Summary

When I died, I didn't expect anything to come afterwards. I couldn't have possibly anticipated that I would be reborn into a world of miraculous powers and amazing superheroes. And unfortunately, I never once considered that a world of heroes would have a dark side... nor that it would be so horrifying.

A Boku no Hero Academia self-insert.
Prologue

The last thing I remembered was a bright flash of light, and a really loud… well, I guess *FUMP* is the way to put it. What other word is there for a massive release of concussive force, but one that you weren’t around to see the eventual explosion from. It wasn’t even the biggest surprise either; I worked on Capitol Hill, and the current administration, well… it spawned protests like rabbits.

And I’d forgotten one very important thing: some protesters are *violent*, and those same people would try to arrive nice and early so everything was 'in place', which is why we received warnings on the days of scheduled protests to arrive early, and use the alternate entrance. I’d forgotten to go in the ‘hidden’ employee entrance at the building where I worked (it’s not really hidden, it’s just really hard to notice), and had gone in the front.

I guess that’s how I got caught in the blast of… whatever it was. My last though wasn’t anything profound. I didn’t hope for an afterlife, or pray that maybe Buddhism was right and I’d gotten enough good karma.

My last thought was quite simply: “Damn it, I forgot to take out the trash last night, didn’t I?”

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When awareness returned, I’ll admit, I was surprised. I was fairly certain I had just… well, you know. Bought the farm. Moved upstate. Kicked the bucket. Stood before the pearly gates. Had my time come. Okay, how many euphemisms for *died* can I use before I run out?... oh, I’m out. Never mind that.

What does matter is that everything is *too damn bright*, my head is *too damn heavy*, and *oh dear lord no why am I moving something’s holding me put me down put me down put me down*—

“Congratulations!” I heard a voice say. Or actually no, it wasn’t exactly that. That’s what *I understood* it to be. What was actually said was much more along the lines of… hang on, that was Japanese, wasn’t it? My skill with the language was rusty, but I still recognized it when I heard it. That was… oh no. Please don’t say it. Please tell me it isn’t true.

God, Allah, YHWH, Ahura Mazda, Buddha, C’thulhu, whatever deity may be listening, please don’t say I need to go through all this again. I had a decent enough life. One was fine. I don’t need to—

“It’s a girl!”

*God. Fucking. DAMN IT!*

That was it. This was too much. This was all just… just… I couldn’t help it. I cried like the baby that
I was.

* * * * *

[AGE THREE]

Did you know time slips by in really weird ways when you can’t even stay awake for more than a couple hours at a time? Or just how frustrating it is to understand everything that’s going on around you, but not be able to communicate at all beyond some very vague gestures?

Well firstly, time is a funny thing. As you get older, lengths of time start to become much more relative to how much life you’ve already lived. For a ten-year-old, an hour seems like an impossibly long period of time. For a senior citizen, on the other hand, waiting an hour is probably relatively simple. They’ve lived so many hours and years that one hour is child’s play for them. Well, I was in a particularly… alright, there’s no way to get around this. I was in a bizarre situation as far as my perception of time went. I was just shy of—damn it I died just before my 25th birthday too didn’t I!?

—Alright, sorry, that was… that was uncalled for. I need to relax.

Anyway. I died (yeah, we’re not putting window dressing on that anymore) just before my 25th birthday. And now I was a baby again. But while my age may have reset itself, my mental maturity, my understanding, and for the purposes of this explanation, my perception of time? Those hadn’t changed. I still felt an hour like I would have when I was older, more patient, and needing to wait outside the courtroom on door duty for the hour (occasionally longer) of the argument. I could read the clocks and know time was passing, and I think my new parents had already picked up that something about me was special. Oh wait, no, they already knew that. Turns out I ended up in a world I knew next to nothing about.

If this was Naruto, or Bleach, or even one of the crapsack worlds like Evangelion, I would be perfectly fine. I knew just about anything there was to know about what was going to happen. But here? Nope.

I’d seen maybe three episodes of My Hero Academia. I had no idea how these ‘quirk’ things worked. What I did know was that there was some measure of inheritance involved, and that mine had bred true.

First, let’s go with my mother. Yaseiki Kimiko. The Japanese propensity for photo albums seriously paid off here, because while she didn’t realize I understood everything (or at least enough to figure out the rest), my new mother had taught me all I needed to know about her and what she was capable of. Formerly a pro hero by the name of Wildling, Kimiko had a Quirk that she called Skinwalker. She was a shapeshifter, capable of taking on anatomy and scaled-up physical abilities from the entire animal kingdom. She couldn’t transform her entire body, at least some part of her had to remain human, but I’d spent enough time in what had to be a kangaroo’s pouch to understand the sheer utility and versatility of this power.

While she wasn’t a pro hero anymore, Kimiko still helped society in an incredibly important way, thanks to her Quirk. See, what I would’ve overlooked had it not been pointed out was that being able to take on the biological abilities of the entire animal kingdom meant my new mom had a particular capacity for chemistry that was far beyond even the most effective molecular assemblers that could exist. Kimiko was an experimental disease specialist. When you have access to every single organic compound that ever has existed or ever will exist, suddenly cures that would seem out of reach are within the realm of possibility. She’s renowned enough in Japan that any time a major poison user appears, the local hero groups keep modes of transport ready to fly her out, wherever and whenever.

All that said, it’s very hard for me to take my new mom seriously when she, and I cannot repeat this
enough, grows a kangaroo pouch to carry me around in.

And then there’s my new dad.

Dad 2.0 is a Pro Hero by the name of Native. When I first learned his hero name and, even worse, saw a photo of his costume, I choked. I mean, there was also a spark of recognition cause I’m fairly certain I saw some mentions of a character named Native on one of my many wikiwalks when bored at work, but it was mostly choking. Thankfully, I was only a toddler at the time, and my new mother is a trained medical professional, so there was no risk to me at the time.

But seriously, the idea of a Japanese man dressing like he was wearing cosplay straight out of Disney’s Pocahontas and calling himself Native was enough to send me into a literal conniption. Then I found out that Native, real name Yaseiki Kenta, actually is part Native American. Navajo, to be precise. A few generations back a Navajo soldier stationed at Okinawa met a girl, fell in love, they had a kid, and then it turned out that he had a fiancé back stateside so great grandma kicked him far, far to the curb and ignored his existence. It took two generations for my father to track down his roots, and he spent at least half a decade learning from the Navajo, getting in touch with that part of his heritage. Upon his return to Japan, he took on a new name and costume, calling himself Native in honor of his heritage.

See? What is appropriation on the surface may not always be. Plus, the idea of a Native American spiritualist fits perfectly with his powers. Almost too perfectly, honestly... then again, this is a superhero universe. Overly fitting backgrounds and names are just part and parcel of it. But I'm getting off topic, aren't I?

Native named his Quirk Shamanic Totem. He can take on the aspects of a wild spirit, usually an animal, and can use the full range of that animal’s natural abilities. It also creates a sort of spiritual “shroud” around him in the vague shape of the animal he’s using as his totem, and it can be the shape of the animal itself or adapted to human. His favorite offensive is using grizzly bears, because everything is more awesome with bears involved. That said, he seems to be limited to air-breathers. When teaching me to swim at the age of three (wait, how old am I now!?), he tried to call on a shark. It fizzled hilariously, and instead he went with a dolphin.

And then, there was the time I used my Quirk for the first time… let me tell you, that was a shock. I mean, intellectually I knew I most likely hadone, but to actually experience what it means to have superpowers? Well…

It is both less awesome than it sounds… and so, so much more.

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The first time I used my Quirk was the day before my fourth birthday. Mom had made taiyaki with chocolate in the center to have at my party the next day, but I really, really wanted one while they were fresh. The problem? She knew this just as well as I did, and had put the baking sheets with taiyaki on the table… and pulled all the chairs away. I was still a wee tyke, and there was no way I had the upper body strength to pull myself up to that table.

That being said, I had a sweet tooth a mile long, both in my past life and in this one. If there were sweets nearby I would find them, I would eat them, and then I would find more. People can’t sugarcoat things for me because I’d eat that too. So I figured, eh, I’m a toddler again, nobody will think it’s weird that I’m doing something so silly.

Our house was, well, standard Japanese really, minus the Navajo decorations everywhere. Two story, kitchen and combined living/dining room on the bottom, along with what used to be a master
suite converted into a pair of offices for mom and dad; the bedrooms and bathrooms were on the top floor. We only had one real ‘bathroom’, with a full shower and bath set; the rest were just water closets with a toilet and sink, or what we in the United States (during my previous life anyway) would have called a ‘powder room’. With the taiyaki cooling on the counter for a decent bit of time, mom would probably be up in her office-cum-lab, analyzing samples and experimenting to see if she could finagle anything new. This meant she wouldn’t be paying any attention to the kitchen, or any strange noises coming from it.

And so I tried jumping up onto the table. I jumped, and failed. I jumped, and failed again. And again. And again! And again, and again, and again, and eventually, while jumping, I wondered to myself whether cats ever felt frustrated when they went to make a jump and failed. You know, like that old George Carlin skit, where the cat failed the jump, but they meant to do that, they totally meant to do that… fucking meow!

And the next thing I knew, I was suddenly above the table, and falling back down towards it. I flailed a bit… or at least I tried to. My arms and legs just sort of righted themselves in midair, getting perfectly into position to land with minimal shock or stress to my limbs.

That’s when I noticed they were glowing. And the glowing, well, aura looked a little bit like… well, like paws. I’d just used my Quirk for the first time. It was similar to my dad’s, but with the ability to do it piecemeal like my mom’s transformation.

And by golly did that taiyaki taste ever so sweet.

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[AGE FIVE]

More time passed, as it was wont to do. The pace of it was rather surprising though, I’ll say that much, and soon enough I was five years old. Again. I could walk, I could talk, Native had already gotten me well underway with learning English, and I’d had to fake becoming fluent really quickly over a period of a year. That was… not easy. I’d nearly slipped up many times, specifically because I was still a stickler for grammar, but I think I managed to pass it off as just being a case of that mental plasticity little kids have.

As for my Quirk, I’d gotten plenty of practice in with it. It was the kind of thing that kids our age just tended to use. Quirks showed up by the age of four if they were going to at all, and you know how kids are with toys; once they get a new toy, they are going to spend the whole damn day playing with it. And a Quirk is basically just a toy that keeps getting more and more fun to play around with. The more you use your Quirk, the better you are at using it, and the more versatile you are with it.

And given how Quirk-centric society is, is it any surprise that my parents, and many other kids’ parents, set stuff up so we could experiment with our Quirks in the context of fun and games?

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“Now Kanna-chan, you remember the rules right?” My father spoke in that particular tone that we all easily identified as ‘parental’; it’s the same voice that seems standard when you’re talking to a little kid or a class of kindergarteners, but if you started using that tone with anybody over the fourth grade, it meant they were in deep shit. Given I was not even old enough for kindergarten yet, it was being used the first way.

“Yes daddy,” I replied. For the fifth time. Seriously, soccer isn’t that hard.
“And whatever you do—”

“Don’t let that dumb Iida boy score all the goals!” A hand came out of nowhere to pat my head and ruffle my hair, and I tried to slap it away before it could do so. Key word? Tried. I failed.

“Atta girl. And we’re here!”

Dad and I walked through the gate of Hosu City Memorial Park, just a standard combination of field and playground, though there was a memorial placard off to the side describing the wishes of some or other hero who had passed on, and whose will had allocated the funds for the park. Imagine a school playground. Now adjoin a fairly decent sized field to it, a bit bigger than an American football field, but not quite as large as a soccer (or ‘footie’, or ‘footból’, or just ‘football’, whatever) field. Also, surround it with apartment complexes full of families on the north and south sides, and housing on the east and west. Why that particular layout came to be I don’t know, but, well, you have Hosu City Memorial Park down to a T.

“Oh, Yaseiki-san! You made it!” I looked up to see a man with pale skin, jet-black here, and rectangular, rimless glasses waving to my father and me. Next to him stood two younger boys: one of them appeared to be in his teens, and was wearing a tracksuit with… wait, is that a UA tracksuit? Huh. The younger of the two boys next to him was probably my age, also sporting black hair in a fairly bland cut, but he was wearing what could only be prescription sports goggles. Either the kid wanted them himself because he thought they looked more like a hero’s headgear, or his parents were tired of having to constantly replace broken glasses.

“Hi!-hello!” The boy ran over to me, a lot faster than I thought he would be capable of at that age… and promptly faceplanted two feet away from me, with… was that exhaust? I sniffed. Yeah, with exhaust billowing from shiny metal ports in his calves.

Yeah, definitely option two: fed up with broken glasses.

He sprung back up none the worse for wear, though, and soon extended his hand to me… which he then began to move up and down as though he was already shaking mine.

“My name is Tenya! Iida Tenya! And you’re Yaseiki… something!” I grabbed his hand to stop him from shaking. This did not work; soon my entire body was rocking and rolling like a ship on a stormy sea.

“I’m,” I tried to stop myself, “Kanna,” and it failed again, “please,” I grabbed his arm with my other hand, “let go,” and pulled, “of me!”

It didn’t work well. It took shaking side to side to get Tenya to let go, and even then he sprung right back up, none the worse for wear. How much pep did this kid have!?

“Anyways, you’re the first two to arrive. A few more and we can get this underway!” Mr. Iida gave my father a look and a smile, and while I could see him smile back at Mr. Iida, it was just a little bit strained. I didn’t have long to ruminate on this, though, because more and more kids and parents started showing up.

And then we were off to the races.

“C’mon Kanna-chan, you can do it!”

“Stop her Tenya-kun! Steal the ball back!”

And Tenya proceeded to do just that. Try as I might, I just could not move fast enough to keep the
ball away from that boy. His footwork was unreal for a four-year-old. I had the advantage of being mentally much older... but against this kid’s raw physical ability, it was nothing! If I wanted to get an edge, I needed to match him in speed and agility—

Tenya’s leg-engines stalled out for a moment, and he faceplanted again, letting the ball fly well away from our goal and straight out.

—and beat him on *endurance*. But I couldn’t think of an animal that would do that off the top of my head. Tenya was like a cheetah; he was all flash and substance, but not much staying power. If I had to put him in a race, he’d blow away most sprinters, but more of them are longer affairs, and a long distancer would be hale and hearty like a *wait a minute*.

I thought of a horse. Not just any horse, though; a mustang. A wild, undomesticated horse, roaming the plains, constantly on the lookout, ready to dart at a moment’s notice if it saw something it didn’t like creeping across the grasslands. The glow came over my legs, and a moment later, I was dashing after Tenya, whose engines had fired back up during my pondering.

I got close while he zigged and zagged, his fancy feet making my teammates trip and stumble over themselves, but once he started off at a dead run towards our goal, I lost ground. It was only when Iida slowed to try and line up a shot that I managed to glide right past him—

—and steal the ball away!

Then I lost my balance. I tried to use my Quirk to get myself back on balance, and the glow spread across my *entire* body... for an instant. Then I felt an exhaustion fall over me, and the glow of my totem animal dissipated entirely, leaving me on the ground gasping for air.

Five minutes later I was back on my feet, keeping the horse to my legs, and stymieing Tenya’s every attempt to score!

Unfortunately, he did the same to me. His team beat mine, 3-1.

I don’t like Iida Tenya.

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And that’s how I learned how to better use my Quirk! Well, the ‘channeling a totem animal’ part, anyway.

The other aspect of my Quirk was that, if I was trying to do something human anatomy couldn’t, I would slightly shapeshift to allow for what I wanted. Like when I was playing Marco Polo at the community pool and accidentally shapeshifted gills to stay under as long as I wanted. Now that was a surprise, let me tell you. Overall, it’s a very good Quirk. Lots of potential, plenty of room for improvement, but I still hadn’t won the superpower lottery. I’d gotten a decent ticket, but not the golden one. That one went straight to All Might. Hoo boy, I’ve seen hammy people before, but All Might is something else entirely. I can see why people are so taken in with him; that kind of charisma is nothing to be taken lightly!

… wait. Something important with All Might happens around the time I’m supposed to be in high school again, right? Damn it, I can’t remember.

“Kanna-chan!”

My dad’s voice pulled me out of my musings. I looked myself over in the mirror. Long, jet-black hair pulled tight into a braid, tied at the end with a patterned leather strip. And, much as I really didn’t
want to be wearing it… a white t-shirt, a soft leather jerkin over it, and a Native American-patterned skirt with similar sandals completed the ensemble. I still wasn’t used to wearing skirts.

I was even less used to suddenly being Native American… and Japanese. Wearing something like this was reserved for Halloween only, and even then you had to be careful not to go too overboard. This? This was overboard. This was so far overboard that even… huh, I don’t have a good analogy to go with this one. Darn.

“Coming!”

So, uh. Meet the new me, I guess? My new name is Yaseiki Kanna. Family name, wild spirit. Given name, shortened corruption of Kannagi, an archaic Japanese for shrine maiden, literally meaning ‘one who talks to/calms the Kami’. I think. Meanings are weird.

No, enough time for that later in life, I’m still a little kid here. And now poppa Native was going to take me into Hosu City and show off Daddy’s Little Girl to all the other Pro Heroes on his day off.

Joy…

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Once we got into Hosu City, the first stop was the Iida family, like Tenya from before. Apparently the whole ‘leg-engines’ thing wasn’t just Tenya. Nope, they all had a similar Quirk, which I was told all about...

“—and the Iida all have this amazing Quirk, which lets them move super fast, zoom, zoom, and hit things real hard, ker-pow!”

… right now. In dumbed down child-speak, because it was assumed I couldn’t understand otherwise. A perfectly valid assumption I will admit, but my spoken Japanese comprehension had become flawless. It was just those damn Kanji that gave me trouble now.

“—Oh, and that boy you play soccer with, Tenya-kun! Also…” dad leaned in close while we walked, a hand keeping his voice from carrying, “I think he has a crush on you, Kanna-chan.”

I stopped dead. Nope. Nope, nope. Nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope—

“Kanna-chan, Kanna-chan! What is it, what’s wrong?”

…

“W-was I saying that out loud?” I asked. Native nodded. “Darn it.”

“Language, young lady!” And there came the instant reply, aghast. “And where did you hear that language, little miss!?” I looked up at dad and had to suppress a smile. I saw my chance.

“Tenya-san.”

I saw dad’s face contort in a very entertaining way. The expressions he was making ranged from severely constipated, to trying to frown and sneer at the same time, to ‘I’m failing really badly at not laughing’, all the way back to a very good impression of a Moai statute.

“That Iida boy will never lay a hand on my precious little girl! Why, when I give those pretentious Tenka and Tensho a piece of my mind, they’ll—”
"I finally found you…", a voice spoke, in English. "Native…"

I felt a chill run down my spine. That voice… it sounded so cold. So dead.

I tilted my head up to look at where the voice came from, and set eyes on an absolute monster of a man. Thick, ropy, pale scar tissue covered nearly every inch of the man’s exposed skin, and a brown-red stained muscle shirt, particles flaking off of it with every small bit of wind that passed, covered the rest of his torso. He wore tattered, ruined camouflage fatigues, and heavily worn-out jackboots protected his feet. His hands seemed to have bony growths and protrusions along every joint and knuckle, with claws at the end of each finger, and jagged, bladed edges of bone following the lines of his arms up to his biceps, extending multiple inches from his skin and nearly half a foot out the end of his forearm, anchored to his elbows. Dog tags clattered around his neck, many more than any one person should have been wearing. He had a ragged, messy hole where his left eye should have been, and he bared the teeth in his snarling, fanged maw.

He smelled of blood and death. He smelled of murder.

“Wendigo…” My father looked up at the villain—for what else could he be?—perched atop the building. My mind took in the word: wendigo. A Native American monster, often former humans, similar in nature to the skinwalker depending on which tribe you asked. Monstrous demihumans, formed by malice and hatred and given life through cannibalism or autophagia.

Those were American combat fatigues.

“How did you get out?” Speaking English as well, Native moved carefully, positioning himself to block me from the villain’s line of sight. I wanted to move, wanted to run. I’d been in danger before in my previous life, but never at the hands of another person. And never something quite like this. For the first time I could remember, I truly felt mortal terror. And for the first time in either life…

As the fear took hold, I lost control of my bladder.

Wendigo sniffed the air. “Cute kid, injun. She yours? She smells just like you did back then…” The villain licked his lips, and his mouth seemed to expand larger than a normal face would allow. “Bet she tastes good too. Sugar and spice and everything nice.” His jaw parted, revealing rows and rows of fangs sprouting from inside his mouth. “Like you did, but so. Much. Better!”

With a motion I nearly didn’t comprehend, Wendigo spat. An aura flared to life around my father as he blocked… something. It clattered off of his skin and fell to the ground, and then I got a good look at what it was. Wendigo’s teeth.

He had spat his teeth at me like some kind of missile.

“Kanna.” I looked to my father, and saw something in his eyes that I couldn’t place.

"Run."

I didn’t think twice. I called the horse to my legs and sprinted as fast as I could maintain.

“You can run, kiddo, but I will track you. I will find you! And I will gnaw on your bones!!”

I ran. Wendigo leapt for me. Native blocked and I heard someone impact a building. I spared a look back and saw Wendigo pulling himself from the brickwork, and a raging bear surround my father. He turned and saw me looking, and I flinched. I could see the rage building in his eyes.

“I said RUN!”
I turned tail. I could still feel some urine dribbling down my legs, the glow of the horse augmenting my legs doing nothing to stop the shame. I ran.

I ran. Maybe I should look back no he could be right behind me I had to keep going was Dad going to be okay no I had to keep running I can’t outrun him oh God what do I do there has to be some way out of this duck down that alleyway no stick to the main street keep going head for the police station you can make it you have to—

CRACK

And I fell. My Quirk dissipated, but I know I could still sense it. It was still there. It was still going strong. And getting stronger every moment.

Then something in my left leg broke. And then something in my right leg broke. And then another, and another, and another. I’d felt pain in my legs before. I’d torn my ACL and given myself countless injuries in track and cross country. But not this. Not like this. Never like this.

Never like this.

I could feel my legs shattering. They were coming apart, and I could feel every second of it. My bones splintered, my muscles shredded, my tendons ripped to pieces.

I screamed. And I cried. And I vomited. And I whimpered, and I heaved, and I trembled, and I shivered, and I suffered. And through it all, I felt every single bit of it. Until suddenly I didn’t.

I lay there, waiting on a side street, trembling in a pool of my own vomit and tears. I’d not felt anything like this. Not pain like this. Never like this.

Never like this.

“Kanna-chan! You there, call an ambulance, now! Kanna-chan, stay with me. Kanna-chan. Kanna, Kanna!” My vision was tinny. I couldn’t see from my peripherals. But I knew that voice. That was dad.

He was bloody. He was favoring an arm. He was staring at me, but not quite at me. He was looking lower.

“I c-c-c—” I heaved again, but nothing came out. I could hear the ambulance around the corner.

“It’s okay Kanna, just hold on a little longer!”

“c-can’t feel,” I choked out. “My legs… can’t—”

My mind shut down.

* * * * *

I awoke to an obnoxious, droning beeping, a painful crick in my elbow, and a pressure on each hand. I tried to lift my arms, but even if something hadn’t been holding on to my hands, I don’t think I would’ve been able to. I felt fatigued. Weak. Worn, and sore. Like I’d gone a hundred rounds as Little Mac’s punching bag, or thrown through every wall of a skyscraper.

My eyes started to adjust to the light, and I could see something on my face, covering my nose and mouth. An oxygen mask? I tried to look to what was on my hands, but even moving my eyes was hard, and that tiny bit of exertion was enough to almost exhaust me. I saw mom on my left, and I
guessed that other pressure was dad on my right. They both looked like wrecks.

“Wait, is she—Kimiko, she, she’s awake! Kanna’s awake!” Dad reached over to my mother, wincing as he did so, and shook her awake.

“Mmm… what is—K-kanna?” My mother’s eyes filled with tears, and I could tell it took all she had to not throw herself on me. I don’t think I could have taken it if she had. I hurt.

“W—” I coughed. And then I kept coughing. Something was in my throat, and my gag reflex was choking me. Oh gods above I was going to choke to death in the hospital—

“I’ll help her, you call the nurses!” Mom helped me, removing the tube from down my throat and reaching under to pat my back as I coughed weakly. She poured water from a pitcher into a small cup on my bedside table and gave it to me, one infinitesimal sip at a time. I could barely swallow.

The doors to my hospital room opened with a slam and a nurse with some or other animal features barged in, what looked to be my chart in hand. I saw the front of the door behind him; I was in the Intensive Care Unit?

How long?

“We called the doctor, he’ll be right here!”

How long had I been here?

“Ma… ma…” I could barely talk. “P… p-pa?”

“We’re here, Kanna-chan,” my father said, clutching my hand tight with both of his, tears brimming in his eyes. I wanted to try to talk again. I had to know how long. I had to—

“She’s awake!” The doctor rushed in this time, her white coat swirling about her legs. The snakes twined around her arms hissed, but it was soft, not threatening. Her piercing, slit yellow eyes held more warmth in them than I could ever have imagined from a predatory gaze.

“Jakuzure-sensei—”

“Kimiko!” The doctor admonished. “How many times have I told you! Call. Me. Kaiya.” She flipped a lock of hair back behind her shoulder, and looked at me. “You’ve been quite the touchy patient, little lady. Even a three-day coma is hard on a kid as young as you are, and I would suggest you not expect to leave this bed for the next six.”

Three… days?

“Six!?” My father jumped up, flabbergasted. One look from the doctor had him sitting right back down before the snakes on her arms even had a chance to hiss.

“For every day spent in a coma, expect two days of bed rest and four days of rehab.” She looked at me, and her wan smile broke. “For you though, Kanna-chan…”

“W-wait?” My mom threw her hand out. “Are you sure now—”

“It would be crueler to wait,” Native interrupted. It was easy to tell; the way he held himself and spoke was different between when he was channeling his hero persona. “Kanna-chan. What happened is…” Native’s voice broke. Dad looked for the words. “Not all Quirks are perfectly safe. Not even for the user.”
“W-what—” I broke off coughing again, and mom offered me more water. I accepted, and looked to the doctor.

“From what your father tells me, your Quirk has more in common with his than your mother’s. Or at least, that’s what we thought.” I felt something like cold water flow down my spine. What was she saying?

Slowly, Jakuzure-sensei flipped the blanket off my legs. From the knee up, all seemed normal. But from the knee down…

Three-quarters down what should have been my calf, there was another joint, like a backward facing knee. From there, my legs thinned further, extending for the length of my changed calf once again before ending in… in…

“Hooves?...”

I don’t know how to walk on hooves. I don’t even know if I can walk on hooves.

“We have physical therapy waiting for you when you’re free from bed rest, but…” the doctor stalled. “This isn’t the kind of thing we’ve ever had to deal with before. I think… I think you need to maybe accept the reality that you might not ever truly run, much less properly walk again, Kanna-chan.” She bowed her head, and closed her eyes. “I’m sorry. There was nothing more I could do.”

I didn’t cry. I just sat there, staring at my legs, my… my hooves.

I don’t know how long I sat there.

…

I...

I don’t know what to do.
“Jakuzure-sensei?”

The snake-Quirk doctor gave me an oddly perplexed look as she came in. It was her daily checkup, same time as the past five, and this was the first one I’d spoken to her immediately for.

“What is it, Kanna-chan?” I opened my mouth, stopped, blushed, opened my mouth again, closed, looked away, looked down, blushed… oh dear, this is… uh, not as easy to ask as I thought. Jeeze…

“C-could I, um…”

“How?” She sat down on the edge of my bed, one hand placed along the side of the bed towards mine; it was obviously there to take in case I wanted it. I guess she thought it was a very serious topic, about my… my hooves. Gods above that still feels… I don’t like saying it. It feels weird. I had feet for thirty years of life, just shy of twenty-five before, just over five now. And now, to not have them anymore…

I think I may need amputee counseling. But first.

“Could I get my catheter removed?”

If I had a camera, I would have loved to take a picture of Dr. Jakuzure’s poleaxed expression. One eye gave a single twitch before its eyebrow went up, her lips parted just the tiniest bit, and her head tilted to the side. The snakes on her arms both froze with their tongues out. The tongues weren’t even moving, which was beyond odd.

“Eh?” I sighed.

“Could I get my catheter removed.”

“O-of course!” Dr. Jakuzure recovered, the snakes on her arms somehow chortling at her plight.

“But w-where did you learn that word?”

“My mother is a doctor and your orderlies and nurses don’t think I’m listening,” I deadpanned. Oh, wait. Crap. I may have sounded a lot older than I’m supposed to be. Eh, I’ll chalk it up to essentially being a double amputee. Ouch, that hit a lot closer to home than I thought it would, because it’s true enough, to be frank. Damn…

“Well! In that case, let me go get a nurse! Oh, and a wheelchair for when you need to go to the bathroom!”

“C-could I—”

“No.” Dr. Jakuzure’s response was swift and to the point, and her visage was just as stony as her tone. “You are not to try walking on your… new legs,” she euphemized, “until you are in the presence of a licensed physical therapist, with proper supervision and a safe environment.” Her face softened, and she frowned. “You’ve been hurt badly enough, Kanna-chan. I’m not going to let you hurt yourself any worse on my watch.”

The good doctor’s phone buzzed then, and she got up in a flash.
“Sorry Kanna-chan, I’m needed! A nurse should be here soon!”

Good news. A nurse did come by soon.

Bad news? It was a male nurse.

* * * * *

[THE NEXT DAY]

“Are you ready, Kanna-chan?” I looked behind my wheelchair, up at my mother, and nodded. The twin bars were in front of me, child-sized and ready to help me support my weight with my arms. I lifted my legs and the physical therapist, an obscenely musclebound man whose name I hadn’t paid attention to, slid the foot (well, hoof) rests up and out of the way. Then, for the first time, I put my hooves on the floor.

It felt… I don’t know. Imagine you’re wearing ski boots. It’s a bit clunky and unwieldy, and you can’t feel that much through it. But the difference with hooves is that, anatomically speaking, a hoof is just an extensively modified toe. You would think that would make it sensitive, but hooves are so thick and sturdy that you feel just shy of nothing through it. The feedback I felt, the softness of the floor, was more from what probably used to be the knuckles at the base of my toes, which were now just one joint that let me move it a bit. So even with my new hooves flat on the floor, it didn’t feel that way. I couldn’t help but think that I wasn’t fully on the ground, even though my eyes were telling me otherwise.

“Alright, let’s try and stand up. Hands on the bars,” the therapist guided my hands to the twin bars, and I held on for dear life with all the force my five-year-old arms could manage. “And three, two, one, up!”

I pulled myself upright, and almost immediately lost my balance. I pitched forward and would have fallen flat if not for the bars. A quick step forward with one hoof—hoof put me on slightly better footing (does that word even apply to me anymore?), though I was still unsteady. I kept over adjusting with one leg, and then the other compensated in kind, building the fatigue I felt, and when I tried to stand up straight, I once again failed to keep my balance. The therapist caught me, and brought me back to the chair.

Day one: failure.

“It’s as I thought,” he murmured to himself. “Normally, people whose Quirks give them mutations like this are born with the necessary wiring up top to let them not need to think about their actions. Starting with baseline human legs means that you’re going to be facing an uphill battle, Kanna-chan.”

“But… I will be able to eventually, right?” I had barely been in this wheelchair for an hour at most. I was already sick of it. How did people confined to these things not go crazy? Every single second I sat in this thing, it was a constant reminder that I was weak, that I was an invalid. That I was more or less a cripple.

“I’m going to make some calls, see if we can’t get a specialist to help you with this. It may take some time though, so please be patient with me, okay?”

I frowned.

“I wanna try again.” The therapist smiled, and helped me back onto the bars.
I tried to walk. I really, really did. For a moment I thought I’d gotten the hang of it, but then my leg twisted in a way my brain kept telling me was not possible and I had to be picked up again. The depths of frustration that I was feeling… I don’t know how to properly describe it. If the definition of insanity is trying the same thing over and over and expecting a different result, then the definition of raw frustration is needing to do the same thing again and again, and seeing no improvement or change in the results.

But what choice did I have? I kept trying. And I kept failing. Again and again I nearly fell, held up by the beams and my arms. The one time I actually did fall, somebody else was there to pick me up, and I burned with embarrassment because I know that I wouldn’t have been able to do that myself.

For thirty total minutes I banged my head against this wall, and for thirty total minutes I completely and utterly failed to make any progress.

“I think we’ll have to call that a day, Kanna-chan. Yaseiki-sensei,” he nodded at my mother, “Native-san,” and at my father, “I will update you if I hear anything regarding that specialist.”

There was probably some conversation after that, but if there was, I heard none of it. I was… I was drained. I was physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted.

By the time I got back to my hospital room, I was fast asleep in my wheelchair. I think I woke up for a tiny bit when they transferred me to the bed, but I’m not sure.

I slept the sleep of the dead: deep, unmoving, and unbroken.

* * * * *

The next day came bright and early, and I was surprised to find my father there when I woke up. He was wearing casual clothes, which meant either it was a weekend (I’d lost track of the days in here), or he had taken the day off for me. If it was the latter…

I balled up my sheets in my grip. Every second I was in here was another second that a professional hero had to shirk his duties.

“Papa—“

“I’d always hoped that you’d be my sidekick one day.”

Whatever I expected him to say, it wasn’t this. My father—Native—had a strange, twisted sort of smile on his face. It was the smile of a man who finally understood a joke, and in doing so, realized he was the butt of the whole thing.

“I saw you use your Quirk for the first time, and I saw it, right then. I saw what could be, I saw my little girl fighting the good fight with me, side by side. Father and daughter, honorable warriors against the Darkness. You know?”

“Papa—“

“I threw a Hail Mary,” he interrupted me again. “It’s a term from their version of football, where you just pray and throw and hope for the best. Kanna-chan, they don’t know what to do. The experts don’t know what to do. I had to try something.” He darted forward and grabbed me in a hug, lifting my back off of my hospital bed. I gingerly wrapped my arms around him, careful of the IV stent still in my elbow. “I know it’s selfish to think you’re going to be a hero and not anything else, but now that it may not happen, I… I—“
He cried. I cried.

And I resolved, then and there, that I would walk again. Even if it meant breaking myself apart again, I would walk out of this hospital with my own two legs.

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The first time I was in the children’s ward physiotherapy room, I didn’t pay much attention to what was inside of it. I had a laser guided focus on the parallel bars that would help me learn to walk again. But today I took the chance to actually look at the place within which I would hopefully adjust to my changed legs.

The inside of the room had three walls covered in simple, kid-friendly wallpaper, all farm animals and animesque characters traipsing on a green field. Other happy-looking chibi-style birds and bugs flew through a blue sky, and a sun was smiling in the corner of one wall. To kids it was probably fine, but remember, I had the mind of an adult in here. The uncanny valley was acting in full force, and that sun brought two things to mind: the terrifying giggly baby sun from the Teletubbies, and the angry sun from the desert levels in Super Mario… Land? World? One or the other.

The last wall of the room, where much of the more specialized equipment (and the parallel bars I used) were pressed against, was dominated by one massive mirror. Don’t ask how I managed to miss the mirror entirely on my first time in here; I blame it on being pig-headed and anxious.

“So the bad news,” I jumped; for someone as muscular as a damn orc, that physical therapist was incredibly sneaky. Also, I felt bad; I still hadn’t learned the man’s name. “We haven’t managed to get any specialist to help you. The good news is we may not need to.”

You know what? No, I’m not playing this game. I just gave the man my best deadpan stare, and he cleared his throat before motioning to my father.

“I placed a few calls during the time you were unconscious.” He was talking as much to me as my mother, the therapist, and Dr. Jakuzure. “It turns out that as far as people knew, *Wendigo was still imprisoned*. A friend who helped me put him away the first time took a look in? Well, he got somebody to impersonate him. I don’t know how, and frankly? I don’t care. But we’re not going to rest until he’s back behind bars, even if that means my friend needs to come here to help track him down a second time.” My father cleared his throat and looked at the door expectantly.

I waited a moment, knowing it wouldn’t take long before he got impatient.

“Kihei… that was your cue…”

And still, nobody came through the door. My father sighed and reached into his pocket, pulling out his mobile and dialing. He put the phone on speaker, and we heard the dial tone going… and going… and wait I hear something.

It sounded like… was that the *Rocky theme*!? Well, whatever it was, it was getting closer to the door, and I could hear some childish murmuring coming from behind it also. Then the door swung open and my answer was clear.

In walked a man that I could only describe as an absolute mountain. Imagine… well, it was still fresh enough in my memory to compare. Imagine ‘The Mountain’ from Game of Thrones. Now make him bigger, with shaggy white hair, and give him a pair of *massive goddamn ram horns* spiraling out from either side of his head. Now you’ve got a good idea of what this man looks like. Or rather, you would until you looked lower, and realized he wasn’t wearing shoes. He wasn’t wearing shoes
because he didn’t need them.

He had hooves.

And so did the little blonde girl in his arms. She looked to be about my age actually, and aside from the hooves, also had a tail that looked somewhere between a deer’s and a horse’s, with pair of horns rising up from either side of her head, pointed straight up and ending when they were as far above her head as my arm was long. Also, when put next to this man, she was adorable.

“Kenta! It’s been too long.”


“More or less. Pony-chan here is having the harder time; I didn’t get around to teaching her much Japanese at all.” He sighed. “I really should’ve done that, huh?”

“Or,” and I spoke in English here, “it may be fine?” Kihei looked at me. My father looked at me. The doctor, my mother, and the physical therapist all looked at me.

“Papa, papa, she speaks English too!” Pony, on the other hand, looked delighted. She squirmed out of her father’s arms and ran the short distance across to me, flailing her arms and her tail to come to a stop in front of my wheelchair, and pointed down excitedly. “Hey, hey, papa! Hooves! She has them too!” Then she leaned in real close, all smiles and delight. “Hi! I’m Pony! What’s your name? Wanna be my friend? Can you teach me that other stuff my papa and your papa were saying?”

The girl was a motormouth. I liked her already.

“I’m Kanna. I’ll definitely be your friend, and help you learn that, but uh…” I frowned. Then I pushed myself up from the chair, trying to stand on my own hooves… and tumbled forward, falling on top of Pony as we both landed on the floor. “I… don’t know how to walk on hooves…”

“That’s okay!” She hopped up instantly, and then pulled me up, holding me steady as I felt my balance constantly slipping. “I’ll show you! It’s super easy, here, just follow me!”

And so my lessons began in earnest, with the help of the girl who would become my new best friend: Tsunotori Pony.
Chapter Two

[EIGHT DAYS LATER]

Today was always meant to be my last one spent here in the hospital, even though I had only had a measly eight days of physical therapy. Hospital beds aren’t cheap, and they aren’t unlimited, especially in a society with literal superheroes as just another aspect of daily life. I’d taken up this bed for three days of a coma, six days of forced bed rest, and eight days for physical therapy. That was the exact amount that I’d been told was afforded to coma patients, in that one coma to two rest to three therapy ratio I’d mentioned before. The hospital couldn’t justify giving me anymore time here, and neither could Dr. Jakuzure, no matter how much easier of a patient I was than some of the kids she’d seen come through.

It wasn’t all bad though. Thanks to Pony, I could kinda, sorta, maybe walk? Ish? Okay, I was still beyond terrible at it. I was used to the tactile feedback and balance of a plantigrade foot, sue me. But now, instead of needing to hold onto two things for dear life and hope and pray that I wouldn’t bend my knee and… was it still an ankle? I’ll call it that. Instead of worrying about the bend of knee and ankle, I could actually focus on just… walking.

I know it sounds so simple, walking, but it’s one of those things I can’t take for granted anymore. I still need a cane. It’s one of those silly canes with the four additional stability prongs at the end, because just a single tip cane wasn’t stable enough to help me balance. But I could walk.

And after not being able to even stand up unassisted for almost two weeks, and wondering whether I ever would again, that was the best feeling in the world.

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“Kanna-chan?” The door to my hospital room opened, showing me, surprise surprise, yet another goddamn male nurse. Were there any female nurses or male doctors at this hospital? Was this the Defied Expectations Health Center or something?

A closer look at the nurse made it obvious why he was in the children’s ward though: he looked like a walking talking husky. I mean… he was fluffy. So fluffy. Like, so incredibly fluffy that I wanted to bury myself in his fur and never let go.

“I want to pet you.” Oh crap, I said that out loud.

“Come again?”

“Nothing!” Yeah, he’ll believe that. Uh-huh. Right. I could feel my cheeks heating up, and I’m pretty sure I was bright crimson at this point.

“Maybe later you can pet me, I know my fur is soft and fluffy. Anyway! You have a visitor!”

Husky-Man stepped aside, revealing… not Pony. Darn it. No, it wasn’t my newest friend, who was more fun to spend time with than a barrel of monkeys, because of course we can’t have good things in this life. Instead, there was a black-haired kid with a vase full of flowers under one arm (that he definitely didn’t pick out himself), face set in an annoyingly stern expression that just kinda looked like he was constipated. And, as was typical Tenya fashion, he had an arm raised, but was only waving the forearm in a repetitive back-and-forth that you could probably use as a metronome it was
so regular.

“Kanna-san! We missed you at the past two soccer games, so I have come to bid you a good day and a get well soon!” He took his waving arm down (finally…) and brought out the vase. “This is from us!” Yeah, five year olds don’t sound like that. Unless, of course, they either aren’t actually a five year old mentally (myself…), or they were an Iida. They all had melodramatic sticks up their butts, and took formality way too seriously. It’s actually annoying, especially since now I definitely don’t stand a chance against him in soccer.

Damn it, he was going to win the next I don’t know how many soccer matches, wasn’t he? Ugh!

During my ruminations and recriminations, Tenya had managed to put the vase on my bedside table and get waaaaaay too close to the bed, and was currently staring very intently at the shapes my legs made beneath the covers. His brow was furrowed, and while it was adorable as can be to see a kid that young thinking that hard, I wasn’t about to forget that Tenya is a smart kid. He could definitely see that something was different.

“So, uh…” Wow. I’m so eloquent, aren’t I?

Didn’t get a chance to say much more though, because suddenly Tenya was bowing at the waist, holding a position that was definitely uncomfortable.

“I am sorry to hear that you and your father were attacked! It puts shame on the Iida that none of us were there to help you in your time of need! Please forgive us for our trespass!”

I stared. And kept staring. And kept staring as Tenya started to shake a little from the exertion of holding the bow.

“Did your mama or your papa tell you to say that?”

“Aniki said to! He told me exactly what to say and how to say it!” Tenya’s glasses fell off his face and hit the floor. “I shouldn’t have told you that! And uh… I can’t see my glasses…” I rolled my eyes and grabbed my cane, then lowered the railing on the hospital bed and slowly lowered my hooves to the ground. Cane at the ready, I pushed myself up off the bed, then turned around and peeked under it.

“There they are.” I leaned down carefully, ever so carefully, carefully, and grabbed his glasses. I handed them back to Tenya, who put them on and smiled at me… then looked down. And his face suddenly turned into a mask of horror. He pointed.

“Your legs, y-y-you, you, your, y-your, you, they, uh, you, they—”

“Wait, miss, where are you, hold up a second!” A commotion outside the door had us both looking right at it when it slammed open and a tiny blonde missile rocketed into the room, pulled me into a hug, and somehow landed us both right back on the hospital bed.

“Kanna Kanna Kanna hi I missed you guess what we’re gonna be living with you for a bit cause daddy said he needs to find a house,” “Pony,” “and your daddy said we could and I’m gonna be sharing a room with you and it’s gonna be like a big slumber party for a week,” “Pony…” “and it’s gonna be so much fun and we’re gonna—uh whoa whuh hey what’re you whoa whaaaat’re you doiiliiiiiing!”

I grabbed one of Pony’s horns and started waving her head around a bit, not harshly, just gently, like I was moving her head to make her look at something.
“I’m looking for the pause button,” I replied in English. And a sudden flinch, point, and shaking motion out of the corner of my vision suddenly made me remember my other guest. “Oh, right. Pony, this is Tenya,” I waved one to the other, and then switching to Japanese, “Tenya, this is Pony. Say hi!”

He didn’t. Or rather, he didn’t get a chance, because he suddenly sound himself pulled into a hug by Hurricane Pony.

“Hi! I’m Pony! Nice to meet you! Can I try on your glasses? I bet they make everything look funny! Ooh what’re these things on your legs?” “Pony—” “Are they metal? Does it hurt? How did they get there? Do you feel anything if I touch them like this?” “Pony…” “Could you stick a banana in one? I saw a cartoon where somebody stuck a banana in a pipe and it did weird things like make noise and —”

“Pony!”

“Huh?” ”OW!” Poor Tenya. Pony turned so fast to look at me that she didn’t realise how close she’d been standing to him, and her horn smacked him on the tushie while she was turning. Not the pointy part, thank goodness, but he did jump a good foot in the air, propelled by a sudden spurt of exhaust from the pipes on his legs.

“Ugh, ewww, that stuff smells like a car! Yuck! How did you get cars in your legs? Are they tiny cars like those ones I saw boys playing with at the airport? What about wheels? Do you have wheels anywhere?”

“Pony, he doesn’t understand you,” I muttered, reaching with the hand not holding my cane to grab her wrist.

“Huh? But you can, why wouldn’t he?”

“He doesn’t speak English, look if you wanna ask him something, I can ask him for you?”

“Sure!” Pony somehow picked me up and plopped me onto the hospital bed, then did the exact same for Tenya, then hopped onto my other side so that I was in between the two of them. Not a moment later did she start with the questions, and I was suddenly playing translator for a pair of energetic, curious, rambunctious five year olds than it is for any other situation I’ve had to do it for. But there we sat, Pony fielding a question, me translating, Tenya answering and providing one of his own, me translating again, and back and forth, for at least an hour.

And that’s how all three of our fathers found us, coffees in hand an exasperated expressions on all three faces.

* * * * *

[LATER THAT DAY]

It would seem Pony’s random comment that she and Kihei would be living with us for a little bit actually had some merit. Apparently the family in the house three or four down was suddenly a bit wary about living near Native now that a villain had shown up tracking him, and was looking to sell their home as quickly as they could to get away from the ‘risk to their safety’. It was a bit rude of them, if you ask me, but I couldn’t exactly damn their motives. I can easily see myself doing the
same in a similar situation, especially if none of them had good Quirks for self-defense. I’d seen Wendigo, and he was terrifying. So no, I couldn’t condemn them.

Instead, I could gleefully appreciate the fact that I now had somebody to speak English with that wasn’t my family, and that I was about to experience something I hadn’t for literal decades: having a sleepover with a friend in the same room by choice.

Did it seem a bit odd that I’d met Pony just a little over a week ago, and was already super good friends with her? Well, you obviously don’t remember what it’s like to be five years old.

Mentally I’m definitely not five, not even close, but physically, and most importantly, hormonally? Yes, yes I am. I am, hormonally speaking, a five year old. This means I am energetic, excitable, hyper as can be, and oh yeah, constantly flooded in endorphins by the slightest little thing. When you imagine somebody high on life, you need to imagine a properly stimulated five year old, because oh my god I am constantly higher than that time my cousin bought a quarter of a dispensary. This also means it is super easy to make friends. There’s no ulterior motives when you’re five years old. Making friends is as easy as saying hi, do you want to be my friend, yes, boom, new best friend.

Now keep in mind, Pony is the first fellow child I’ve spent time with that also spoke English, she was in a new environment where the only other person she was close to was her father, and when we met I was very, very unstable, emotionally speaking.

Is it any surprise, any at all, that she managed to imprint herself upon me so deeply and so quickly? Because it shouldn’t!

I wasn’t complaining. The closest ‘friend’ I’d had in this new life so far was Tenya, and unfortunately, that was tempered by the fact that it was brutally obvious he had a crush on me. Oh don’t get your panties in a bunch; when I was at daycare in my first life I already had a crush on a girl, and news flash, it was reciprocated. The next one I had that, once again, was reciprocated, was when I was six. Puppy love and crushes are things that happen no matter how old you are or aren’t, now can we get back to the point?

Namely the fact that I had a friend over for a week and everything was awesome!? Hey, you have your best friend over for a week with nothing that you need to do but hang out and have fun and resources at your fingertips, and you see if things aren’t awesome!

Pony and I both cheered as we watched Sailor Moon blast the monster of the week, then sang along with the theme song, and hammered the button on the disk player’s remote to go to the next episode. Turns out Sailor Moon, no matter what world you’re in, is a goddamn classic, and sorry to all my fellow proponents of sub over dub, but I’m going with what I grew up with the first time. The dub of the original is what I knew first, and it’s the only one Pony will understand since she’s not great at reading fast enough for subtitles yet, so that’s what we were going with!

I was waiting to see Pony’s reaction to the tonal shift though. We were just about out of the Monster of the Week only episodes with the last Inner recruited, and she was about to see some stuff go down. I could only wonder how this one would happen, since while I remember most of the basic story beats from the first time around, I can’t actually recall most of the finer details.

So while Pony was seeing this for the first time, I was in more or less the same boat. And oh boy was I excited.

God I love Sailor Moon.

“Girls, did you want anything else to snack on?” My mom walked into the main room with cups of
tea, because what else were we going to be drinking, and we felt the impact as she put them down on
the low center table. Then Pony nudged me, because Mom spoke Japanese, and I had to translate
again.

“Anything sweet?” Pony asked. “Or uh, oh, oh, apples! Any apples?”

“Do we have pocky?” I asked. “Or—”

“Apples, got it, and no pocky until after dinner little miss! Now come out from under the kotatsu and
drink your tea, I don’t want to have to clean the carpet again!”

“But it’s so warm under here!” I called back.

“Kanna…”

“Fiieeeiiee,” I grumbled, then turned to Pony and switched to English. “We need to get out from under
this if we want the apples.”

“Aww…”

We extricated ourselves carefully and sipped our tea; Pony made a funny face at the taste, and I
laughed. I reached for my cane and used it to get myself up, then slowly clomped over to where we
had the sugar sticks and brought it back for her.

“Wait why are Sailor Moon and Mars fighting!? I thought they were friends!” I laughed and grabbed
a stick of rock sugar and plunked it into her tea, which Pony, surprise surprise, pulled out of the tea
and started licking. It was basically rock candy, and hey, I’d done the same thing a few times.

“I’unno, let’s keep watching!”

By the time the apples arrived, we were so engrossed in the episode that I think we both forgot to
thank my mom, and just started chowing down.

Jadeite had just died when Mom called for dinner.

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When I woke up, it was still dark out, and I felt a terrible pressure in my bladder. I must’ve had too
much juice and tea earlier, because I know I’d gone to the bathroom before heading to bed. I
checked the time: just a few minutes shy of midnight; Pony and I had gone to bed at nine o’clock. I
grumbled to myself and, with my Quirk, called on the silence of a cat’s footsteps. A dull, muted glow
surrounded my hooves, and combined with the rubberized ends of my cane, I made almost no noise
as I slowly clip-clopped my way to the bathroom, plunked myself down on the seat, and did my
business. Before I forget, I need to mention that I love Japanese toilets. They do most of the actual
cleaning business for you, and they even have seat heaters.

I’d finished my ablutions and was just heading back to my room when I saw the light click on in my
dad’s study. That was both his office and a parlor he used for entertaining clients, but why was the
light on now? Mom and dad should’ve gone to bed almost an hour ago at the latest.

Well, you know what they say. Curiosity killed the cat, and I was currently channeling a cat with my
Quirk, so… I crept closer. The door was cracked just a hair; unless there was an emergency,
Dad never closed that door all the way. The fact that it was open, even just the tiniest bit, meant I felt
just a bit less guilty for eavesdropping. No, I’m not going to sugarcoat it, because either I’d eat that
too, or Pony would.
And as I got closer, I heard voices.

“... rocks, or straight?” That was my father. In English. Which, since Mom’s English was rather rough, meant the person he was talking to would probably be—

“Light on the rocks. A little water is fine, but too much dilutes it. Don’t do that to a Hibiki.” Tsunotori Kihei. But both of them also spoke Japanese; why would they both be speaking in their second languages? “A toast. To Sylvia.”

“... three years now, huh?” I caught the tail end of whatever my dad had said, and scolded myself for getting lost in thought. I made sure my position was sturdy, then shifted the cat from my footsteps to my hearing. The glow faded from my legs, and instead I could see a slight haze at the periphery of my vision.

“I miss her more every day, Kenta. She was my everything, and she’s gone. I thought I’d made peace with it, you know? That Pony and me, the two of us, we’d be fine together, we could brave anything.”

“And then Wendigo.”

I heard Kihei laugh. It was a bitter, mirthless chuckle.

“You know what’s ridiculous?” I heard the ice in his glass clink, then after a pause I heard the ice cubes rattle. He’d probably drained it, and slammed it back down on the table. There was a shifting of the floorboards, one that I could feel even under my hooves; Kihei was a big man, and if he was making that much disturbance, he was not in a jolly mood. “They still don’t know when he got out of Leavenworth. Not how, not why, when. I know the other two, even if I don’t believe it, I still know!”

I heard him flop back down onto his chair, and it groaned trying to hold up his weight.

“Careful,” my father’s voice came, an undertone of recrimination coloring the tension in it. “That chair wasn’t cheap.”

“Oh fuck off,” Kihei snapped back. “He may be after you and yours, but Wendigo is the reason Sylvia died. She barely made it through Pony’s birth! Christ…” I could practically hear the man deflate. “What am I going to tell Pony when she starts asking what happened to her mother? How am I going to tell her? I’m sorry honey, the villain that wants to kill and eat your friend and her father hurt your mom a long time ago, and badly enough that she was dying really slowly’”? He… I don’t know how to describe it. Bleated? It wasn’t a very human sound; it was more akin to the ram whose horns he proudly bore. “It’s all just a great big cosmic joke at this point, Kenta. Nothing’s going to bring Sylvia back… and yet Wendigo can get a flawless fucking body double to take his place in Leavenworth for God only knows how long. Leavenworth!”

“Kihei,” my father broke in, voice grave. “You’ve said it twice now, but you still haven’t really told me anything. I know Wendigo is after me, he followed me back to Japan. But you said you knew why.” I heard the ice in his glass tinkle. “I need to know, Kihei.”

“You’re not going to like it,” the mountain ram man shot back immediately.
“Kihei…” my father warned, tone cold.

“It’s a blood feud.” I came up short, and very nearly let go of my Quirk at that. A blood feud? Who even does those anymore?

“A blood… Kihei, if you’re making a bullshit joke out of this I swear—”

“Kenta. Wendigo killed Sylvia. Do you really think I would joke about anything where that, that monster is concerned?” I heard my father sigh and sink deeper into his chair, the leather making wonderfully demonstrative sounds as he sat further back.

“That still doesn’t answer the question. A blood feud, sure, I’ll buy that. But why? And why my family? All I did was help catch him.”

“Oh, it’s nothing that you did, old friend. It’s not even what your ancestors did. No, it’s about what his did. Wendigo’s got a lot of reasons for the sick shit he pulls, but right now? Before anything else, he’s trying to finish what his great fuckin’ whatever grandpappy started, oh so long ago. His blood feud isn’t against you, or your family, or even your goddamn tribe. It’s against your people.”

I was starting to put two and two together myself, and could feel my knees going weak at the realization. He couldn’t mean—

“You don’t mean—”

“I do,” Kihei interrupted both my thoughts and my father’s words.

“Alexander Mason, otherwise known as Wendigo, is a direct descendant of President Andrew Jackson. He plans to finish what his ancestor started with the Trail of Tears. And by being a Native American and the one who stopped him the first time, you’ve put yourself—and Kanna—right at the top of his kill list.”

I’d heard enough. I didn’t want to—I couldn’t hear any—I was done. I sent the cat back to my footsteps and silently clip-clopped back to my room, hoping that both men were too engrossed in whatever conversations they still had to notice that the door to my room had opened and closed, since I couldn’t do it perfectly silently with only one free hand.

I tucked myself back into bed, happy that Pony hadn’t woken up.

For as long as Wendigo was after us, we would be in danger. But from what I’d heard, the man was anything but dumb. His first assault had probably been impulsive, excitement at finally having tracked his quarry across the Pacific, only to have them right in front of him, and that eagerness had been his downfall. Wendigo wasn’t an idiot, and he wouldn’t make the same mistake again. The next time he came for us, he would be prepared. He would be stronger, better armed, and possibly even have backup. And as long as I could barely walk, I would be a liability.

Right then, right there, I resolved again. I had to recover. No, I had to do more than simply recover. I had to surpass what I had been capable of before. I looked down at my hooves.

If it meant I had to suffer the agony of transformation again, and even sacrifice my humanity, then I would. Right there and right then, I swore. I would not be Wendigo’s victim.

I would never let him make me his victim again.
Chapter Three

[THREE WEEKS LATER]

“Kanna Kanna pass I’m open Kanna over here look I’m open pass to me quick quick!”

A quick glance over to Pony let me see that no, she wasn’t just super excited, she actually was open. I was good enough at dribbling the ball forward, but I wasn’t confident that I could actually aim my kick well enough to actually score, so a quick smack with the side of my hoof sent the ball careening over to where Pony stood completely unguarded.

Then I misplaced my hoof on the way down, lost all the momentum I’d managed to build up from running trying to stabilize myself, flailed my arms and took a couple tentative steps, and then promptly fell down on the grass and got what was definitely the twenty-seventh such stain on my shorts in the past twenty minutes.

I pushed myself up with my arms and looked towards Pony, who had apparently lined up her shot and was now getting ready to let it loose. Tenya rocketed his way in, doing his best to try and intercept, but Pony was just too fast for him. In fact, Pony was too fast for everyone, and possibly even too strong as well. She kicked the ball, and it was off like a shot, blowing right past the poor kid with the size-expansion Quirk who always got stuck playing goalie before he could even move.

I pulled myself into a crouched position with my hooves under me, and shakily stood up, arms out and constantly shifting to maintain my balance. My legs shook under me and I constantly felt like I was going to fall over, but I managed to retain my balance enough to start walking, and the momentum was enough to keep me upright without any more effort on my part.

During the past three weeks, I’d noticed something rather annoying about my hooves and movement. While I could walk just fine once I got moving, and I could actually run faster than I could before, even with the horse spirit in my legs, I couldn’t stand still. I was like a bicycle: get me moving, and it was all smooth sailing, but once I had to stop, I needed support to keep upright.

It was a problem, to be sure. But right now, given just how movement-heavy soccer was, I didn’t really care. Pony had just joined in for the first time last week, and we’d won by three points.

Now?

We were up by four.

I practically galloped over to Pony and stole her from the congratulations of the rest of our team with a running hug, and kept moving and carrying her further away from the rest.

“Great job Pony! You’re great at this!”

“Thanks!” Her voice was cheery, and her eyes alight. “I guess that ‘ey so’ thing Daddy had me do was good for something!

I stopped short at that one. Wait, AYSO was still a thing over there?

Then I fell over again because I’d stopped.

“Kanna are you okay!? Here, lemme help ya!”
Thank goodness for friends. Also, shut up, I’m definitely not blushing and that wasn’t embarrassing at all. You hear me?

At all!

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“So did you girls have a good time?” Kihei asked as he escorted us back to his and Kanna’s house. The two of us looked at each other, shared a laugh and high-five (we’d won again! Suck it Tenya!) and answered in the affirmative.

“I got three goals this time!” Pony bragged.

“I got the ball to you for two of those! Did you see when Tenya jumped for the ball and ate that grass? He looked so silly!”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh! Those goggles look silly, but they’re like super strong! The ground didn’t even crack them!”

The two of us continued to chatter away, the conversation eventually moving away from soccer and over to Sailor Moon, kittens and puppies, and then finally to snacks by the time we got to Casa Tsunotori. Kihei opened the front door and let us in, and as per usual Pony ran straight for the kitchen to get some apples. That girl and her apples, I swear.

Despite the fact that the house was architecturally Japanese, and was laid out in standard Japanese fashion, Kihei had managed to remodel the interior to look and feel much more Western. Yes, there was the standard Japanese depression in the entryway to take off our shoes, but the rest of the house was more along the lines of what you’d find in an American suburb than anything else over here. Tatami or bamboo flooring had been done away with, replaced with stone tile in the kitchen and dining areas, and cedar flooring covered with large area rugs dominated both the living room and the family room. It was a home meant for a family of four or five, but Kihei and Pony had it just for the two of them, which meant that Kihei had room for something that most people would never need, but had suddenly become a necessity for myself as well.

I grabbed the apple that Pony tossed me and took a bite, then followed Pony and Kihei into what had formerly been a large secondary bedroom, chomping down on my snack the whole way. Pony and I went in the first doorway and waited in the small, enclosed entryway, waiting for him to open the thick, bulky metal door that separated the room’s contents from the rest of the bottom floor. When the door finally opened, I let out a breath at the sheer heat that I felt buffet me, and could already tell I’d started sweating.

“Alright, sit on down over there you two, grab the shoe pullers and get to work huh? Pony, give Kanna a hand if she needs one, will you?”

“’kay papa!” Pony grabbed two sets of pincers and handed one to me, then set one leg on her knee so she could access the bottom of her hoof. I did the same with the opposite, and called forth the strength of a bear to help me out in getting my old horseshoes off. The first one was a bit tricky, the nails were pretty darn well embedded in my hooves, but a quick bit of help from Pony got it off in good time. The second one came much easier, and Pony and I both tossed our old, worn-out horseshoes onto a small but slowly-growing pile in the corner.

“Pony you’re up first, Kanna get me some water to quench and some for yourself will ya?”

“Right away Tsunotori-san!” I called back, hopping off the bench we sat on and immediately
moving so I didn’t lose my balance.

“That’s Kihei to you missy!” He didn’t even turn my way to respond, already holding a cherry-red heated horseshoe up to Pony’s hooves with tongs in his left, and hammering it to shape with his right. I got over to the big sink in the corner and leaned against it for balance, then filled up an empty paint can with water before leaning over and getting a drink straight from the faucet, making sure to splash myself a decent bit before turning it off. What? It’s hot in here! I grabbed the filled paint can and clip-clopped my way back to Kihei and Pony and dropped the bucket at his right side, then sat back down, making sure to keep a little further from Pony and the red-hot horseshoe her dad was hard at work manipulating.

“Alright,” he murmured around the nails that I hadn’t noticed sprout from his mouth, “this one should just take a little bit more…”

A minute or two later the first horseshoe had been fixed up to his specifications, and he cooled it off in the water for a few seconds before pulling it back out and using his hammer to break off any oxidation scale that had formed. He took the horseshoe, held it up to Pony’s hoof, then had her move to lay her leg on the bench. With his other hand, he rolled his hammer to his ring and pinky, grabbed a nail from his mouth, and slowly worked at hammering the horseshoe into place. Then he went back to his forge, got another dully-glowing horseshoe from inside, fit that one on Pony’s other hoof, and hammered it in.

“Alright Kanna, your turn. Pony, up you go.” She hopped off the bench, and I scooted myself down, feeling the tiniest bit of apprehension as I stared at the remaining nails poking out of the corner of Kihei’s mouth.

Yeah, this is one of those facts of life they don’t really tell you about until you actually, well, have hooves. Horseshoes serve a very real purpose, and while horses usually need theirs changed out every six weeks or so, we put our hooves through much more wear and tear than your average horse, what with how cities are so heavy on concrete and pavement. So, every three weeks from now on, I’d need Kihei, or another licensed farrier (and preferably blacksmith too!) to switch out my horseshoes.

“Stop tensing up,” he told me in Japanese, causing Pony to look at the two of us in some confusion as she tried to parse the new words. “It doesn’t hurt. Hooves are just giant toenails Kanna, you can’t actually feel anything from the hard part.”

“I know, I know!” I fired back, still using Japanese (“Hey, I understood that one!” Pony exclaimed excitedly). “It’s not like you’re putting a nail into something that used to be skin or anything!”

He hammered my first horseshoe to shape and quenched it, then gave me an odd look.

“You know,” he spoke, voice low and still Japanese, “I keep noticing that you really don’t sound like most kids your age.” I froze, and then I forced myself to breathe and hoped he didn’t notice, but Kihei hadn’t even turned to look at me in the first place. “Let me tell you, I was not expecting as much sarcasm out of you as I’ve seen.” He chuckled, then started hammering the nails into place, and soon my first horseshoe was affixed. “Kinda refreshing actually! I love Pony to bits, but let me tell you, a little deadpan is some serious relief next to how hyper she is.”

“Oh, oh, you’re talking about me! What’re you sayin’ Papa, huh, huh?”

“Nothing important, Pony-chan!” Kihei assuaged his daughter, using Japanese to try and get her more used to the language. Pony thought a bit about what he said, then seemed to figure it out and nodded enthusiastically.
“Okay!”

Kihei chuckled a bit, and I couldn’t help but let out a little giggle at her antics. But then Kihei sighed, and his shoulders slumped, and I could sense a shift in his demeanor.

“You’ve come a long way since that girl I saw in the wheelchair a month ago, Kanna.” He got up and grabbed the last horseshoe from the fire, waving it about in the air to bring it down from a bright orange-red to the dull cherry it seemed was safe to touch my hooves. “But the standing thing… I can’t wrap my head around it. You can walk just fine, you can run, but you can’t stand still, and it’s driving me up a wall trying to figure it out.”

“Tsunotori-san—”

“Hup-up-up,” he stopped me, holding his hammer up, “It’s just Kihei, and drop the -san. You don’t need that with me.”

“B-but—”

“Drop it,” he repeated, using a tone very much like I would with an unruly dog. I slumped a bit and crossed my arms, then stuck my lower lip out like the petulant five-year-old I was now. He chuckled. “Still, I know I’m missing something. I can’t think of it! I’ve shown you everything about how we do it, from the tops of our heads to the tips of… our… I am such an idiot.”

“Who did Daddy call a dum-dum?” Pony piped up in English, and Kihei grit his teeth, practically biting into the remaining two nails he’d yet driven through the horseshoe and into my hoof.

“Me, sugarplum,” he grumbled. “I’m the dum-dum. Pony, does your tail help you when you’re standing?”

“Huh? Hmm…” She tilted her head skyward and stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth. That was the cutest damn thinking position, I swear. “Well yeah, I whip it out to stop and then maybe move it back and forth a little bit but it’s not like I really think about it, I just kinda do it and oooooooooooh I get it now!" She bonked her fist off of one of her horns, then pointed a finger at me. “Kan-Kan doesn’t have a tail!”

“Kan-Kan?” I deadpanned. Pony stayed in the exact position she was in beforehand, but I could see the flush slowly work its way up her cheeks. She opened her mouth, but I cut her off. “It’s okay, it’s okay! I guess that just makes you my little Pony then!”

“Anyway,” Kihei interrupted, pulling the rasp back from my hoof and standing up, “it would seem we overlooked something that should’ve been incredibly obvious. It may seem small, but the tail serves an important purpose, one I hadn’t even thought about until just now. Kanna-chan, I am deeply sorry, but it looks like we may need to work on something new from whole cloth. Until then, keep working on it, but since that style of movement is meant for those of us with tails, you’ll—”

“Probably just fall on my face again, got it,” I grumbled, getting up and making sure to keep one hand on the bench for stability. “Can Pony and I watch some TV now please?”

He waved us off, then moved to go through the annoying procedure of shutting the forge off and venting the heat.

“Go on, I’ll be back inside shortly. We’ll walk you back over to your house in a couple hours, okay Kanna-chan?”

“Uh-huh.” Pony wrenched open the heavy metal door with strength an average five-year-old
shouldn’t have, then both of us went back inside to the carpeted hallway. At the end of the hall we both slipped into special hoof-slippers, since we didn’t want to scratch up the nice wood floor in the family and entertainment room, and skidded our way across the floors, as any kids in slippers or socks would do, to plop down in front of the TV. Pony put on some or other American cartoon that they got with a satellite TV uplink, but I wasn’t paying much attention to it.

I was too focused on what Kihei had said.

"It may seem small, but the tail serves an important purpose," he had said, and upon reviewing how I’d seen Pony move at the soccer game, it was immediately obvious what that was: balance. Whenever she came to a hard stop, Pony’s tail shot out straight behind her, which, aside from being really darn adorable (her tail looks like a white-tailed deer’s!), also gave her a bunch of reverse momentum to help her come to a complete stop. Additionally, even when standing still, she continues to move her tail around in small, minute twitches, something I don’t think she even realizes she does. Those micro-adjustments obviously help to keep her weight centered and balanced, given that with our hooves, we are constantly walking on what may as well be tip-toe.

I don’t have that constant source of adjustment and momentum. If I need to keep balanced, it’s all in my legs and knees and ankles, and that isn’t just difficult, it’s exhausting to try and keep constant track of. If I overcompensate with my weight on one, I need to instantly shift to the other or I start listing to the side, which then makes me take a step or throw my upper body and/or arms to a side, which could make me overcompensate again, and you get the picture: it goes round and round in circles. Having a tail takes all of those small adjustments off of the legs and lets you keep a much steadier stance.

I looked down at my hooves in thought for what must have been the umpteenth time by now, and I only had one thought.

This… was going to hurt.

* * * * *

When Pony and Mr. Tsunotori (I’m not calling him Kihei in my head. It’s just… weird to call your friend’s dad by his first name!) got me home, my mom invited them in for dinner. And when she invites you to stay for dinner, that is not a request that you can simply refuse. When Yaseiki Kimiko invites you for dinner, that’s not a suggestion. You do not say it’s fine, you don’t want to be a bother, and try to leave, the way Tsunotori-san did.

No. Instead? You say “Yes ma’am” and stay for dinner.

So fast forward an hour and a half later, and it’s not long before my bedtime. But I have enough time to research, and I think I can do it without getting bothered. So I hopped over to the computer in mom’s office that she lets me use, booted up the web browser, opened up a private browsing tab, and started searching Google. Or Moogle, as it’s apparently called here. Don’t ask me, it’s the same damn thing by any other name.

If I needed a tail to not have to spend months figuring out how to do this from scratch, then I was going to make sure it was the most goddamn versatile tail in the history of tails. Mammals would be infinitely easier if my mother was any indication (she actually uses modified platypus spurs to ‘milk’ any venomous or otherwise caustic substances she produces, with box jelly venom as the most common for whatever reason), and when it came to mammalian tails, I was downright spoiled for choices. That said, I knew what I wanted: weight for balance, dexterity for utility, and strength for… well, smacking things. I dunno, it could be handy!
The first one was answered rather quickly, and all it took was thinking about my mother’s favorite baby carrier: the kangaroo. That tail isn’t just for show; it is strong, it is heavy, it can support the kangaroo’s entire weight for brief periods, and it’s definitely for balance! A quick Google… err, Moogle search confirmed this, though… yeah, I didn’t need it to be so big and strong that I could use it as a third leg. No, I’m not making this shit up!

So that solved the first third. The next was dexterity, and while I was initially going to just say ‘screw this’ and go with capuchin monkeys for their prehensile tails, I decided to not half-ass something this important, and do my homework.

Did you know pangolins have prehensile tails? I didn’t! Well, I do now, but I didn’t! Given just how sturdy and armored pangolins are, maybe some of that will transfer over, even without trying to add scales?

So that was two parts. Part three: strength. You’d think I had that covered with the kangaroo, but I was looking for a more utilitarian kind of strength. I wanted my hypothetical tail to be able to serve me in situations I hadn’t thought of yet. The kangaroo was for more ground-bound scenarios, the pangolin’s prehensility would serve for denser areas... but I needed something to handle my father’s biggest weakness.

I needed something to handle the water. And the answer there was cetaceans.

For those who don’t know, ‘cetaceans’ is the category of animals that includes dolphins, whales, porpoises, and the like. Marine mammals with blowholes. And once again, there was a wealth of options at my disposal. If I wanted the fastest cetacean, the choice was… wait, it’s actually called the common dolphin? Really? Huh. Didn’t see that coming… anyway, back to the search. For raw strength, the blue whale seemed to be the most obvious answer given just how much muscle you’d need to propel that much mass through the water, but I needed a balance. I needed speed and power, and that made the choice clear.

I slotted orcinus orca, the killer whale, into my third ‘slot’.

Now, keep in mind that I was taking a huge shot in the dark here. I don’t actually know if I can just… make a great big animal mélange like this. My father can’t, but I’m operating under the assumption that my Quirk sacrificed the raw stamina and full-body applicability of his for the versatility and mix-and-match, plug-and-play advantages my mother’s held. This was going to be a gamble, and if it didn’t work out, well…

I’ll say it again. This was going to hurt.

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I waited awake until an hour after my parents went to bed to set my plan into action.

First thing’s first: some way to keep things clean. I don’t know if this is going to be messy, or bloody, or what. While the reshaping of my feet into hooves wasn’t, it was working from existing materials. This was going to be growing a new body part wholesale. So I snuck over to the bathroom and grabbed all the dirty towels I could carry, and spread them out on my floor.

Second, a fuel source. I know some Quirks can just… I dunno, magic shit out of thin air, but I don’t know if mine works that way. Maybe it would take the calories from food I ate, maybe it would burn my remaining baby fat for energy, or maybe it would just redistribute my body mass. But if that wasn’t the case, I’d need to scarf down huge amounts of food.
So, I grabbed the big bowl of apples from our fridge. The one that Pony’s constant visits had practically mandated we have. Yeah, our families go through a lot of apples.

Third, sound. This one was easy: I just grabbed a pillowcase, twisted it into a gag, and tied it around the back of my head. This would also hopefully keep me from biting my tongue if it hurt as badly as I expected it to.

And with all the preparations in place, it was time to begin. I sat down cross-legged on the towels, closed my eyes, and focused. Macropus rufus, the red kangaroo. Phataginus tricuspis, the tree pangolin. Orcinus orca, the killer whale. I brought the three to the forefront of my mind, and envisioned myself extracting the traits I wanted from them. The strength and balance of the red kangaroo’s tail, the prehensile nature and durability of the ground pangolin’s, and the raw power of the killer whale’s; I pulled these three to the forefront of my mind… and then I cast them down to my back, to the base of my spine, and my tailbone.

Even though my eyes were closed, I could feel my Quirk and the strain of using it in a way I never had before. I could actually sense the ethereal aura of a tail stretching over a foot from my back, and if I focused, I could even… maneuver it a little. I rested the ‘construct’ on the floor, kept my breathing even, and then just tested it. I moved it up and down. I moved it back and forth. I pushed down on the floor with it, and felt my butt lift up, then levered myself up and down a few times, testing.

I could feel a strange sort of pressure building at the base of my spine, and I also felt the sweat beading on my forehead. I’d never used my Quirk to approximate a limb I didn’t have, or tried to mix and match multiple animals to create something wholly unique, and I was feeling the strain. But I had to persevere. I had to push on, go past what I was capable of. I needed this. I needed to be able to move normally, without any outside help. I couldn’t be a liability if Wendigo came again.

The image of his gaping maw flashed through my mind’s eye, and I bit down harder on the twisted pillow in my mouth. The pressure at my spine had turned painful, and my breathing was coming ragged. It was harder to hold onto my Quirk, but I had to keep going. I couldn’t stop now. I would not be that monster’s victim next time. I had to push my Quirk farther than I ever had before. I had to find the very limits of my ability.

And then I had to break them.

I had to go beyond.

I had to go PLUS ULTRA!

The pain in my spine spiked.

My eyes shot open and I bit back a yell, and my grip on my Quirk failed. The glowing, ethereal tail faded… but the pain and the pressure didn’t. They grew.

I fell forward, and held myself up with my arms, my breathing quickening and heart racing as the pain intensified. I felt my legs spasm, and the next thing I knew I was flat on my stomach, and my back was jerking upward. With every motion I could feel the pain worsen, until eventually—

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—The sun was up, and I was on the floor, laying on my side.

I blinked away the spots in the corner of my vision and tried to bring my arms up to untie my gag,
surprised at how fatigued I was. Even as I did this, though, I could feel strange sensations, new sensations, filtering through to my confused brain. I frowned and furrowed my brow, then thought for a moment and tried to replicate whatever I’d done with the spectral aura-tail.

I felt something touch the towels I’d spread on the floor, damp and crusty with who knows what, and found myself propelled almost a full inch into the air. I rolled myself so I was on all fours and pushed myself to my hooves, but my legs buckled under me and I landed flat on my butt.

And then I felt what could only be a tail stop me from sliding further.

My hands slid back and grabbed at the base of my spine. Just like how my legs were still normal skin leading down to my hooves, it still felt like normal skin. With probing fingers though, I could tell it was just that little bit tougher than normal skin. It wasn’t very big around, maybe about as thick at its base as a slim beer bottle, and as my hands traveled along its length, I found it tapered and became thinner as I neared the tip. I could feel the limb under my hands, and I could feel my hands atop the limb as they traveled its length.

I started laughing, weakly at first, then growing stronger. When my confused and then quickly horrified father burst in, followed by my concerned mother holding a phone handset, I was still exulting in my success.

It worked.

It fucking worked!

“Kanna, Kanna, look at me, hey, look at me, Kanna!” My father pulled me up from the ground and held me in his arms, concern writ large on his face. “Kanna, what did you do?”

“I d-did it Daddy,” I replied, my voice weak, but triumphant. “I d-did it. A-and I can d-do it a-again.

“I k-know what my Quirk does now.”
Hosu City Police Headquarters wasn’t usually the most lively building when the clock struck midnight. Sure, there would be the occasional hard-boiled veteran detective chasing down a lead, a night watchman or two, and a couple men minding the continually increasing numbers of drunken salarymen filling up the ‘drunk tank’, but that meager population couldn’t be considered ‘lively’ under even the most generous of circumstances.

Tonight, however, was not like most other nights, because tonight, a meeting had been scheduled. It wasn’t the most momentous meeting, or even the most secretive. But it did have a very illustrious guest or two present, and that was enough to make Police Chief Tsuragamae Kenji’s jowls quiver in anticipation… and dread. Hosu City’s dog-headed Chief of Police looked out the window of the conference room, peering out at the city streets he claimed as his territory and was proud to call home. He saw the safety and peace with which the few remaining pedestrians wandered the streets, how the cars drove along with no worries that there would be a sudden danger interrupting their delayed commutes.

All it had taken to shatter that facade was one brief afternoon.

“You’re early,” Kenji remarked without turning away from the window, one ear visibly perking up as the door to the conference room cracked open, admitting a man that he grudgingly admitted relief to knowing he was around.

“Everyone else is late,” Sir Nighteye, ‘sidekick’ (in name only, if Kenji had to say so himself) to All Might, replied as he brushed an imaginary speck of dust from ever-immaculate suit. “My time is valuable, Chief Tsuragamae; if you truly believe this is more worth my while than assisting All Might, then you had best prove it soon.”

“Patience, young man,” Kenji admonished the young hero. “Most of the others joining us have young children that they need to be sure of. They will arrive when it is time.”

Sir Nighteye simply clicked his tongue, but held his peace. Kenji suppressed the sigh of relief and turned back to the window, waiting for the rest of the party to arrive. His wait was short.

First through the door was Iida Tensho, Pro Hero Nitrous, and his older son, UA second year and Hero Trainee Ingenium. Tensho ran the largest professional hero agency in Hosu City, and he and Kenji had had the distinct pleasure (and he wasn’t being sarcastic) of working together on numerous occasions. For all that the man was stiff, severe, and occasionally came off as slightly robotic, he was first and foremost a true professional, and a true joy to work alongside.

“Ingenium, take a seat,” the Pro Hero told his son, and moved forward to greet the Chief. “It is a pleasure to be working beside you once more, Tsuragamae-dono, though I wish the circumstances were better.”

“You and me both, Nitrous-san. You and me both.”

No sooner had Nitrous sat down beside his son (and slapped the boy’s hands down when he started to fiddle with something or another on his costume) did the remaining members of their party arrive, all at once, and all engaged in conversation.

Mizushima Masaki, better known as Manual, the Normal Hero. Yaseiki Kenta, otherwise called Native, the Roaring Shaman. And the newest arrival to his town, and the one that still set Kenta’s

“Everybody, thank you for coming,” he greeted the collected persons as they all took seats at the conference table. “I’ve gathered you all today to discuss a looming threat, not just to Hosu City,” he looked meaningfully at Manual, Native, and Nitrous, “but also to the residents of Japan as a whole,” this time carefully eyeing the visiting Detective and Sir Nighteye.

“I speak of course of Wendigo, the American villain that recently darkened our streets. I understand that we have with us an envoy of the higher-ranked Pro Heroes,” Sir Nighteye nodded at the acknowledgment, “along with the detective responsible for imprisoning the man the first time. Welcome to your parents’ homeland, Detective Tsunotori; I hope you are finding your time here enjoyable.”

“If my daughter is happy, I’m happy,” the mountain of a man replied, voice rumbling. “But if I want her to *stay* happy, then we need to stop this madman. *Again.*”

“Well said!” With that, Kenji passed around copies of the folder on his end of the table, and sat down once everybody has a copy. “With that, would you care to begin, Detective?”

“If I must.” The detective pushed himself up from the table and moved to the far wall, which held a magnetized surface that could be used as a whiteboard. He removed a piece of acrylic paper from his folder and adhered it to the wall with one of the magnets hanging beside it. From out of the paper stared the image of a man possessed: his furrowed brows and lank, matted hair nearly obscured the ragged hole that had replaced his left eye, but it did nothing to disguise the mouthful of razor-tipped fangs protruding from his distended mouth.

“Master Sergeant Alexander Mason, former United States Army Ranger. Thirty-seven years old, credited with twenty-eight confirmed kills as a soldier, and at least three hundred and fifty more as a fugitive throughout the continental United States. According to his official personnel file, his Quirk is a major strengthening and minor shapeshifting Quirk, enabling greatly enhanced strength, moderate regeneration, and the ability to grow and modify the bone tissue in his body at will, to devastating effect.” A different image made its way onto the board: that of a clean-shaven, much younger, two-eyed Alexander Mason, garbed in military dress uniform and with a brace of medals across the left breast of his jacket.

“What happened to make Alexander Mason into Wendigo isn’t something I was allowed to know for some time, not until it became necessary to know *where* and *who* he would be striking next. If you could all turn to seventh page of your folder, you will find a *heavily* redacted report, detailing the final, failed mission of Master Sergeant Mason.”

Chief Tsuragamae turned to his own copy and perused the available information, despite already knowing what he would find. Mason led a small squadron of seven others to investigate a possible research facility just on the Iraqi side of the Iran-Iraq border, one that was apparently playing host to the development of new drugs that could *permanently* strengthen somebody’s Quirk. Even through the massive redaction of details, Kenji could see that things had turned sour quickly: the ‘tip’ that they were acting on was actually leaked intentionally, and had been purposefully relayed by two members of Mason’s own squadron. Their full names had been obscured, but he could see partials: Long and Walk.

“Further investigation into this report led me to Jonathan Longshadow and Ian Walks-With-Wolves, a pair of Native American soldiers that had apparently been coerced into helping this illicit operation. Their actions are most likely the source of Mason’s hatred of Native Americans, which spread from...
these two specific individuals to the population in general, and seems to have evolved to include all indigenous populations.”

Three further laminates joined the two already present on the board, revealing rather grisly crime scenes. The information printed atop them listed the locations as New Mexico, Alaska, and Hawaii, with the dates revealing large many months between the three.

“While traveling across the Pacific, he seems to have found the time to stop by Alaska to massacre the indigenous Inuits present there, killing some thirty-eight individuals before fleeing, and continued with native Hawaiian Islanders on Maui, only slaughtering another six that we know of before moving on. We do not know how long he has been free from Leavenworth, so there are almost certainly more bodies that we simply have either not found, or not attributed to this man.”

“If I may,” a hand rose, and then the rest of Sir Nighteye followed. “If you mean to say that he has shifted the target of his hatred from simply the Native American population onto all indigenous groups, do you mean to suggest that our own Ainu are in danger? And more importantly, what does this mean about his original goal?” Sir Nighteye’s gaze passed over Native, who gritted his teeth, and stared harder at the images in his lap.

“At this time I do not believe Mason’s primary goal to have changed: he came to the Japanese archipelago to kill the one he feels most wronged him, and the man who defeated him prior to his capture the last time: Native. What you seem to be overlooking is that, despite being a savage, broken man, Mason is not an idiot. Far from it. But there is one more revelation about Mason, and his Quirk, that has to be taken into account. Native?”

Native stood up from his seat, then walked forward to stand in front of the assembled professionals.

“The last time I fought Wendigo was nearly seven… no, eight years ago now. When we fought then, his Quirk allowed him to perform some measure of alteration to the shape, structure, and strength of his muscle and bone, but nothing large or game-changing. When we fought a month or so ago, that was no longer the case.”

“And by that, you mean…” Sir Nighteye belligerently waved his hand. “It may seem that way to you, but I do not have all night.” Native seemed to mutter something under his breath, but swallowed whatever he was going to say and pressed on.

“When we fought just over a month ago, his Quirk, and the changes it made… they were faster. They were more fluid. And the first thing he did was fire his teeth at my daughter as projectiles. That ability was decidedly not something he was capable of the first time around; once I’d knocked most of the teeth out of his head, that was when he became sloppy and I was able to capture him. From what Kihei told me,” he nodded at his horned friend, “his teeth didn’t finish regrowing for a full week. But now? His teeth were all regrown one minute later.”

“It’s the cannibalism, isn’t it?”

Everybody present turned to Ingenium, the hero trainee suddenly going fluorescent at the attention. “I m-mean, it’s the only thing t-t-that makes sense! The file says he, he… ate his old squadmates, and then he was able to evade the Army’s own police, right? Well, wouldn’t that mean that he’s eating people, and maybe eating some of whatever makes their Quirks tick, and that’s making his own Quirk stronger in the process?”

Kenji huffed. Everybody turned to the dog-man.

“It’s clear then. Sir Nighteye, you are free to leave; report back to All Might and the rest of the
Ranked Heroes. There is a serial murderer on the loose.

“And the more he kills, the harder it will be to stop him from killing again.”

* * * * *

"Onegai... d-darek-ka... tasuket-te! Kami-s-sama, Ooru Maito, t-tasukete!"

He growled, and with one last wrench of his jaws, he silenced the treasonous wench in front of him. He leaned down over his newest kill, and with great scooping motions of his clawed hands, shoveled pound after pound of wonderful, savory, treacherous meat into his maw, and swallowed. It felt warm as it traveled down to his gullet, and when it nestled in the pit of his stomach, he felt it. A warmth spread through him, and he practically vibrated with energy, with potential, with power.

The Wendigo stood from his kill and leapt to the roofs, disappearing into the moonless night.
Alright, fine. I was reckless. In fact, I’m going to go so far as admit that I was really reckless. In hindsight, I probably should have told either my mother or father what I was thinking, and then been firm that it was my Quirk, and that if they didn’t want me to, I was probably going to anyway. Then I could have gotten some supervision over the whole process by which I grew my tail, and wouldn’t have wound up in the situation that currently plagues me: namely, getting frog-marched to a psychiatrist. Once again, it was one of my mother’s colleagues at the hospital, but it wasn’t a friend of hers. Instead, Dr. Shisui just happened to owe her a favor: she’d produced incredibly specific mixes and dosages of various compounds that one of Dr. Shisui’s more ‘troublesome’ patients required, and had earned quite a bit of goodwill in the process… goodwill that was about to be largely used up on me, I supposed. And before we get any further, can I just rant a little bit about names in worlds like this? Why, why does it seem like everybody has a name that just happens to perfectly describe some aspect of either who they are or what they can do? Because while I don’t have the kanji in front of me (nor would I be able to read them if they were), I can tell you right now that Dr. Shisui’s name? Shisui means “still waters”. Yes. The psychiatrist’s name… was a pun about hidden depths.

Ugh.

I’m forgetting something. Oh, right! Tail!

So, turns out having a tail is awesome. Like I already mentioned, it’s more or less skin-colored, and is about three-quarters as long as my legs, and it is already the most useful thing ever. I could stand up without any wobbles or anything now, and whenever it seemed like my balance was shifting, my tail moved practically on its own to correct for it! It wasn’t even that obvious, just a kind of lazy waving, sort of like the way some people will shift from foot to foot when they’re idle. Also, just for kicks, I held onto the bathroom counter and used my tail to brush my teeth. Yes, I actually have enough dexterity with this limb to hold my toothbrush and use it like that for proper dental hygiene.

So let me repeat, having a tail is awesome.

“Well that’s new,” a familiar voice remarked as we walked through the doors to the hospital. I turned to see Dr. Jakuzure, the snakes on her arms hissing hello and… smiling? Is it even physically possible for a snake to smile? “I take it you’re here to get that checked out, Kimiko-chan?”

“Actually I already did that at home,” my mother replied, “and she’s perfectly healthy. Somehow.

No, she’s here to see Dr. Shisui, because she did a very stupid thing, and I’d like his professional opinion on it!” If I actually were just a normal five year old, I probably would have blushed at that scolding. But I’m not, so I didn’t. Instead, I just pouted, crossed my arms, turned away, and let my tail lazily wind around me a bit. Yes, I was that mature.

“You’re doing much better though, Kanna-chan!” Dr. Jakuzure remarked, kneeling down in front of me with a smile on her face. “Try not to mind your session with old Shisui too much. He’s got the air of a daft codger, but he really does know his stuff, hm?” I rolled my eyes, but then nodded, and that seemed to satisfy the good doctor. “Well, I’m off; those rounds aren’t going to complete themselves, you know?”

“Oh, don’t I,” my mother replied, then patted me forward. “Come on Kanna-chan, this way.”
Just as Dr. Jakuzure had warned, Dr. Shisui definitely had the air of... what was that turn of phrase, it was on the tip of my tongue. Airy, airhead, empty-minded... oh wait, I remember now! Dr. Shisui had the air of an absent-minded professor. You know the type: the one who’s so engrossed by whatever subject matter he’s working on or teaching that he completely ignores stuff that anyone else would take into account. The best example of this I’d ever seen was, hilariously enough, Justice Stephen Breyer, back during my first life.

You haven’t lived until you’ve had to suppress a laugh at watching (one of) your boss(es) walk into a wall while reading a good book.

But anyway, back to Dr. Shisui, the psychiatrist on staff at Hosu Memorial Hospital.

And the man that I was currently driving up a goddamn wall.

I couldn’t blame him. If he’d had the full picture of what was going on with me, then maybe he’d have been able to properly pick my brain, but as it stood, nothing fit. His first guess had been something on the autism spectrum, though to be honest I have no idea why that would be his immediate answer. If I had to guess, it was because the majority of the diagnoses he handed out on the regular were on the autism spectrum, and it was just his go-to. When that didn’t fit, he went into mood disorders, which also didn’t quite fit, largely because I just wasn’t old enough to actually have developed the oddities in brain chemistry necessary for these. Schizophrenia? Too young. Bipolar disorder? Again, too young. Major depressive disorder? A no, and the one that actually made me the most happy: that’s the specific one that had plagued me during my first life. Sure, there’s always a chance it could resurface, but it didn’t seem all that likely.

But then the line of questioning changed, and I couldn’t follow what he was thinking anymore. Beforehand, I’d had a fairly good idea of exactly what hypothesis I was being led towards, and what certain affirmatives or negatives would mean. This was far from my first time seeing a psychiatrist for diagnosis. But these were questions I’d not heard before, and had more in common with a medical history than it would with mental health. So safe to say I was baffled.

That’s when he called my mother back in.

“Yaseiki-sensei. Unfortunately, despite my best efforts, I do not have any concrete opinions as to what seems to ail your daughter, or as to the source of her... unusually mature demeanor,” the psychiatrist said, leaning back into his recliner and pressing his fingers together. Wow, very Gendo Ikari... “Nothing I am used to seeing fits correctly, and since I am not a specialist in the area that does, I hesitate to assign a diagnosis to this one thing, though it is the only possibility that even remotely begins to make sense. However, I am still obligated to inform you of my opinion.

“It is my belief, as a licensed psychiatric professional, that your daughter suffers from some measure of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, likely brought about by her encounter with this... ‘Wendigo’.”

That couldn’t be right. There was no way that I had even the slightest inkling of PTSD.

“Are you certain? Couldn’t it be something else?” My mother’s voice was... unsteady. “Couldn’t there be anything else to explain this?”

“Kanna-chan.” I turned towards the doctor. “Have there been any moments where, even for an instant, it felt like you were ‘back there’?” I nodded, and he raised a finger. “Did this traumatic event induce nightmares?” I nodded again, and a second finger raised. “Do you find yourself thinking about the event, or do your thoughts find some way to circle back towards it?” I nodded, and a third
finger joined the other two. “Have you felt any instances of just being afraid, or anxious, and without any noticeable cause?” Once again, I had to nod, and a fourth finger rose. “I believe the behavior that led your mother to bring you here speaks for itself as possible self-destructive behavior,” Dr. Shisui got started on the other hand now, “I can tell from our conversation that you have been unusually guarded and reserved, and displayed a tangible sense of relief when your mother entered.” Wait, really? I hadn’t… had I actually been doing that?

“And yet, you do not seem to possess any measure of guilt or shame with regards to the incident, your personal relationships appear to have flourished, if how much you spoke about this ‘Pony-chan’ was any indication, your emotional state and affect appear remarkably normal, and you do not have the sense of hopelessness or listlessness that I have seen plague PTSD sufferers in the past. While my diagnosis remains, I do not believe that it is a particularly serious case, and that further psychiatric care would be a mistake, and even a disservice. That being said,” and here he reached for a note pad, not his prescription pad, and wrote something down before tearing the page off and handing it to my mother.

“Weekly counseling sessions would not be remiss, and would almost certainly improve young Kanna-chan’s mental health. Sometimes just talking about it can help immensely.”

It was at this point that I more or less tuned out. I’d heard everything I needed to. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder… the worst part is? Looking at it from as detached a point of view as I could, he was right. God damn it, he was right. I had been experiencing some negative effects from my encounter with the Wendigo that I couldn’t really chalk up to anything else. And much as I hate to admit it, I need help for this. I need real, serious, professional help, or this issue is just going to get worse and worse.

Mentally, I sighed.

Looks like I wouldn’t be escaping shrinks in this life either.
Chapter Five

[KANNA, AGE SIX]

“Kanna Kanna Kanna look, look! I’m wearing one of your Christmas presents! How do I look, how do I look?”

I turned to face the door to my room, and saw—who else?—Pony standing in the doorway. She had on a cute white sundress with green—what was the word, lace? Filligree? Was it something else? Somebody help me, fashion is too complicated—held up by inch-wide straps on her shoulders and just covering her knees. Obviously neither of us could accent our outfits with shoes, hooves kind of precluded that, but both of us had an entirely different avenue: bows and ribbons. So Pony had tied a pair of bows on her horns with ribbons of the same light-green that was present on her dress, and her hair was pulled back and tied with another ribbon of the same color. Thankfully for my sanity, Pony hadn’t put her hair up in a ponytail, so I don’t have to try and avoid a pun there. She kept her hair low, but still out of the way.

“It looks great! W-what about me?” That second part came out a lot more shyly than I expected, but hey. I was a little… embarrassed, that was all. I didn’t grow up wearing dresses to parties the first time around!

I also had on a knee-length dress, but mine covered my shoulders and had a bit of something or other around the collar that I couldn’t quite describe properly. It started as a nice teal up top, and slowly darkened along a gradient until it was a deep, ocean-water turquoise at the bottom. Also, there were sequins on it. My mom had wanted to get me something with glitter, but that was where I put my hoof down.

…but huh. I’d already started changing my idioms to accommodate not having feet anymore. Eh, food for thought.

Also, before I forget, I’d tied a teal ribbon on my tail, about four inches down from the tip. It was in as big and poofy of a bow as I could manage, and I loved it.

“I’m so excited! I know we’re always near it for soccer,” “Remember to call it football here,” I interjected, “but I still haven’t seen Tenya’s house! And his brother just finished at that big fancy school, that one for heroes—wait, what was it called? Uh… U Key?”

“Yuuei if you want to be a smarty pants,” I mimed drawing the kana on my mirror so Pony could see, “but just call it UA, it sounds exactly the same and is so much easier to write.”

“I’m still no good at reading Japanese,” Pony said, voice a little dejected. “It’s just so weird! You’ve got all these swirlies and lines and they’re really really close to each other but it’s just a tiny difference and then—”

I cut Pony off with a hug. She giggled. I chuckled. We both laughed. When I pulled back, we were sharing a smile.

“Girls!” A voice rang out from the lower level. “Hurry up, we’re going to be late!”

“Coming momma!” I grabbed Pony’s hand and led her down the stairs. It was party time!

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So, my family has a fairly sizable home for Japan. Two bedroom, one major master bath and one with a shower only, a kitchen, a dining room, a family room, and two more for offices for mom and dad to use... it was nice.

It had nothing on the Iida family home. This place... this was a goddamn mansion. And that was just on the outside! On the inside? Well...

“And this is my bedroom!” Tenya stiff-armed (yes, stiff-armed—what, do you really think the world’s most robotic child would press a button normally?) a button on the wall, and the metal and glass door slid open with a barely audible whirring of servos and motors. It was a fairly typical child’s bedroom, but everything was seriously fancy: brushed chrome, anodized metal surfaces, a brushed ‘glass’ bedside table that I was fairly sure could take a bullet... my family was fairly well-to-do, and Pony and her dad definitely weren’t hurting for funds, but this?

This was was forcing me to recontextualize everything I knew about who Iida Tenya was. And we were six.

A quick glance to my side showed that Pony’s jaw had dropped, and after seeing the small line of drool starting to work its way down her chin, I followed her gaze to Tenya’s wall. And, more importantly, to the massive collection of unopened action figures set up meticulously within a glass display case. Most of them I didn’t recognize, others of them were clearly various heroes (“That’s a really big All Might,” Pony mumbled, staring at the centerpiece of Iida’s collection: a 1:5 scale model of All Might in his debut appearance, carrying what had to be eight civilians out of the rubble simultaneously), but my eyes skipped right past those...

... and straight to the Star Wars figures. I cannot begin to tell you how happy I am to know that Star Wars is just as big of a thing in this Japan as it was the first time around, because I fucking love Star Wars, and—

“Is that a Black Series Darth Revan!?” Tenya just nodded. “Iida Tenya, I hate you so much right now. So much.”

“Ahaaha! Aniki waited with me for eight hours to buy that!” Tenya put his hands on his hips and puffed out his chest, and somehow the light managed to glint off of his glasses just so. “It is my Star Wars cen... err, Lynch... the, uh...” And suddenly Tenya’s face-splitting grin became very strained. “It is whatever that word is that means the most important part that everything else is only second best next to!”

“Well, you’ve got centerpiece, lynchpin, piece de resistance, magnum opus, showpiece, focal point, main event, keynote, and spotlight, but the one you actually wanted is the first.”

Tenya flushed a bit, then opened his mouth to respond. Of course, that was the moment his door chose to open back up and his mother, Iida Tenshi, swept in.

“Tenya-kun, you can show off to your little girlfriends later,” she teased. Tenya and I both started blushing and stammering immediately; it took Pony a few moments to parse through the rapid-fire Japanese, but once she’d pieced together enough of what had been said, her own blush was incandescent. “We’re about to cut the cake! Come, come!”

And so we followed Iida Tenshi through the hallway, out into a parlor room filled with people. Some of them had obvious Quirks of their own on display, while others just wore costumes or UA tracksuits. This was obviously a group of Tensei’s friends from his graduating class, and Casa de Iida was the place for them to see and be seen.
“Thank you everyone for coming!” The voice came over a set of speakers that I couldn’t see, and were likely artfully concealed within the room’s hi-tech decor, but the actual owner (“Nii-san!” Tenya whispered excitedly) was unmistakable. “These past three years I’ve spent at UA were some of the best of my life, and I’m sure that many of you here could say the same.” The room roared with applause, but a motion from Tensei was enough to quiet them down. “But now that we’re out, it’s time for us all to move forward. And with that in mind, I would like to introduce myself to you anew.”

Iida Tensei pulled the helmet he’d been holding from under his arm, and secured it snugly over his head. There was a brief hiss of air as something pressurized or equalized, followed by a burst of exhaust from the tailpipes on his armor’s shoulders and legs.

“Today, I am reborn. No longer am I simply a disciple of greater heroes. Instead, I aim to join them.”

I heard the revving of an engine, and suddenly Tensei was running along the walls of the room. He did a lap, two laps, three, growing faster and faster until I couldn’t pick him out. And then he leapt, landing in the classic three-point stance of heroes everywhere, and he stood surrounded by family and friends.

“Today, Pro Hero: Ingenium is born!”


And then the moment was completely ruined when a girl with waist-length, somewhat wavy and… kelp-y light blue hair leapt out of the crowd and practically draped herself across Tensei’s back.

“Oh Darling, you look so incredible dressed in my newest lovely! Well, well, do you like it? Do you? Do you!” Even from here, I could see a manic gleam in her eyes.

“R-Rei-chan—”


I don’t know what spurred him to do so, but I would be eternally thankful to Tenya for dragging both me and Pony outside. I swear, I have never seen somebody in what could only be described as orgasmic bliss over… over… that!

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The three of us sat in the backyard of the Iida family garden, trading glances. Never would we ever, our eyes seemed to say, allow ourselves to become victim to that.

“Tenya… who, was that!?”

“Aniki’s girlfriend!” Tenya’s voice was its usual strong self, but his body language said otherwise. It was a fairly warm night, and yet he was shivering. “She is a fierce woman!”

“Kanna, what’s he saying?” Pony asked me tugging on my dress. “I caught some of that, but—”

"Tenya’s scared witless of his brother’s girlfriend,” I deadpanned. Nope, I was not getting into this. But still… “But still. He finally graduated from UA, huh…”

“Come again?” Tenya asked. Oh, right, wrong language. I repeated myself in Japanese, and he nodded, then started… pumping a fist repeatedly. “Yes! Aniki is incredible, truly an amazing hero in the making! Some day, I will be just like him, I swear it! I too will go to UA, and I will become
the greatest hero that there ever was!”

I smiled.

“You up for the challenge, Tenya-kun? They don’t let just any kid into UA’s hero course, you know.”

“Of course!” He changed his pose again, this time opting for one hand on his hip and the other out towards Pony and me with a thumbs up… which kept bouncing up and down at regular intervals. “I will get into UA, and I will make my family proud! I swear it!”

“You know what?” I finished translating what Tenya had said for Pony, then pulled the three of us close. “Let’s all get into UA. Let’s all go together.”

“Yeah!” Pony exclaimed, putting a hand out. “We all go UA! We shit at that school!” I pinched the bridge of my nose and corrected what Pony said. She had the good sense to blush a bit at what had been cursing, but the point still stood.

“Together.” Tenya put his hand out, and placed it atop Pony’s. I followed with mine, and Tenya and I both ignored his slight flush.

“Together.”
“Kihei, where are we going?”

“Earth to Kihei, are you gonna tell me what we’re doing?”

“Kihei. Where. Are. We. Going.”

“If you don’t tell me where we’re going, I’m just going to turn around and head home.”

Things had continued in this vein for the past hour, but despite all of his protests, Kenta had still ended up on the Shinkansen. Now, traveling south from Hosu, Kenta still hadn’t managed to get a word out of his friend. He could only recall a few times when Kihei had been this cagey about what he was up to and what he’d had planned, and only one of those times had actually been something good. This one was shaping up to be very much the rule, not the exception.

“Allright, Kihei.” He used English; talking on the Shinkansen wasn’t forbidden, per se, but it was frowned upon as being disruptive, and using English meant he could pretend he was just some foreign-born man on a vacation to reconnect with his heritage. “I’m on the train. We’ve been rolling for an hour already. Whatever investment you seem to think I needed before you let me know, it’s there. Now spill.”

“Trust me on this one,” Kihei rumbled, “you’re not going to like it.”

Kenta couldn’t help himself. He stood in front of Kihei and slammed his hands down on the man’s shoulders, looking him dead in the eyes.

“Just. Tell me.”

Kihei sighed and rubbed his face, then started running a finger along one of the curved ram horns that sprouted from the side of his head. Kenta recognized the tic; Kihei was feeling guilty, but he was absolutely certain that he was justified in doing whatever it was.

“We’re going to Okinawa.”

“Oki—Kihei, that’s three hours on this thing. What reason could we possibly have to go to—no. No, I refuse.”

“Kenta…” Kihei warned.

“No Kihei! You know my opinion on this matter! Damn it, and I even set it up so that Iida boy could cover for me, what’ll it look like if I just reappear? Whatever, it’s still not as bad as this, this…” He floundered for a word. “Bullshit!” Kenta flounced down into his chair, anticipating the next stop. Whatever it was, he’d be getting off and buying a return trip. It would put a dent in his funds, sure, but if Kihei thought he could get Kenta to consider it for even a fraction of a second—

“My contact told me he had information on the Wendigo,” Kihei elucidated.

—then he was absolutely correct. Something burned inside him whenever he heard that name. Wendigo. It made sense, if he thought about it, for a man who hunted down Native Americans to steal the name of one of the culture’s greatest boogeymen. But it still rankled to know that everything he fought against, everything he so deeply hated, had stolen one of his people’s stories and tainted it with his association. The legends of the wendigo were told as cautionary tales, stories of winter’s
chill, of the prudence in preparing for the hard times, of how hunger and starvation could take on
forms other than the physical.

Now it had appeared in the real world, fully convinced that it was the descendant of a man who’d
had no children, and given some crazy mission to slaughter people for no other reason than the
circumstances of their birth.

Kenta gripped his armrest tighter, struggling to force down the rage that sought to take form around
him.

“Well, then he better have something good.” Kenta looked out the window, hoping to calm himself.
“And a really fucking good reason as to why he’s not out here helping.”

* * * * *

Yokota Air Force Base. With the advent of Quirks, most countries had greatly scaled back their
military might, and some had even outright done away with the armed forces, folding them into hero
groups and other self-defense forces. Japan itself had largely done so, although the Navy and Coast
Guard remained as strong as ever, given just how common Quirks that saw use in aquatic or marine
environments were among the villain population. The lawlessness of the open seas was not
something even All Might could corral, and out in the vast ocean waters, crime flourished, and so the
Navy and Coast Guard remained.

But America took it a step further. Instead of scaling back their military, they had expanded.
According to an arcane bylaw of American law that Kenta had fallen afoul of during his time in
America, all registered heroes in America were considered active military, and their actions fell under
the armed force’s own jurisdiction. Additionally, all American citizens with Quirk licenses not for
active hero work were considered Army reserves, and could be called to service with only a
minimum of warning. Despite being a visiting hero, Kenta had nearly fallen victim to these laws;
they had tried to force him into ‘accepting’ an Army commission in order to receive the credit and
reward for capturing Mason. It was only due to Kihei’s help that he managed to evade that trap and
return to Japan.

There was a reason Wendigo’s capture marked the end of his regular visits to the United States, no
matter how much he loved the country. And it was the same reason he swore he would never
enter any area controlled by the US Military.

That oath would be broken today.

“Mr. Tsunotori, Mr. Yaseiki.” A soldier garbed in dress uniform came up to both men and saluted.
Of course he spoke in English, because even now the world still felt the need to bend over
backwards for the United States. “If you will follow me, I have been given leave to escort you to the
Sergeant Major.”

Kenta and Kihei shared a look, but followed the soldier anyway. He led them through the base,
taking what was almost certainly a largely circuitous route meant to display the base’s might. They
passed the firing range, where multiple soldiers, some with projectile-based Quirks and some with
guns, practiced. They passed a sparring area where two more soldiers, both using their Quirks,
fought with the same ferocity that Kenta had only ever tapped into once before. They passed a
teeming barracks, a crowded mess tent, and a conspicuously empty infirmary, and only after what
had to have been a silent and very intentional tour of the facility did they finally arrive at their
destination. The soldier knocked on the door and then, on some seemingly invisible signal, let the
two men in.
“Kihei!” The man behind the desk stood up, his size absolutely dwarfing Kenta, and even managing to overshadow Kihei’s prodigious height. If this man was less than two meters tall, Kenta would eat his costume. He had the smallest touch of gray hair at the temples, but the rest of him seemed to have the vigor of youth, tempered by the rugged experience of manhood. “It’s been too damn long! When did I last see you, that one Fourth of July?” Kihei stepped forward and clasped arms with the man, then the two went in for a one-armed hug. The impact of their hands and fists upon each other let loose small shockwaves, and Kenta had to take a step back to steady himself. A quick look around the room revealed no breakables, and durable acrylic windows; he had to wonder if that was less for safety than it was simple practicality, because normal windows would probably have been destroyed by now, if that display had meant anything.

“No, it was the luau in Hawaii. It was, wow, almost four years ago.”

“Right! Right.” The big man let go and pulled the chairs away from his desk, beckoning for the two men to sit. Kenta did so, and was surprised at just how deceptive the chair was: it looked comfortable, but it really, really wasn’t. “And how’s your daughter, what was her name, Umika right?”

“Umako, actually, but she prefers her middle name Pony,” Kihei grumbled. “Honestly, the two should have been the other way around, but I was adamant, and Sylvia… well. She wasn’t in fighting shape after Wendigo.” Sylvia Tsunotori had always been the greatest tragedy of Wendigo’s madness. She didn’t have a drop of Native American blood in her; she just happened to have been wearing a gift Kenta had brought back from the reservation, and was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Five years now, hasn’t it been.” The man looked down to his own left hand, and at the plain gold band sitting there. “I can only imagine how you feel. If Gwynn… enough of that! Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

“Kenta, this is Sergeant Major Andrew Louis Szabo,” Kihei motioned between the two men. “He was my college roommate, and the reason I can never seem to sleep past sunrise.”

“A pleasure.” Kenta reached for a handshake, and had to wince; the Sergeant Major’s grip was like iron. “I understand you have some information for us?”

“Straight to business I see, I can respect that. Unfortunately, gentlemen, we must be incredibly brief.” He took a cellphone out of his pocket, pretended to look, and placed it away. Once all the men had sat back down, SGM Szabo reached into his desk and pulled out a pair of files. “These do not exist, and as such will not remain unopened until you have returned to your homes. They are not about to be slipped beneath your coats, and did not leave this base, because they never existed in the first place. In fact, you didn’t even get to see me at all, because I was occupied with processing new transfers.” The Sergeant Major stood from his desk, and retreated out the door. “If that is all, I will need you two to leave the base as soon as possible. The fastest route is simply taking a right turn out my door, then the third left, and going straight.”

No more words were exchanged. There was more that Kenta wanted, no, needed to ask, but if Kihei’s massive hand on his shoulder was any indication, this was not a situation where he could simply do so. And thus, Kenta and Kihei took their folders… and left.

* * * * *

Four hours later saw the pair finally return to Hosu City, and with the blessing and presence of Chief Tsuragamae, Kihei and Kenta used the same conference room that they had two years prior, when first discussing the Wendigo. The two of them dove headfirst into the information that Kihei’s friend
had procured for them, and the results…

“No,” Kenta shook his head, not in disbelief, but with certainty at the slowly growing dread in the pit of his stomach. “They didn’t. They wouldn’t.”

“They did,” Kihei rumbled. A crack echoed through the room; the conference room table had splintered beneath the man’s titanic grip. “He didn’t even need to escape Leavenworth. He may as well have walked out the front door…”

Master Sergeant Alexander Mason had been imprisoned within the military penitentiary in Fort Leavenworth. That had been the official line. The reality of his situation was far, far different. The Wendigo was a unique specimen. For every marginal input, he grew demonstrably stronger, and that was simply observations gleaned from the time he was on the run. After he had been imprisoned, though, the experiments truly began.

They started by feeding him cadavers, people who had been dead for indeterminate amounts of time, trying to determine if there was a point at which the growth factor of his Quirk could not be stimulated by the consumption of human flesh. Once they had determined that edibility was the sole time factor, they started to investigate whether the strength of the Quirk user he fed from had an effect. Once again they had a cadaver, but there were also samples taken from deceased villains… and deceased heroes. And the results were astonishing.

The more experienced and skilled a Quirk user was, and the more they exercised their Quirk on a day to day basis, the more power Wendigo could extract from feasting upon their flesh.

Oh, Mason had been resistant. Despite all of his murders and all of his madness, he still considered himself to be a patriot at heart. He would not simply eat the flesh of somebody that he had not himself killed, and verified that, in his twisted opinion, they deserved that death. So they took the choice away, and force-fed Mason, at least at first. Eventually he grew too strong for them to safely restrain.

That’s when they resorted to starvation, and Mason fully gave way to the Wendigo.

“I’ll send alerts to police precincts and Pro Hero agencies around Japan,” Chief Tsuragamae intoned, voice partly broken up by a growl building deep within his throat. “Heroes are not to engage the Wendigo unless they are absolutely certain of their victory. We cannot risk him growing more powerful any faster than he already will be.”

“It won’t help.” Kenta let out a hollow, mirthless chuckle. “Somebody’s going to do what I did. Either they’re going to do it for the glory, or out of urgency, or even just because they think it’s the right thing to do, and they’re not going to have my luck.” He slid down the wall to the floor, the open folder sitting upside-down next to him.

“That’s when they resorted to starvation, and Mason fully gave way to the Wendigo.

“Some hero is going to attack the Wendigo, and if they’re lucky, he’ll just leave. But mark my words.” Kenta looked to both Kihei and Chief Tsuragamae, eyes shadowed. “If they manage to interrupt the Wendigo’s hunt, he’s going to eat them.”

The eviscerated, gnawed remnants of Pro Hero Scallopina, discovered three weeks later in Hakodate, only proved Kenta right.
Chapter Six

[Kanna, Age 8]

Do any of you remember those days way back when, during the earlier days of your childhood, when you were never actually sure where you were going on vacation? You knew you were going out of town, whether it was on an airplane, or a train, or even just on a road trip, but you didn’t actually know where you were headed. The one I most remember from my first time through life was on what was my and my twin brother’s eighth (or maybe ninth, I’m not so sure anymore) birthday. Our parents actually pulled us out of school for the day, breaking our perfect attendance records in the process, and took us for a day trip skiing at Big Bear Mountain. I got practically run over by a snowboarder, and my brother got… wait, no, other way around. My brother is the one who got nearly run over by a snowboarder, and I’m the one who took a wrong turn and wound up on a black with almost no snow covering the brush and rocks. Wow, yeah, I’m starting to forget details from the first time around. That’s… I’m not actually sure if that’s worrying or not, actually. Should it be? Should I be worried about that? Damn it, I don’t know.

I’d known that we’d be going on vacation at the end of term and before the mid-summer school session started up (yes, there’s school in the summertime in Japan, look it up), but I hadn’t had a clue as to the location. I only actually learned when we got to Narita Airport and arrived at the gate… and suddenly the need to shop for a new swimsuit made sense.

We were going to Guam.

For those who’ve never heard of the place, Guam is a territory of the United States, just like the US Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. There’s also a military base on Guam, which, as I learned my first time through life, is actually at least a thirty minute drive away from most of the tourism centers, and that distance is the only reason my dad was fine with going there. Let’s see, other info on Guam… while the place attracts similar types of tourism as Hawaii from Asia, the climate is a lot less temperate, and is actually more humid and… jungle-y. That’s not a word, but there’s nothing else I can think of. Anyway, Guam attracts a large amount of people from Japan due to its proximity and relative price. It lets them go to the United States without actually having to take a flight somewhere in the twelve hour range or so. How do I know this?

I’d been to Guam the first time around. Multiple times. And if you want to hear something just a little spookier, it looked like we’d be staying at the exact same hotel I’d been to each of the previous times, which somehow still exists in this world: the Guam Hilton. We had two rooms, and they’d apparently be connected: one for my parents, the other for Pony and me.

Oh, did I forget to mention? Pony was joining us!… but, and with a suddenness that has me both worried and suspicious, her father wasn’t. The original plan was for me to room with my parents, and for Pony to room with her papa Kihei. But now he wasn’t coming. He’d said something or other about an investigation that he was consulting on, and how something major had come up that he couldn’t simply walk away from due to infosec… I think. I’d been eavesdropping again. Oh, right, that’s another new development I hadn’t mentioned yet: Kihei’s working as something between a private investigator and a consultant. Think Sherlock Holmes. I don’t know how he’d managed to get this position, but he had, and it was putting a damper on our vacation plans.

Namely, the fact that Pony had spent the entire plane ride so far staring out the window looking sad and lonely. I’d tried to engage her in conversation, or get her to play a card game or a video game or something with me, but she was just… staring out the window. I went back to my reading material for a while (a book on weird and wild animal science, courtesy of my mother’s book collection… did
you know that the fastest animal relative to its body length is actually a mite?), trying to think of some way to cheer Pony up.

And then I finally remembered the way that always worked on my brother and me the first time around. I smiled, then leaned over to Pony.

“Hey. Hey Pony.”

“Mmm,” she mumbled.

“We’re sharing a room, right?”

“Whatever…” Pony just mumbled and tried to turn further into the window. I leaned in closer.

“You know what that means?” She didn’t respond. “No parents, no rules.”

Pony turned away from the window. She turned to face me, slowly, ever so slowly. I held up the pocky I’d brought with me as a snack, and let my grin grow, and grow, and grow. And in turn, Pony’s did too.

Meanwhile, in the opposite aisle, my parents sat completely unaware.

* * * * *

A few hours later, we’d finally gotten checked in and settled, and it was time for fun. Pony and I got changed into our bathing suits, and of course we had to compare them. Pony was wearing a two-piece, a simple number in, what else? Red, white, and blue, of course! Despite the fact that she’d lived in Japan for three years and gotten more or less fluent in Japanese, Pony was, through and through, still an American girl, and I was more than happy to indulge. My own swimsuit was a one piece, though it was mostly bare in the back, held up at the shoulders and by a strap that goes around my neck. It would’ve been a little more difficult for Pony to get this one on, since she would’ve had to negotiate her horns with the… well, ‘collar’ I guess? Is there a specific word for straps that go around the neck to hold a garment up?

We made our trip down to the beach, and soon, the paved walking path gave way to sand.

“Last one to the water’s a rotten egg!” I immediately ran from the path, to the sand—and lost my, well, ‘footing’ I guess, the word doesn’t really apply to hooves does it—and flopped face-first into the sand. Ow.

“Kanna! Are you okay?” Pony made to run to pick me up—and also flopped face-first into the sand, her hooves not finding the purchase she’d expected. “Oof.”

“Well girls,” my dad started as he picked me back up, and my mom picked Pony up from where she’d fallen. They dusted us off, and then just started walking slowly. Pony and I shared a glance, and we started… well, walking. Slowly.

Yeah, this should’ve been obvious in hindsight, but hooves are a little different on loose sand than pavement. You know how when you try to run on sand, some of the sand shifts underneath you? Well, now assume that your feet were a third the size, and you couldn’t actually move them. You’re standing on less sand in the first place, so if the little bit you’re standing on slips underneath your hoof? Whoop, there goes your balance. Did that mean neither Pony nor I could run on sand?

Hah! No. We figured it out in a minute or two. Just needed to be a little more lead—err, lead-hooved? I guess? We just needed to dig our hooves in a little more, or put a little bit of weight into it,
or something like that? Look, I can’t really describe it. The closest you’ll get to the sensation is putting on a platform high-heel, cutting off the heel, then trying to run on sand yourself, and that’s still not exact.

Once we finally figured it out though? We had a blast.

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“So you just… grow gills? Doesn’t it hurt?”

I shrugged. Then I tried to talk, but a bunch of water came out instead. I motioned for Pony to turn away, but she didn’t; I just shrugged. Then I wrapped an arm around my midsection, pushed, and upchucked what had to be a full gallon of water. No, not from my stomach, from my lungs. Once I’d done that, I took a deep breath the normal way, and coughed a couple times to clear the rest out. Once that was done, I let go of the shark whose gills my Quirk apparently let me borrow, and felt the gashes in the side of my neck close up. Pony got really close and looked at my neck as the gills closed up, somehow both fascinated and disgusted.

“Your skin was gray and weird next to those things…” Yeah, it definitely went full disgust.

“Not sure how it works. Maybe it’s just because humans can’t breathe underwater and sharks can, so my Quirk made me a bit shark-y to do it?”

“But your Quirk is just you, isn’t it?” I shrugged. I hadn’t a clue, and that was very in-depth discussion, both scientifically and philosophically.

“Hey, wanna build a sandcastle?”

“Sure!”

And so Pony and I went off to build a sandcastle. We didn’t have the usual buckets or shovels or other supplies that kids often have if they live closer to the beach, so we just made do with our hands, though my tail also helped out a whole bunch. We managed to gather up a bunch of sand, and started to build. Sure, it was a bit messy, but it was a whole ton of fun. We had a couple of small ‘towers’ surrounding a much better built ‘grand hall’. We surrounded all that with a moat, though it wasn’t actually filled with water, since we didn’t have a reliable way to carry it up from the shore. We did grab a few pieces of kelp that had drifted ashore and used it as a drawbridge. Then Pony found a bunch of shells and started to put them along the outside of our sand castle, prettying things up.

“They’re windows!”

I loved it. Was it a messy sandcastle? Yes. But it was our sandcastle.

And then some older kid spat a jet of water out of his mouth and wrecked our whole sandcastle.

“H-hey!” Pony immediately got up, facing the boy who had destroyed our sandcastle so callously. I just kinda… sat there, staring. I’m sorry, I know it’s lame, but… I’d forgotten just how mean kids could be for no reason at all. This was some boy who couldn’t possibly have known us, and saw us having fun, and just… ruined it. There was no rhyme or reason to it. He just… did it. I don’t know why, but that hit a lot deeper than I expected it to. It was just a random act of cruelty. And… I could feel my eyes burning. I couldn’t explain it. It just…

I started to cry.

“Hey look, she’s crying!” “Haha, what a crybaby!” “Waaah, waaah, my sandcastle, waah!”
The boy who’d wrecked our sandcastle was flanked by his friends now, and I saw him stand up taller, bolstered by their egging. Then he took another deep breath, and released another jet of water, this time aimed at me. It knocked me over from my kneeling position and onto the sand, and now I was drenched and crying and coated in sand.

“Hey! Stop that!” Pony stepped in front of me and intercepted some of the water, getting herself all soaked in the process. “I said stop!”

“Yeah? Come and stop us!” The boys ran away laughing, and ended up running to a rocky wall that separated the Hilton’s beach from the neighboring hotel and hid behind it. They perched atop and the lead boy started firing off more water jets, and the other two joined in, one by throwing leaves he pulled from his arms, and the other by firing jets of wind from holes in the center of his palms. I would have thought their parents would come and stop them, but they didn’t.

Pony didn’t balk, though. She went down on all fours, kicked at the sand with her hooves to get a better starting grip…

And then she was off like a goddamn cannonball. A rooster tail of sand jetted up into the air behind her, and she crossed the distance between us and the rock wall far faster than I’d ever seen her move before. I was worried she was going to hurt herself, but she just lowered her head, bared her horns, and kept charging. Then Pony met the wall.

And the wall lost.

Pony broke through the wall and continued on, pinning the lead boy to the sand between her horns. She put her arms on his shoulders and pushed herself out of the sand, then held the lead boy down and kicked his companions out of the way. I heard her saying something, and he was blabbering something else in return, but none of that really mattered right now. All that mattered right now is that Pony… Pony was amazing.

“Hey! Hey! What’re you doing to my son!?” Oh, and the man heading towards Pony… dressed in a suit with the Hilton logo on his lapel pin.

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As it turned out, the boy was the son of the hotel’s general manager. And this was apparently not the first time he’d pulled such antics. It was, however, the first time he’d actually had someone retaliate…

“I am so, so sorry for my son,” the general manager, whose name tag read Anthony Mantanona, had me and Pony seated in his office, and my parents standing behind the two of us. I’d managed to stop crying, but I was still shaking a little. I… I don’t understand why it hit me so badly. It was just a random kid being a stupid little bully. I may look eight, but my mind is much older. A stupid little schoolyard bully shouldn’t… shouldn’t…

I…

I think I understand why Dr. Shisui suggested a diagnosis of PTSD now.

“Phillip should never, never have been doing such things, and rest assured, I will be disciplining him properly. I know it’s not much, but please, accept a complimentary upgrade for the duration of your stay, and I’ll be comping half of your hotel fare and deducting all additional charges for the remainder of your time on Guam. And now,” he pressed the enter key, then turned away from the keyboard, “I believe somebody else has something to say. Phillip Christopher Mantanona!”
I jumped at the yell, feeling my heart rate jump just a little bit, but calmed down a moment later when my brain caught up with my nerves. The door behind Mr. Mantanona opened, revealing the same boy who had destroyed my and Pony’s sandcastle. And boy, had Pony not been kind. He had a black eye, a split lip, and had a bandage on his upper arm. Pony got out of her chair and stood in front of mine, arms crossed and stance protective.

“Well?” His father’s voice was cold. “I’m waiting…”

“…’m sorry,” he mumbled.

“Excuse me? Phillip. Christopher. Mantanona?” His father repeated his name, putting strong emphasis on each syllable.

“I’m sorry for being a bully,” he mumbled, voice seeming very sarcastic. He was clearly not genuine.

“You’re grounded,” his father broke in.

“What!”

“For the rest of the summer, Phillip, and we are going to be discussing your behavior with your mother, and the archbishop!”

The boy kept complaining, and his father refused to budge, eventually dragging him out of the room by his ear, but I didn’t care. I just… I just wanted to go to my room and rest. I voiced my desire, and my mother and Pony both brought me up.

I curled up on the bed. Pony curled up next to me. I leaned in closer to her, and she shuffled closer to me, and soon, the two of us were out like a light.

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Oh, before I forget to mention it?

The rest of our trip went much better than the first day. And we took full advantage of that ‘all additional charges deducted’ that Mr. Mantanona offered. Surf & Turf and chocolate lava cake, both of which Pony and I split, have never tasted so good.
[KANNA, AGE NINE]

“What do you think about this one, Kanna-chan?”

I turned to look at my mother, who was holding up a really cute pastel pink t-shirt with stylized horse silhouettes running across it.

“I like it.” I replied, grabbing it from her and putting it into the bag that the store had us use instead of a cart. “It’s very Pony, she’ll love it!”

We were at one of the umpteen clothes stores at Hosu City’s janky approximation of Harajuku (Fashion Street in Tokyo, for the uninitiated) trying to pick out three different things: clothes for mom, clothes for me, and a present for Pony’s birthday party next week. She was turning ten, and a few months earlier than I was, which meant I got the chance to set a super high bar for awesome presents for the big double-digit birthday. It was a bit of a competition between the two of us: who could come up with the ‘best’ present. Sometimes it was personalized stuff (my sixth birthday present had been my first set of horseshoes, cleaned up, framed, and set in front of a picture of me and Pony smiling and laying on the grass), sometimes it was super damn elaborate stuff (I’d gotten her a crystal pony that I’d pinched and scraped up the funds for over months two Christmases back), and sometimes it was just fun stuff.

This time, I was preparing a great big package, sort of a combo ‘welcome to double digits’ survival kit and a ‘best friends forever’ thing. Was it cheesy? Hell yes. Did I love the idea? Hell yes!

We were running into a bit of a wrinkle clothes shopping though: Pony’s… proportions. No, I don’t mean that she’d already ‘blossomed’ (well, she was looking close to having to graduate from training bras I swear to whatever gods are listening I’m not jealous damn it), so get your head out of the gutter; also, she’s only ten! Out, Pedobear!

No, the real issue was her horns. Those things made her head about twice as wide as it would be otherwise, and it also provided a particularly difficult obstacle to navigate when putting clothes on, since the damn things were sharp! Sure, we had tons of fun dressing her horns up as miniature trees at Christmas, but for clothes shopping?

Ugh.

“I wish we had some way to know if this would fit on her,” my mom said while coming up behind me, echoing my thoughts almost exactly. “Button ups are perfect, and you’re both a bit too young for halters young lady,” I yanked my hand back like I’d been slapped, “but normal shirts. Ugh! There has got to be an easier way to do this than hoping and praying!”

“Don’t I know it,” I muttered, the annoyance tinging my voice with some seriously mature overtones. I saw my mom give me a funny look through the store’s mirror, then seem to shrug to herself and start looking at something else.

Mom was right though. This would be so much easier if we had a way to model for Pony’s horns. What kind of horns were they, anyway? I remember I looked this up a little while ago and compared, but I don’t think I ever really narrowed it down. They had the same texture as a gazelle, but that was actually a very big classification. I think I’d decided on impala as being the closest exemplar I could
come up with for what Pony’s horns were, and even then, the shape wasn’t quite right. It was pretty
darn close though, and if we had a pair of them handy just to try and compare to—

I felt the weirdest sensation, tinged with a quick flash of a headache. You ever been on an airplane,
or experienced big shifts in altitude, or just had serious sinus pressure from a head cold? Have you
ever had a hard time ‘popping’ your ears to equalize pressure, and then felt that crazy relief when
you finally managed it? Well, amplify that tenfold and you have something close to what I just felt.

Oh, and for some reason my head felt heavy. Not, like, clogged sinuses heavy. More ‘I’m wearing
one of those beer drinking hats and it’s filled to the brim’ heavy.

“Kanna-chan, what do you think of thi—Kanna what happened are you okay!?” Huh? That was
some serious mood whiplash there, but—oh. Oh.

I’d finally taken the chance to look at myself in the mirror, and… and… well.

I had a magnificent rack.

Oh get your head out of the gutter. When I say ‘rack’, I mean it in the same way you would when
talking about a deer’s antlers, not—oh forget it, it’s my fault for that poor phrasing. It was kind of
like the running gag from… what was that spy show parody with the main character whose names
were probably just random nouns put together? The one with the tinnitus and the hilariously over-
the-top drinking? Damn it, I can’t remember anymore. But yeah, it had a running gag about double
entendre usage. And I’m getting off track.

“Oh, I’m… fine, actually,” I remarked, rather surprised at the realization myself. Unlike the past two
times I’d transformed myself, this time had had two very noticeable differences. One, it was almost
instantaneous. And two, it was almost painless. “Hang on, let me… okay, c’mon Quirk… release,
release, release…”

I stared at my reflection, or specifically the serious horns that had sprouted from the side of my head,
and focused. And not a moment later, I felt yet another weird sensation. Remember what I
mentioned about popping your ears? Yeah, now imagine that in reverse.

I looked up, and the horns were gone. I frowned, furrowed my brow, and focused… and then there
they were again, and the weird sensation was much more muted this time. Another instant of focus,
and they retracted right back into my head. Then back out, then back in… it was on command.

I could change my shape immediately and at will. And what’s more? This didn't feel like when I use
my Quirk normally: I didn't feel tired, or any sort of drain, or anything. This was... was this indefinite
shapeshifting?

“Well,” I said, bringing the horns back out and holding up the basket. “Think our sizes are close
enough to test?”

My mother just sank to her knees in relief, hugged me, and murmured about how I was going to give
her a heart attack one of these days.

* * * * *

“Oh, thank you thank you thank you thank you!”

As it turns out, Pony isn’t a fan of big birthday parties, and to be honest I’d gotten tired of them over
the years. It either wasn’t as big of a custom over here, or our families just weren’t big fans of it, but
either way neither of us had to worry about spending most of the day with tons of kids we were
kinda sorta maybe friends with at some massive party we’d neither wanted nor asked for. As a result, we just had a small, private affair for Pony’s birthday. Specifically, she and I were having a slumber party. Again. What? I liked having my best friend just four houses down! I’d lived in Los Angeles the first time around; to get to any of my friends’ houses there, it was at minimum a ten minute drive… and this assumed the closest friend and absolutely no traffic!

Anyway, Pony had just opened up her gift, and was currently hugging me for dear life… and the pressure on my ribs was getting a little painful. I gave Pony a quick triple tap, and by the time I’d started into the next three for the ‘O’ part, she’d gotten the hint and loosened her grip. I love Pony, but my goodness, this girl is strong. Straightforward and simple her Quirk may be, but the raw power she packs more than makes up for it!

“Think your mom can help me learn to use the makeup?” Pony’s voice was a lot quieter here; it’s easy to forget that, for all of her spunk and upbeat nature, she didn’t actually have a female role model around to help her.

“Is the sky blue?” I replied, tone light. She giggled, then went back to the box of stuff my mom and I had picked out, and got one of the t-shirts we’d managed to find.

“Kanna, I really like this shirt, but uh…” She pointed above her head. “Can I even…?” I didn’t even respond to this one. I just kinda… gave Pony a look. She’d known me long enough by now to realize that the look was my way of saying ‘figure it out for yourself’. To kind of put emphasis on it, I made a small motion with my hand. ‘Well go on’, it would seem to say.

Pony took the cue and unbuttoned the shirt she was wearing, revealing the training bra she already needed to start getting used to (am… am I feeling… jealous? The fuck?…), and slipped the t-shirt on over her head. As always, she was mindful of her horns, but she didn’t really need to be. This t-shirt’s neck was rather stretchy, and the entire shirt was fairly elastic. It wasn’t a pure cotton t-shirt, and actually had a synthetic fiber in there to make it soft and stretchy, which made the usually drawn-out process of Pony putting a shirt on actually rather quick.

“Wow,” she remarked, giggling a little. “That was easy! Did they have, like, a mannequin with horns or something? You have to tell me which store it was!”

“Nope, no special mannequin,” I teased, a small grin spreading across my face. I know something you don’t know, it said, and I could see Pony huff a tiny bit.

“C’mon Kanna, tell me! Tell me tell me tell me!” She shuffled closer on her knees, hands outstretched and fingers making grasping motions. “Don’t make me tickle it outta you…”

I mock gasped. It was no secret that I am obscenely ticklish. You could tickle me on the outside of my elbow, one of the least sensitive places on the human body, and I will break down in peals of laughter.

“Oh, you don’t wanna do that!” I mock gasped and stood, putting the back of my hand on my forehead dramatically, and calling my Quirk to me. A very slight glow alighted along the crown of my head, though Pony would be hard pressed to notice it; when I stood, I’d put my back to the lamp, and it was pretty good at hiding sudden glows. “Because if you did, we may have to…” I smiled, and let my Quirk do what it wanted to.

“Lock horns!”

And suddenly, I sported a marvelous pair of gazelle horns. Pony gasped, hands in front of her mouth and eyes wider than I’d seen them in a long time. Then she walked closer, ever so slowly reaching a
hand out. I took hold of her hand and brought it to the horns I’d grown with my Quirk, letting her feel that, yes, they were real.

“No way…” Then she narrowed her eyes in thought before they snapped back open. “Wait! Can you make them disappear?” I waved my hands, and in an instant, the gazelle horns faded back into a glowing outline before even that faded away. “Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh that is so cool! It’s like when you did those gills, but on command, and it’s not nasty and fishy!”

“H-hey! It was not nasty! Though, yeah, it was kinda fishy,” I admitted.

“Can you do something else?” Pony pulled me over to my bookcase, the top shelf of which had been populated with animal science and anatomy books ‘borrowed’ from my mother’s collection, one at a time. Although really, she has to know at this point, and is just humoring me by letting me think she hasn’t noticed. I know how parents are, and this is the kind of interest that was well worth encouraging. “Ooh, ooh, I know! Do cat ears!”

“Oh… I sat down on my bed and crossed my legs beneath me, then closed my eyes and focused. I could feel my Quirk taking hold as my hearing grew more sensitive, and then, with a slight sting and the odd sensation of being deaf for about half a second, I could hear so much stuff. “Huh, sounds like my dad and your dad are laughing at someth—what was that!?” I felt something like wind blow into my ear, but the sensation also came from the top of my head, and I felt the weirdest muscles move and my hearing seemed to pan around a bit.

“Oh my gawd they’re real kitty ears!” Pony pounced on me and pinned me to the bed, then started running her fingernails along the outside of my changed ears.

“Pony what’re you dooooooooh that feels good, oh wooooow…” I closed my eyes and just leaned into her hands, and I think I reached up to hold her hands closer, I’m not sure. “No wonder cats love this…”

Holy crap that feels awesome… man, cats are such lucky buggers if this is what it feels like to have their ears scratched…

“Hey Kanna, uh…” Pony pulled a hand away, and before I knew what I was doing I used my own to put it right back on my ear. “Okay, okay! But uh, what about trying to change your, uh… well, your legs?”

“Hm?” I opened my eyes and pulled away from Pony, surprised. Then I looked down at my legs. I concentrated for a second, then tried to use my Quirk and—

“Whoawha!” My legs cramped and spasmed, and I ended up kicking my headboard, leaving a very deep imprint of my horseshoe in it. I let go of my Quirk and just… stopped for a moment. Pony looked at me, then at my still kitty-fied ears, then at my legs, then at the headboard… then back at my legs, then back to me.

“Let’s, uh, not do that again?”

“Please.”

Then I grabbed her hands and put them right back on my ears, and all was right in the world.

“Hey, either of you girls want some what the fu—dge!?”

And then of course my dad had to burst in and ruin the moment. Because of course it had to be right freaking then. Ugh!
Of course. Freaking dads…
Interlude Three | Geronimo

[Kanna, Age Eleven]

Native shook his head, one hand up by his temple as if to stave off the headache he knew would come soon.

“There’s no doubt about it,” he said to the investigators and other Pro Heroes clustered around the body. “It’s definitely the Wendigo. But at the same time, I can’t help but feel that something is wrong here.”

“Wrong?” Pro Hero Kamuy, quite possibly Hokkaido’s most famous home-grown hero, canted her head to the side as she asked. It was a peculiar action, one that Native couldn’t help but equate with Old Man Coyote, back on the Rez. The only thing missing was that insufferable smirk, the one that was somehow out of place on a man Coyote’s age, and yet seemed to fit his affect perfectly.

Not that he’d be able to see it, what with the mask covering Kamuy’s face. It very much resembled a wolf, but the white wood had blue accents that didn’t seem to match what he’d seen of the heroine. Also, if she was going for some sort of mythic iconography, wouldn’t a mustelid have made more sense with lightning powers? Raiju were a thing; electric wolves, on the other hand, were decidedly not.

But back to the important thing: trying to figure out what was bothering him so damn much about this latest body.

“It’s… I don’t know. The first thing that comes to mind is that I actually had to stop and look to see if this was one of the Wendigo’s.” He pointed at the corpse’s throat, or more importantly, the great, ragged gash that split it down to the spinal cord. “See, even back in the United States, Mason’s kills were… well, he was never subtle. Originally I’d thought this was down to location, there was always some population of mountain lions or bears in the area, and they also tend to go for the throat. Combining that with the fact that he always seemed to gorge on the largest concentration of stuff in the body, and it’s no surprise that the first, what, ten? The first ten Wendigo victims had to be reattributed from wildlife predation during exercises to homicides, because they actually looked like the victim had been mauled by a bear, or even a particularly ornery coyote in some places.”

Native shifted his position, stepping carefully to avoid where some bit of viscera had fallen away from the body itself, possibly carried there by scavengers. He stood above the corpse’s head now, using his rubber-gloved hands to probe the skin of the neck.

“Eventually, it got to the point that I could ID a victim just by looking at their throat. Wendigo’s favorite killing blow was a surprise attack from behind with claws, grown out of his fingertips. You’d get four nearly-parallel slashes along the throat.” He drew his finger across the victim’s throat, indicating where they would be: one above the gash that was present, and two more below it. “Given that fingers have different lengths and thicknesses, and the claws he protruded were the same, the second gash from the top was always the deepest, and the bottom the most shallow. Additionally, in the earlier kills, and the ones where he’d gone a long time between…”

Native shifted his grip on the corpse, letting his thumb rest just underneath the right edge of the jawbone.

“You’d sometimes find a great big puncture wound here, if he’d forgotten not to make an additional claw on his thumb.”
“This is all very fascinating,” Kamuy broke in, her voice as dead as she could make it, “but there’s only one gash along the throat.”

“And that’s what had me so confused.” Native probed the wound, then pushed the rent flesh together. “See how clean the wound is? Claws usually leave much more ragged and messy cuts. I couldn’t discount it immediately, because the last time I fought the Wendigo—”

“Six years ago, yes?” Kamuy broke in.

“Yes,” Native replied, testily. “As I was saying, the last time he fought, he’d had blades of bone extending along his forearms. And these were actual blades, closer to what you’d find on a sword than on actual biological exemplars, like claws or talons. The closest biological equivalent would be the smoother examples of shark teeth. But to go for the killing blow with one of those forearm blades is completely unlike the Wendigo: from everything we’ve seen, he would always, always, always strike from behind, and kill with one hit. This?”

Native waved at the rest of the body. Or what was left of it. The internal organs were all gone. Most of the skin had been flensed away, and the skeletal muscle underneath carved off, the edges of the cuts somehow both rough and exact.

“This is different. There’s only one thing that lets me know it was the Wendigo.” Native reached to the corpse’s head, and pried open its mouth. He waved one of the investigators closer, and motioned for the flashlight to be shone into the mouth. All present couldn’t help but hiss—whether it was shock, dismay, or horror, Native couldn’t know. Perhaps it was all three.

“The tongue is missing,” Kamuy murmured, her voice shaky.

“Exactly.” Native stood up and removed his gloves, then motioned to the investigators that he was ready to leave. “In all of his kills, the Wendigo has never left the tongue. After I captured him the first time, I asked why. His answer?” He looked Kamuy straight in the eye.

“It was the most tender cut.”

* * * * *

“That you dad?”

Kenta hadn’t finished setting one foot in the door when he heard his daughter’s voice call to him. He could only sigh; the girl was far too precocious for her own good, and much too curious to just let it slide. He’d found her looking through the files in his study too many times to believe he could simply turn her away without any information.

Yet again, Kenta cursed Alexander Mason, cursed the man for stealing his daughter’s innocence.

“It was him,” he confirmed. Kenta heard his daughter’s footsteps—hoofsteps, he had to remind himself, she didn’t have feet—and looked up to see her in the doorway, arms crossed and an eyebrow raised. “What?”

“That’s it? That’s all you’re gonna give me? No ‘glad to be home’, or ‘how was your day’, or even ‘sorry I missed the sports festival’? For the third year in a row, might I add?”

Kenta sighed. He finished taking off his shoes and walked past his daughter, ruffling her hair while he went by and getting a swat in the arm for his troubles.

“I’m sorry Kanna-chan, I really am, but you and I both know there’s really nobody else who can do
“H-hey!” Another voice broke in, one he recognized intimately. “We were watching that!” Kenta bit back a curse, and sighed again.

“I’m sorry Pony.” He turned to his daughter’s friend and tried to offer a placating gesture. “Would you mind if I—”

Pony’s hand lashed out and grabbed the remote back, and with a huff switched the channel back to whatever show the two had been watching. Now that he was paying attention, it was a rerun of the UA Sports Festival one-on-one tournament.

“Oh come on, you mean we missed the end! But—that was—it was five seconds!” Pony got up and pointed a finger at Kenta, and he leaned back to avoid a possible skewering if she got really angry. “I blame you, mister! Go to your room and think about what you did!”

“I thought girls weren’t supposed to get this sassy until they were teenagers,” he mumbled under his breath.

“What was that?” Kenta heard Kanna ask as she came up behind him, leaning against the doorway.

“Nothing, nothing.”

“Uh-huh.” By her tone it was obvious she didn’t believe him. “Mom’s at the hospital, you know, in case you were actually wondering where your wife was.”

“Alright. I’ll be in my study. Meet me out back in an hour for training you two!” He started going up the steps, but doubled back as soon as he remembered something. “Oh, Pony-chan! Is your dad home?”

“Yup!” The call back was upbeat, just like the girl herself always was. He smiled; she was a good influence on his daughter, that one. Helped bring some of that light back. Some of the light Mason had stolen. His fist clenched tighter, and only a brief flash of pain kept him from digging his nails into his palms.

Kenta’s study was just as he’d left it this morning, which was actually a bit of a surprise. Either Kimiko tended to update the ledger they had to keep track of business-related expenses, or Kanna tried to snoop on his Wendigo case files. Neither of them was inconspicuous about it: Kimiko always left the ledger open on his desk to wherever she’d been working, and Kanna, for all her care and caution, constantly forgot that the slippers she used to protect the wood floors from her hooves tended to track dust. That last bit was not something he’d care to mention, though. Kanna was sneaky enough as is, and it wouldn’t do to make her even better at it!

He pulled two binders off of his shelves, one fairly large and bulky, the other slimmer but just as dense for its size, and brought them over to his desk. Kenta cast a longing gaze at the liquor cabinet in the corner, but no, he still had the girls’ kickboxing lessons to do, and at least Pony would be able to smell the alcohol on his breath. Besides, he needed his faculties about him.

Something about the body was still bothering him, and he couldn’t put his finger on it.

Before getting into that though, he pulled his expense ledger out and added this trip to it, idly remarking that Kimiko was adding a lot of positive contributions of late; box jelly venom and antivenin were certainly getting popular. But for now, he added this Shinkansen ticket to the
expenses… and on a whim, he reviewed.

Five trips to Hokkaido this year, twelve the year before, twenty-nine the year before that… they were decreasing, and rapidly. Either the police were getting better at attributing the victims to Wendigo themselves (possible), he was being kept out of the loop for unknown reasons (doubtful), or Wendigo just wasn’t killing as many, which was impossible. Serial killers who’ve gotten used to a particular tempo don’t just… slow down. Especially not ones like Mason, whose entire diet, it seemed, had shifted to accommodate his killings. His mind flashed back to the corpse: Mason had removed all of the organs again, yes, but that was still par for the course. The skeletal muscle was mostly missing, but again, that didn’t seem to be all that surprising, given that the meat he himself bought at a supermarket was just animal skeletal muscle. The man was a survivalist, Kenta knew, and much as the prospect sickened him, the Wendigo was probably just preserving it as jerky or… something.

No, the real issue, he thought to himself as he flipped to the binder holding the training plan he and Kihei had devised for Kanna and Pony, was the cause of death. That one long, clean cut had appeared a few times, Kenta recalled, but usually near population centers or clusters of people. That one cut severed the vocal chords, windpipe, jugular, and carotid in one swift motion, and having a rag or other absorbent material nearby could help redirect much of the blood downwards into the victim’s clothing. Swift, silent, and easier to clean, much unlike the ragged, bestial slash that Mason preferred. The cut itself was larger than usual, though, and that was troubling. Kenta felt like it was trying to tell him something… but he just couldn’t figure out what.

No matter. He had time to think on it, and the girls would be outside waiting for him. Hopefully this time Pony would be able to control her strength a little better and not leave him gasping on the ground for ten minutes.

And hopefully Kanna would quit replacing her backfists with claws. He’d had to stop wearing a shirt for these sessions and switch from loose sweatpants to shorts. It’s like she was trying to shred his clothes apart!

* * * * *

“Alright mister, I’ve been patient, but something’s eating at you.” Kenta shifted as Kimiko got into the bed beside him and poke him right in the navel, making him lose his grip on the book he’d been reading. “Now spill.”

“It’s not really bedtime talk, honey,” he tried to deflect. “A bit too gruesome.”

Kimiko just looked at him, held up her hand, and flipped through about six different forms. Kenta thought he recognized three-toed sloth and coconut crab claws; those were two of her go-to morphs if the situation necessitated a strong grip, and it was one of her ways of saying that she wasn’t about to let go that easily.

“Alright, I get the point. Jeeze, now I know where Kanna gets it from.” He tried to joke, break the tension, but neither of them were laughing. He exhaled and flopped down on the bed.

“It’s him again, isn’t it?” Kimiko asked, voice somehow both gentle and reprimanding.

“What else?” He laughed bitterly, idly playing with some of Kimiko’s hair that had fallen close to him when she laid down. “It’s just… I’m missing something. Judging by the pattern he should be on victim fifteen already, but we’ve only found five. And it’s not like he tries to hide them; no, where’s the fun in that? Mason’s a classic boogeyman: it’s not just the name he picked, it’s how he kills, how he leaves the body. It’s all a gruesome display, almost as if to say ‘this could be you’, but even at his
most brutal, he’s never sloppy. Even at his messiest, there’s still a sort of… I don’t know how to describe it. An order to the chaos?”

“So if he’s meticulous, what’s the matter now?” Kimiko posed her question well, and whatever was tickling at Kenta’s brain earlier came roaring back.

“It’s that he’s… is it possible for someone to be too specific?”

“Dr. Kogusuri—oh, that’s our pediatric diagnostician—uses the actual chemical name instead of a drug’s brand name,” she supplied. “Though he usually only does that to throw off the kids and parents so the more informed ones can’t make a connection between what he’s giving and what may or may not suspect is wrong with them.”

“It’s not that.” Kenta shifted, taking a bit more of the covers; Kimiko responded by grabbing them right back, leaving Kenta with less than he’d had before. “The killing blow was different, and the way he got the… I hate to call it that, but the ‘meat’, that was different too. It’s almost like he—”

And then it hit him. Kenta’s eyes went wide and he scrambled out of bed, reaching into the hamper for some clothes and yanking it on as fast as he could before taking the shirt back off; he may have been desperate but he wasn’t about to wear his wife’s blouse.

“K-Kenta, what the hell!”

“No time!” He shrugged on a pair of pants and threw on a pair of flip-flops he found on the floor of the closet, relying on his Quirk to keep him warm instead of proper wear. Kenta grabbed his cell phone and hit speed dial three; after four rings, a groggy voice answered.

“What the actual fuck, Kent—”

“No time!” He interrupted Kihei, running out the door. “Police station! Now, now!”

He hung up and ran, dialing as he did so. A gruff voice barked to talk on the other end of the line.

“Tsuragamae-dono, pull up the missing persons database! I’ll be there in—” Kenta jumped over a car, too much in a hurry to let the light change, and thankful that his hero license let him use his Quirk in public. “Five minutes!”

“… this had better be good, Native-san.” The chief hung up, and Kenta lowered his head, focused on the path in front of him.

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“What the actual fuck Kenta.” Kihei had arrived, but Kenta didn’t even look up. He was busy scrolling through the reports, setting filters as needed to narrow results further. “You woke Pony up. She thought something was wrong, Kenta.” Kenta shouldn’t have been surprised to see that there was an option to filter by blood type, but he still was. He didn’t have the right filter, though, and had to make do with analyzing the various photographs and naming schemes for a match. “Kenta! Answer me when I’m talking to you!”

He slammed his hands down on the table, harder than was necessary. Out of the corner of his eye, Kenta saw Kihei flinch.

“He hasn’t been slowing down.” Kenta bit out, teeth grit. “He’s been evolving, and we were just too fucking blind to see it!” Kenta grabbed the papers he’d printed out, and spread them on the table with a sweeping motion. Each of them was a missing persons report, and as Kihei leaned in closer,
Kenta knew his friend would see the same thing he had.

“… These reports are older. At least six months, even up to two years.”

“Look at the location. Look at the victim, Kihei.” Kenta heard the sharp intake of breath, and knew that they’d seen the same thing.

“Hakodate.” Kenta looked at his friend; Kihei was starting to shake. “Obihiro. Kitami. Sapporo. Two from Wakkanai.” He looked up. Kenta met his eyes. “Four from Urakawa.”

“The victim count wasn’t decreasing. That was…” He bit back a self-recriminating laugh. “There was something bothering me about the corpse I saw today, Kihei. There was less… everything. There was just less body to be had at all. Maybe it was more time between kills? I thought that, but then there was the slash across the throat. It was just one. One long, clean slash, but you can’t get a cut that clean if you’re restraining someone, or they’re moving.”

“He’s not just killing people anymore.” Kenta saw the instant it dawned on Kihei. “He’s taking them. Making one kill last longer.”

“It’s more than that.” Kenta turned towards a printout of Hokkaido, and plotted each of the kills. Then he connected them with a line, and within the shape it formed, he wrote ‘Wendigo’.

“He has a defined hunting ground now. He’s set up shop, Kihei. The Wendigo has a home base.”

Kenta looked at the area bounded by the victims’ locations.

He had no idea where to begin.
Hitting a punching bag is, unsurprisingly, very therapeutic. You can just take all those issues that’ve been plaguing you and beat the everloving crap out of something strong enough to take your hits, but sturdy enough to always bounce back, until you’re all spent and you feel better and those endorphins are flowing. And there’s so many things you can work out this way! Things like worrying over whether you and your best friend are both going to get into that fancy schmancy private middle school that you just know Iida Tenya didn’t even have to test into. Things like wondering how your family is going to pay for that private school, when you just know that people like Iida Tenya don’t even have to write off a fraction of a percent of their annual budget for something so simple as schooling. Things like not knowing if your dad was actually going to bother spending time with you this weekend, because he sure as hell didn’t the past who knows how many before this outside of giving kickboxing lessons, which you just know is for some reason other than parental bonding with his only daughter. And you just know that Iida fucking Tenya definitely doesn’t have to worry about that can of worms, now does he!?

I pulled back from the striking dummy, realizing only a little too late that I’d transformed my hands into bear claws. Again. And that it was only some foresight on mom’s part that kept me from tearing the striking dummy to shreds again; seriously, I don’t want to know how much time and how many protein shakes she needed to produce that much spider silk. Nor do I want to know, actually.

I sighed and sat down on the ground, careful not to sit down on my tail, returned my arms to normal, and drank some much-needed cold water.

I… I shouldn’t be thinking shit like this. It’s not Tenya’s fault that I had these problems, and it most certainly isn’t his fault that sometime in the past couple of years, my dad had managed to insert a stick so far up his ass that he was spewing sake- or whiskey-scented splinters every time he yelled. Which, now that I’m thinking about it, is a lot more often of late. And the worst part? I can’t even fault him for it! I’m a lot more mature than I look, for obvious reasons, and that means I understand a whole lot more of what my dad’s going through than he realizes. The raw frustration he has to feel at knowing that monster is still out there, and that while he’s managed to narrow down his area to about two hundred square kilometers… it’s still two hundred square kilometers of area to search in.

But for all that I understand what my dad is going through, I’m still… I guess resentful? He gets angry a lot more often of late. He yells more. I’ve seen his receipts, and the time stamps tell me that he’s been leaving the house late at night, but for what reason I don’t know. Any time I go into the den I change the channel off of the news, because all it takes is hearing “Hokkaido” for Dad to just… go off. He’ll yell, then he’ll get quiet, and he’ll go to his study, and I won’t see him the rest of the night. He swears it was just a bad day, or something specific at work has him riled up, but I know he’s lying. I keep finding empty bottles of soda bottles and cans of coffee and energy drinks in the recycle bin, ones that I know Mom didn’t buy. And speaking of Mom, I’ve even found her sleeping on the couch when I woke up in the morning! More than once!

And… I don’t know how to handle this. I’ve never had to deal with anything even remotely close to a broken home. I mean, that’s definitely a massive exaggeration, but if I’m reading the signs right, then I don’t know how much longer it will be one. Dad’s…

Am I angry at him? Yes! Of course I’m angry at him! And the worst part is I know it’s not a rational anger. It’s just… look. I’m almost a teenager again, and if my most recent shopping trip was any indication, then puberty already has its hooks into me again. I’m hormonal, and that means my mood
is getting weird. I’m snapping at things that I wouldn’t have given a damn about a couple of years ago, occasionally I feel like just laughing or crying even if stuff wasn’t that funny or sad, and don’t even get me started on Tenya’s crush, because there’s been times when I felt like just taking his pre-teen heart and grinding it to dust in my hand, or where I’ve wanted to just say screw it and give it a go, and I—

I’m rambling. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. I’m turning into a head case all over again, aren’t I? I just need to… I need to calm down. I looked down at myself and then recoiled at the grimy feeling of, yuck, dry sweat. Alright, first thing’s first, shower time. Then a nice soak… maybe that’ll help.

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“Kanna-chan, Pony’s here!” I dropped the towel I’d been using to dry my hair and practically sprinted down the stairs, not even caring that my hair was making a massive damp spot on the back of my shirt. It wasn’t just that Pony was here, and I was fairly certain of what she had with her, given that it’s Somei’s decision day.

No, it’s that Dad was the one who’d called. Dad had come home early.

I may not be capable of transforming bird parts yet, but I may as well have flown straight into my dad’s arms. He caught me and gave me a spin, and I hugged him, and I cannot even begin to tell you how glad I was to not smell coffee or alcohol on him. Today had been a good day. I pulled away from him, and the two of us were all smiles. Then he held up a positively massive envelope postmarked from Somei, and Pony held up one of her own, and suddenly, I forgot all about my frustration and anger and just plain negative blah from earlier.

Because as Pony and I tore open the envelopes to reveal our admission packets, and both of us found that we’d been awarded merit scholarships to help us pay for the cost of a private prep school in Japan, it went from a good day to a great day.

But wait! There’s more!

“So that was just the Iida family,” Dad said as he walked into the den, where Pony and I were still in the midst of celebrating and gorging on—what else?—apples. “Anyway, it turns out Tenya-kun got into Somei as well, and they’re inviting us out for Teppanyaki, their treat!” Pony cheered. I cheered. Dad called mom, and she cheered. Pony ran back to her place to tell Kihei, and we could hear his cheer from four houses down.

That all seems like an overreaction, doesn’t it? Well let’s put it this way: the Iida are the wealthiest family in Hosu prefecture, bar none. Ingenium has only been a pro hero for six years, and he’s already employing over forty sidekicks, and that’s before we even get to his dad! They’re the single largest hero organization in Hosu, and given the scale of heroics they get up to, and the fact that the Iida themselves can move fast enough to get to other wards in time to help, and they are swimming in heroics money. So when I said that the Iida were offering to take us out for Teppanyaki, I need to clarify: they were offering to take us out for Hosu’s best Teppanyaki.

This all begs the question of why, since this is definitely something other than Tenya’s silly boyhood crush that just will not go away damn it. I mean, maybe there was some hero solidarity? Sure, there’d been some involvement from the Iida on the Wendi… oh please no. Please don’t let that taint this too.

Outwardly I kept up my smile. But inwardly my thoughts had turned to turmoil again. Why? Why did everything have to keep coming right back to him?
So apparently the Iida really know how to eat. This place we went to, Saaraku Teppanyaki, was seriously upscale. I mean, teppanyaki can be anything from simply okonomiyaki and yakisoba, all the way up to high-class steak. And, well, what we had here?

What we had here was seriously high-class steak.

The nine of us were in a private room dedicated for larger parties, and by the way the hostess had greeted the two elder male Iida, it seemed like this was a location they tended to come fairly often. I could see why: if you have to host a luncheon or dinner party for your office, teppanyaki let you do dinner and a show, and the environment was just so darn good at getting people to unwind and relax. Then again, I guess that’s what the sake was for, which all of the adults partook in. I actually reached for my mom’s little sake cup and she swatted my hand away, but a nudge at my knee had me looking under the table for a moment, and I saw my dad’s hand passing his cup under to me. I took the largest sip I could manage in the very brief moment Mom wasn’t looking, and handed it back underneath. Dad and I shared a wink and a smile, and I felt… content.

But there was also a small pit of sadness there, because this was the most normal interaction I’d had with my dad in almost four months now.

“A moment, if you will!” Midway through the main course, Iida Tensho stood up and raised his hands to get attention. The effect, though, was partly ruined by the fact that one hand held his sake cup, and the other hand held the bottle. “I’d like to offer congratulations. To Tenya-kun, to Kanna-chan, and to Pony-chan! Today marks a momentous first step along the road to becoming Pro Heroes in their own right! I attended Somei Academy prior to entering UA myself, as did my lovely wife and my eldest, and there exists no doubt in my mind that you three will continue from Somei and on to UA yourselves! Now, let us celebrate!”

There were cheers. There was applause. And there were three great, fluorescent blushes spreading across Tenya’s, Pony’s, and my faces. Everything was wonderful, and we sat back down to tuck back into our meals.

That was when we heard the screaming.

Pony and Kihei were the first ones to notice, and when they perked up and turned towards the door, the rest of us did too. Not a moment later, the sliding door to our private room was pulled open, and a well-dressed man that could only be the restaurant’s proprietor burst in, face red and breathing heavy.

“Native-dono, Nitrous-dono, Ingenium-dono! There’s—a villain attacking us!”

I heard something shatter, and felt small pieces of I don’t know what bounce off of my top. I saw my dad push himself to his seat across the table, the remaining pieces of his chopsticks falling from his now open hand to the floor in a clatter.

“I’ll handle this.” He pushed past the proprietor and into the hall. Mom and I pushed past the man and into the hall, watching Dad as he walked. A too-familiar glow erupted around him, and he simultaneously loosened his posture, spread his arms, and seemed to bend over.

“Kenta!” “Dad!” Mom and I both cried after him in unison.

“I said, I’ll handle this.” He didn’t even turn around; Dad just kept walking, the bear totem I’d last seen him call on so many years ago at the ready. I pushed past my mom and followed my dad out to the main dining area.
“Vile, wretched meat-eaters!” I heard the voice before I’d even finished rounding the corner. It was a higher example of a male’s voice, and the man’s attempt to pitch it lower was really not working out for him. “You would dare try and claim nature’s bounty for your own hedonistic enjoyment! The great and powerful Organos, the Vegan Vigilante, will not stand idly by and let you mongrels eat these wonderful, perfect animals anymore!”

The villain—Organos, I guess he was calling himself—had set himself up in the middle of the restaurant, and if I had to be perfectly honest, his Quirk was… well. If this had been any other location, except for maybe a fish market or butcher shop, it wouldn’t have been anything special. But here, surrounded by so many pieces of dead animal? Well, he actually might have been a force to be reckoned with. I saw him reach out and grab an amazingly marbled strip steak, one that was probably just minutes shy of being sliced up and cooked in front of Saaraku’s customers, and in Organos’ grasp the steak shifted, writhed, fell out of his hand and to the floor, and grew into a full-sized cow. Organos pointed, and the steak-cow charged, toppling a grill table over and mercifully not taking any customers down with it. Most of them seemed to have fled, and the restaurant’s center was only occupied by this one man.

“Yes, yes! Flee, flee from nature’s splendor! Not so delicious when you have to kill your own meat, now is it?!” He was facing towards the front of the restaurant; my dad stalked ever closer, but Organos was completely blind to the looming threat. “There is only—huh!?"

Dad—no, Native—placed a his hand onto Organos’ shoulder, and the spectral bear’s claws followed. The would-be ‘vegan vigilante’ turned, slowly coming face-to-chin with my father.

“Do you think this is a fucking game?” Dad gripped tight onto Organos’ shoulder with one hand and tugged back, the other coming up to push his opposite shoulder forward. The sudden shift sent Organos falling forward, straight into Dad’s waiting knee. “Do you think this is fun? Did terrorizing these people make you feel big, little man?” Dad leaned forward and picked Organos up by the collar of his shoddy, workout-clothes ‘costume’, hoisting the smaller man into the air as the bear loomed behind him.

“Dad!” I yelled out, stepping forward. I didn’t like where this was going, and it had to stop, now.

“One. Night.” Dad pulled the villain in closer, and I could see his mouth moving rapid-fire, but whatever he was trying to say, the words wouldn’t come out. “I wanted one night where I didn’t have to worry about people like you. One night where I could just be. But no. People like you just don’t care. It all has to be about you, doesn’t it?” Organos didn’t reply; I could see his eyes start to roll up into his head. “Answer me, you bastard!”

“Dad, stop!” I ran out now, past the broken chairs, past the overturned tables. I put my hand on his arm, the one still holding the now-unconscious Organos, and just… held it. “He’s down. You won. Come on Dad, just… just let him go. Please.”

The bear totem faded from Dad, and he let go of Organos, the wannabe vigilante’s body flopping to the floor like so much raw meat.

“One night,” I heard Dad murmur. “One night without having to worry about this shit. Was that so much to ask…”

“Dad?” I looked; he was starting to shake.

“Is that so much to ask…”
Chapter Nine

[Kanna, Age Thirteen]

I will be the first to admit that, once again, I have become a massive geek. I love anime, I love western cartoons, I love science fiction and fantasy and everything in between. I love the genres, I love the character archetypes, I love the interactions and the storylines and the worldbuilding and everything in between. It’s fun, it’s creative, it’s vibrant, and it’s somehow both unreal and more realistic than this world, what with everybody and their grandmother having literal superpowers nowadays. All that said, do you know what I don’t like?

People trying to take something they saw in a dumb rom-com anime… and using it in real life. Which is why, when Pony and I went to our respective shoe boxes in Somei’s lobby to retrieve the hoof slippers we need to not damage the floors, I very nearly went apoplectic when an honest to goodness letter fell out of my shoe box.

Word to the wise, kiddos: this is not a thing. Anonymous love letters in the shoe box? Yeah, that never was a thing. It was created wholesale by some or other manga or light novel writer who needed a quick, easy, convenient way to deliver an anonymous note without any of the dubious connotations of slipping it into somebody’s bag or pocket, and it has never, ever, ever been a thing that actually happens.

Until now, it would seem. Because this morning, there was a letter in my shoe box. And I’m sorry Iida Tenya, but if you were trying to hide the fact that it was you, you’re doing a hilariously poor job of it. I know that boy’s handwriting inside out and backwards, and his word choice is just too distinctive for this note to have been written by anyone else.

“So-o-o-o-o, whatcha gonna do?” Pony asked, leaning over my shoulder and reading the note. I was controlling myself as best I could, but I was this close to just turning my nails into claws and shredding this note into frisée and adding it to Tenya’s lunch. But no, that wouldn’t solve anything, would it? All it would do was… actually no, it would solve everything. It would solve this whole little crush by taking Tenya’s heart, ripping it out of his chest, and breaking it into tiny little pieces. And while I will be the first to admit that I can be a bitch at times (though that dumb girl totally deserved it; that was a brand new bra and these things aren’t cheap!), I don’t actively go out of my way to be cruel.

I deflated. There was really only one way I could think of to resolve this whole issue once and for all, and I was going to absolutely, positively hate every single second of it.

“I’ve been letting this drag on for far too long,” I finally spoke up. Pony stopped waving her hand in front of my face, and just… blinked. And then she blinked again. I thought for a moment I’d actually broken her when her eyes went super wide.

“You don’t mean—!” I sighed.

“Yup...” Pony covered her mouth with her hands to try and quiet down the “squee!” that was going to escape any second now. I slumped over, and I’m pretty sure if I had a mirror I would say that the scowl on my face was something that better fitted Sadako.

“Iida’s gonna ask me on a date… and this time, I’m gonna say ‘yes’.”

I let out a long-suffering sigh and slowly marched to class, an almost literal cloud of doom and gloom
rolling over me. Pony, though, was ecstatic. There was no way she was going to let this one go lying down.

* * * * *

It actually took a couple of days until Tenya managed to work up the nerve to actually ask me out. There was no way I was going to invert the dynamic, and instead I’d just asked Pony to let him know that I was… well, willing, though I made sure she didn’t mention anything about the fact that I wasn’t actually all that enthusiastic about the prospects. If anything, I was rather… ambivalent, really. Does that seem weird? Because it shouldn’t. I may look thirteen, sound thirteen, and I actually do my best to act thirteen most of the time (except when in private or particularly fed up with something), but the truth is that mentally I am anything but a standard teenager. I have the perspective to know that teenage romances are… well? They’re short, they’re awkward, they’re way too mushy for my tastes, nobody involved has any real idea what they’re actually doing, and none of it really matters in the long run anyway.

Except the feelings. I had a fairly lengthy (for its type) relationship around this age range the first time around, and when that one ended, I was really shaken up and depressed by it. After going through that, I was determined not to do the same to poor Iida Tenya, because damn it, he doesn’t deserve that! Nobody deserves to have their heart trampled on while they’re still trying to figure out what liking somebody means, what loving somebody means, and what the difference is!

So no, I was not going to be a colossal bitch to try and kill Tenya’s crush. Instead, I was going to let Tenya see what only Pony and my parents have really seen, and hope he comes to the conclusion that I’m not the right girl for him. If somehow all this does is convince him that I am the right girl for him, well… uh… I’ll cross that bridge when I get there?

It was during lunch period that Tenya actually managed to gather up the nerve to come over from class 1-B to us ‘lowly peasants’ in 1-D (… if you’re confused, it’s the same number scheme as high schools use, one to three for which year of it you’re in; the letter denotes which one is your specific classroom/homeroom) and actually ask me out. I’d actually tried to get up to the roof of the school so I could have some privacy for this but, surprise surprise people, anime is lying to you again. You can’t actually get up to the roof of your average Japanese school, and if you can, then somebody’s probably due for a good tongue-lashing, because students aren’t allowed on the roof at all. So no. It happened in my homeroom. During lunch.

And somehow Tenya timed it right as I was putting a whole dumpling in my mouth because I was hungry and girls can eat too damn it!

“Kanna-chan!” He pushed his glasses up his nose, and somehow the light glinted off of them just so, as if… wait, had he been rehearsing this!? “Allow me the honor of taking you out on a d-d-d… a d, d-d, d-d-d-d—”

“A date?” Pony, my wonderful best friend and damn traitor why did you have to help him Pony why you were supposed to be on my side, supplied.

“Yes! A date!” Once again, Tenya started doing that weird karate-chopping repetitive motion he always seems to do when he’s stressed, excited, or both. Damn it, he looks like a super awkward teenage robot right now.

I swallowed my dumpling, and sighed.
“Okay.”

“I understand wholeheartedly, and accept this refusal for—wait.” Tenya had started talking before he’d processed what I actually said. Is it obvious that this isn’t the first time he’s asked me this? “R-really?”

“Yes. Is that so hard to believe?” I blew a stray lock of hair out of my eyes (damn it, there goes another bobby pin…) and stared Tenya square in his. “I could change my answer if you want.”

“No, this is fine! Excellent, wonderful even! Ah, so then I will, uh—”

“Pick me up at my house around eleven in the morning on Sunday,” I supplied. Then I smiled. “That was your last freebie.” I stood up from my desk and put away my bento box, gave Pony’s blouse a slight tug, and started walking towards the door. “I’ll be looking forward to it!”

Then, once Pony and I were out of sight of everyone in the class room, I clamped down hard on her wrist and made a mad dash for the restroom. Once we were inside I locked us in the largest stall, turned, grabbed Pony by the shoulders, and pulled in closer than I probably should have.

“Help. Me.”

The smile that split Pony’s face would soon make me come to regret asking her for help.

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“Damn it Pony I am not wearing that stupid thing!”

* * * * *

So turns out the stupid thing (an honest to goodness goth lolita dress) was just Pony’s way of getting me to agree to something else. At least the something else was much, much tamer, but, well…

“Are you sure this isn’t too short?” I tugged down on the denim skirt Pony had lent me, wishing it would cover further than just halfway down to my knees. On Pony it covered a fair bit more, but I also had a good three inches on her already.

“That’s what the leggings are for!” Pony supplied, pinching the fabric that kept me from feeling too exposed… and possibly getting too cold. It had been a short and mild winter, but spring was only newly here, and the well and truly warm weather was still a couple months away.

She’d also picked out a nice blouse I’d forgotten was in my closet, and paired it with a decent faux-leather jacket she’d picked out for me a couple of months back while it was on sale. I had my hair pulled back in a ponytail, but had some longer bangs and a few locks free on the right side, pinned to the rest with a nice, shiny hair clip. Pony had also insisted I tie a ribbon on my tail, but on this one bit I put my hoof down and said no.

Rounding out the ensemble was probably my least favorite part of the whole thing: a purse. It wasn’t quite a purse, more like a satchel really, but I had it out of raw necessity: even my jacket didn’t have large enough pockets to actually use. The purse-satchel-thing was a small little bag on a thin shoulderstrap, resting on the hip opposite the shoulder I slung it over, and it had a flap with a little twist fastener on it to keep wandering fingers and nosy busybodies out. It was large enough to hold, at the very least, a money clip or coinpurse, a cell phone, a couple extra bobby pins, a makeup compact, one small tube of lip gloss, and a spare eyeliner pencil. Because of course I had to put on makeup for this shit.
Thanks, Pony. You’re a real help.

“You’re welcome!”

“I said that out loud, didn’t I…” Pony just laughed at my plight, gave me a once-over, and deemed me ready to go. At least putting on the makeup had been relatively easy; I’d run with the theater crowd back in my first time through life and high school, and had actually needed to learn to apply makeup when acting. And not the kind that actually makes you look good, but the hyper-exaggerated, really heavy and terrible for your skin stage makeup that’s meant to exaggerate your facial features for the audience. I’m almost ashamed to say that I picked up how to put on eyeliner faster than any of the (other, back then) guys, and had to teach all of them how to do it. The secret?

Contact lenses. They kill your blink reflex, which was the whole problem everyone was having.

Then the doorbell rang, and an entire lepidopterarium’s worth of butterflies alighted in my stomach. Oh gods above, why had I agreed to this!?

“Kanna-chan!” Mom called up to me from the front door. “Tenya-kun is here!”

“C-coming!” I shouted back. Pony gave me a big hug, but then she got behind me, put her hands on my shoulders, and frog-marched me down the stairs so I couldn’t back out at the last second. Damn it nerves, stop it! This is just a dumb teenage first (and only!) date!

When I got down to the front door, I saw Mom standing there with this indescribable smile on her face. And there, in the doorway, was Iida Tenya, wearing a nice polo shirt, navy slacks… and carrying an absolutely massive bouquet of flowers.

Wow, Tenya. Way to make me feel simultaneously under-dressed and embarrassed.

“Oh! Kanna-chan! It is a fine day, is it not!?” Oh lord, he was doing his arm-chopping thing again… with the arm holding the bouquet. I rushed forward and grabbed the bouquet, handed it to my mom, rushed out the door, and slammed it shut behind me. Which left the two of us standing there and staring at each other like a couple of complete and utter idiots.

“So…” I started. Tenya just kinda… stood there for a moment. Then the lights seemed to click on in his head, and he pushed his glasses up his nose, and somehow managed to catch the light off of them again. Man, does he actually practice that?

“Ah! It is almost midday, is it not?”

“Uh-huh,” I murmured.

“Then lunch it shall be!” He turned towards me and gave what I could only assume was his attempt at a winning smile. “How does ramen sound? Simple, yet hearty and wonderful!”

“That works I guess,” I responded in as noncommittal a manner as I could. “I’m feeling pretty hungry, actually; I could probably eat a—cow,” I caught myself. “I could probably eat a cow.”

“I, ah, thought the saying went ‘so hungry you could eat a horse’, Tenya muttered. I gave him a look. Then I pointed down.

“I have hooves, and my best friend is named Pony, Tenya, as in small horse.”

“N-noted!” He recovered in an instant, though I did see a line of sweat drip down beneath the collar of his polo shirt. “Shall we be off, then?” I nodded, and we started walking. Tenya reached out
towards my hand with his. I was *so* tempted to swat it away, but… you know what? Screw it. I indulged him.

Then I shook my hand loose a moment later because *wow* those were some sweaty palms.

"So, call me curious," I spoke in between mouthfuls of *delicious* noodles in a rich, yet spicy broth, "but I noticed that you and your dad have those little tailpipes only on your legs, but your brother has some on his shoulders too. How did that one happen? And what about your mom's Quirk?"

"Mmph!" Tenya finished slurping up the mouthful of noodles he’d been working on, then wiped his mouth with his napkin. “My mother’s Quirk streamlines her metabolism and improves her muscles, letting her run faster, hit harder, and overall perform feats at least five times more than the average woman of her size and fitness!”

“Aaaaaand did you and Tensei get any of that?” Then I noticed something and pointed it out.

“You’ve uh, you’ve got some, uh, some *stuff* on your left lens.”

“Hm? Ah.” Tenya pulled his glasses off and retrieved a microfiber cloth from his pocket, then swiftly cleaned the lens and replaced his glasses. Huh, now that I look at it… that’s a different pair than his usual school ones, isn’t it? These ones only had a visible top rim, and the lack of a bottom rim made the lenses seem to flow directly into his face, with the overall effect of making his glasses stand out far less than usual. “Well, some. Both of us seem to recover faster from injuries and strain than our father, and we can push our engines harder and longer than his.”

“Phrasing,” I immediately responded, then clapped a hand over my mouth.

“What?"

“Nothing, sorry, just… just an inside joke,” I lied. No, that was the *exact recurring joke* from that one parody spy series whose name I can’t remember anymore. Gods above, *why* did I have to say that here? Is it the awkwardness? It’s totally the awkwardness, isn’t it.

For all that this day was shaping up to be weird and one that I was probably going to desperately try and forget in the future, it was vastly improved by quality tonkotsu ramen. Among all the breeds of ramen out there, tonkotsu is *king*. Pork bone broth doesn’t sound that appetizing when you reduce what tonkotsu is down to the most basic elements, but it’s actually *fucking delicious*. It’s rich, it’s fatty, it’s delicious, it coats every noodle in just the right amount of savory broth to make it moist and delicious without becoming soggy… and the ramen shop had an option to add a ‘spice bomb’ into the broth to amp up the heat. I, of course, had gone *straight* for this option.

Spicy food is *awesome*. Also, nobody steals your food when it’s so spicy you’re the only one who can handle it. Life pro tip right there.

“Hm.” Tenya shrugged, and took another great big helping of noodles. He obviously bought my ‘inside joke’ explanation, rationalizing it as something between Pony and me that he had no way of comprehending. Thank goodness. “Mmph! As for Aniki’s shoulder engines, he only has one muffler on each shoulder, and only two on each leg.” Tenya shifted in his chair and turned, pressing the leg of his pants taut against the back of his calf, allowing me to clearly see all six ports on his legs.

“What he gains in versatility, he loses in raw power. I started beating him in races when I was nine, and even now that he’s a Pro Hero he still can’t outrun me!”

“Wow,” I admitted, actually impressed. “If you’re this fast now, I can’t wait until you outrun All
“Hah!” Tenya smiled at me, a cheeky grin that I couldn’t help but respond to in kind. “One day, perhaps. But first?” He raised up another clump of noodles. “We eat!”

I agreed whole-heartedly, and dug back into my ramen with gusto.

Honestly, I’m not sure what I was so worried about. This date wasn’t going anywhere near as badly as I’d expected it to be.

* * * * *

I was wrong. This was going exactly as badly as I expected it would.

Things started going downhill once we headed to the local shopping district and ran into my new arch-nemesis: doors. Every single shop I even gave the barest hint of considering going inside, suddenly there was Tenya, holding the door open for me. Was I closer to the door? He spun around me and got the door open. Was it an automatic door? Tenya steps up to the sensor, door opens, and then he waits for me to go in first. Was I window shopping for more than a couple of minutes? I’d turn towards the door, and there Tenya was, getting ready to hold the fucking thing open. And it was absolutely, positively infuriating.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. Oh, no, that was just the beginning!

While we were on our way around the shopping district, I asked if we could stop in at a bookstore because apparently a light novel I’d been reading had just released a new issue. Yes, I’m a sucker for light novels, sue me. Well, I got the light novel and went to go pay, but before I can get the money out of my satchel… purse… thing, suddenly there’s money on the till, and I know it’s not mine. Yeah, it was only 500 yen or so, but damn it Tenya, I can buy my own book! Then he insisted on carrying the bag, and instead I just distracted him and slipped the light novel into my purse.

Then I ducked into a clothing store, hoping he wouldn’t feel the need to join me in the girls’ section and would go looking for his own stuff, but nope. I have a human coat hanger instead. Sure, I made use of him, and I even tried on a few things and modeled them for him because I didn’t have Pony here to help me and why not but… he didn’t have a bad thing to say. I even purposefully picked out the ugliest, most frumpy excuse for a dress the store had and tried it on, and there Tenya was, putting on a clearly fake smile and telling me I looked great.

I’m pretty sure my frown and furrowed brow was enough to clue him in that no, this was not the correct response. I didn’t end up actually buying anything to try and stave off a repeat of the light novel incident; lunch was fine, that was gentlemanly and I actually thought it was kind of sweet, but my own personal stuff? No thank you.

“Look, a pastry shop!” Tenya pointed, and I followed his finger… and cringed. Like, I actually, full-on cringed. This place was so much sugar and sweet and nice and cute that I half-expected a “moe imouto-chan” to hop out of the window display. While I had no doubt that the actual pastries they offered were delicious, and I was definitely going to be visiting it with Pony just to see her reaction, there was no way in hell that I was going to let Tenya drag me in there.

“I dunno…” I looked around, trying to see if anything around here could buy me some—there! “Oh, I’ll be right back!” I bolted in the direction of my one and only savior at the fastest walking pace I could manage without being too obvious about it.

“W-wait!” I opened the door with one hand, then looked back at Tenya… and pointed at the sign.
“I need new underwear,” I deadpanned. Tenya looked at the window displays, and blushed. I smiled, though I’m fairly certain it looked as fake as it felt, and slipped inside. “I’ll be quick!” I called back as the door closed. Tenya just turned around, shoved his hands in his pockets, and tried to look like he was very busy.

I breathed a sigh of relief and retreated to the very back of the store. A salesperson looked up and started coming over, but I waved her off.

“Bad first date,” I whispered, and she instantly gave me a look of pure understanding. Once she walked elsewhere, I pulled out my cell phone, hit my third speed dial, and called.

Pony answered on the first ring.

“Well? Tell me everything! Tell me tell me tell meeeee!”

“Pony, calm down,” I replied, switching to English in case Tenya decided to work up the nerve and actually come inside. Hey, I couldn’t discount it; back in my first life, I’d been in his shoes, and actually had walked into a Victoria’s Secret with one of my best friends more than once, back when I hadn’t had the anatomy to actually make proper use of their product lines. Granted that had been shopping for yoga pants, not for lingerie, but still!

“Come on Kanna, I wanna knooow!”

“It’s…” I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair. “I don’t know, Pony. I’m trying not to be too bad of a date, but he’s making it really really hard! He’s just… urgh! It’s like he binged some slice of life romance manga trying to prepare for this, and he didn’t even bother to ask his dad for advice!”

“Not his brother?”

“Pony. You’ve seen his fiancee, yes?” Pony’s understanding affirmative came through loud and clear. “That man wouldn’t know a proper healthy relationship if it bit him in the butt.”

“Alright, fine, you may have a point there,” Pony replied. “At least give him a chance, alright? He’s trying.”

“I worry that he’s trying a little too hard,” I murmured. “Look, I have to go; I had to duck into a lingerie shop to get even a couple of minutes away, but if I take too much longer—”

“Go, go!” Pony shooed me off. I was about to hang up when she called out. “Wait wait wait! While you’re there, could you grab me a new nightgown? I’ll pay you back!”

“Did you tear it on your horns?” The nervous chuckle that came through the phone was all I needed to hear. “Fine, fine. Just come on over and grab it once I’m home, alright?”

“Kay!” And with that, Pony hung up.

I knew exactly which nightgown she was asking about, it’s the same one I had for myself, so I just bought one of those and was out the door a minute later. I tapped on Tenya’s shoulder. He turned around, but when he smiled at me, it was somewhat… weaker. Like there just wasn’t as much force behind it.

“Uh,” I stammered, “i-if you were still interested in that cafe, um…”

“There’s a better one just up this way actually,” Tenya broke in. “And it’s less… ah.” He was
“Not so sweet that you’re going to choke to death just breathing the air?”

“Mm,” he murmured, pushing his glasses back up his nose for what had to be the twentieth time today. “That.”

In what was actually a first for the day, we walked in more or less amicable silence, and when we got to the cafe, Tenya actually let me open the door for myself. We sat down and ended up just ordering some tea; iced tea for him, iced green tea for me.

Once the drinks arrived, we sort of just… sat. It was quiet. It was also awkward. So very, very awkward. And that awkward silence continued for nearly five minutes before I moved to break it.

“T’im sorry,” we both said, at the same time. Then both of us moved to try and keep talking, and interrupted ourselves. I leaned back in my chair, and Tenya gestured for me to speak first. I held my glass in one hand, and the other just kinda… fidgeted with my tail.

“I’ve… kinda been a terrible date,” I admitted. “I, uh… I’m sorry Tenya-kun. I’ve tried to, to be as warm and open as possible, but—”

“I understand.” Tenya cut me off, then slouched down in his seat. “I owe you my own apology, Kanna-chan. I… while you were in there, I had some time to think. Not much,” he raised his hand to keep me from apologizing, “you were only in there for five, ten minutes at most, but that was… well, it was enough. And I owe you an apology.”

I’ll admit, I was curious.

“For what?” I leaned forward a little now, uncrossing my legs. “I mean, you don’t have anything to apologize for. If anything it was me. I was… I’ve been far from the best date, and please don’t try to deny it or sugarcoat it, because I’ll probably eat that too.” He gave me a funny look, but then shook his head, and his face went back to that melancholy.

“For… well, you know I’ve had a crush on you for a long time.”

“Eight years and counting,” I murmured, playing with my straw.

“Right, yes.” He pushed his own drink away and set his hands on the table, clasping them together. “And yet, in all that time… I never once attempted to actually get to know you as a person. Occasionally we had interactions, but mostly I saw you from afar, as an acquaintance and sometimes-friend, and over time, I… it sounds silly, but I built an image of you in my head. Who I thought you were, what kind of person I thought you would be if I could just get you alone…”

“And the real me just doesn’t measure up,” I finished. “I get it. You build up this perfect daydream girlfriend, and—”

“That’s not it,” he interrupted. “If I had taken the time to get to know you, to actually put in the effort and become your friend the way Pony-chan has, I would have realized a long time ago that… I don’t actually see you that way. I saw a girl I thought was pretty, but that was all.” He smiled, warmly this time. “It’s like the opposite of Aniki. Rei-san is one of the oddest people I have ever met, but once I got to know her, she is insightful, and funny, and while she has her problems, Aniki is just the type of person to offset those.” He looked me in the eyes again. “And even one full afternoon was enough to know that I… I don’t have that with you.”
I sighed, and stood up.

“No, it’s okay, you don’t have to go!” Tenya held out a hand. “More that, ah, perhaps instead of thinking of this as a date anymore, maybe… just friends?” Tenya extended his hand across the table.

I smiled. For all of his faults, for all of his foibles, and for all of the times I wanted to punch his teeth in today… in the end, Iida Tenya really is a truly mature specimen for his age.

“Friends, then.” We shook hands, shared a smile, and laughed.

“Well, I suppose that is one crush put to bed!” Tenya pumped his fist in triumph… and then kept pumping it. Of course. Whatever else he may be… I could always point to moments like this and claim Tenya is just a robot in disguise.

“Well,” I stood up and fished the money for my drink out of my purse, “I should head home I guess. It’s getting late, and Dad will probably want me home soon.”

“See you at school tomorrow?” Tenya asked. I nodded, and made my way to the door.

Tenya didn’t get up to hold the door for me.

… huh. I thought that’d make me happier.

* * * * *

“Welcome back!” I heard my mother call out to me. “How did it go?”

“I…” I walked into the den and sat down next to my mother, a bus ride of introspection wiser. And from it all, there was really only one conclusion I could pull from today, however much it boggled the mind to think it.

“I think I just got dumped.”
Interlude Four | Manhunt

[Kanna, Age 14]

“You’re leaving again.”

It wasn’t a question. Kenta sighed and stood, leaving his overnight bag where it lay. He turned around to see Kanna, her face set in a stern mask of disapproval. She had her arms crossed over her chest, her brow was furrowed, and a frown was pulling down at the corners of her mouth. But the incongruous part was her eyes: they weren’t accusing, or angry, or even sad, like he’d expected. No, the only emotion he could ascribe to what he saw in his daughter’s eyes was understanding… and disappointment.

Something ugly nestled deep in the pit of his stomach. He didn’t want to give it a name, for fear that he wouldn’t be able to take it back once he gave it that power.

“I have to.” He walked towards Kanna and put a hand on her shoulder. Unlike the last time, she didn’t move to brush it away. “We have a lead, an actual, solid, dependable lead. If there’s even a chance that we can—”

“It’s not that!” Kenta stepped back, surprised at the sudden outburst. Kanna looked away, seeming unwilling to meet his eyes. “It’s… I just…” She took a deep breath, as if to marshal her thoughts. “When will it end, Dad?” Kenta grit his teeth, fists clenching despite himself.

“It ends,” he bit out, “when Mason is back where he belongs.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Kanna stepped forward and put a hand on his arm. It took everything he had not to pull away. “You’re… Dad, just look at yourself. This whole affair is… please. Just—”

“I can’t.” Kenta turned and embraced his daughter; she wrapped her arms around him and he could feel her squeeze as tightly as possible. “It’s my fault that he’s still out there, I… I have to make things right.” He pulled away from Kanna, holding her at arms length by her shoulders. She looked up to meet his gaze; her eyes were wet, and she was beginning to shake. “It’s only two days, Kanna-chan. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Kanna pushed his hands away and turned, slowly drifting back towards the den.

“I’ll let Mom know,” she called back. “Be safe, Dad.”

“I will,” he replied. “I promise.”

It was only once Kenta had already boarded the Shinkansen and well on his way that he realized he hadn’t told his daughter he loved her.

And neither had she.

* * * *

When he finally arrived in Sapporo, having had to transfer in Hokuto, Kenta took the opportunity to stop and avail himself of the station’s Pro Hero facilities. He stored his overnight bag and costume in a locker, ensuring that he had all of the supplies he might need. Once done, he pulled out his work phone and paired it with a discrete earbud. Once that was in place, he went to his recent calls and redialed the third most recent call.
Sir Nighteye picked up on the first ring.

“I’m here.”

“Good,” Sir Nighteye’s relieved voice came through loud and clear. “The vision wasn’t entirely clear, but everything I have points towards the area around Toishiyama, southwest of Sapporo. You have somewhere in the range of twenty-six to thirty hours; the closer you get to that end point, the less likely the situation will be recoverable. Do you have an idea of where to start?”

“I do,” Native replied, “though I would appreciate some logistical work on your end. We don’t have as much time as I’d like, and there’s too much to do for just me. If I relay information, how quick will the turnaround be?”

“It depends on what you ask for,” the other Pro Hero answered honestly, “Expect anywhere between one and ten minutes.”

“Copy that.” Native scanned his surroundings; he couldn’t actively use his Quirk while dressed in civilian clothes, not if he wanted to maintain a low profile and not spook his quarry. “Sir Nighteye… your vision. How much of me did you see? Do you know if I win?” Do you know if I finally succeed?

“… I do not know.” Sir Nighteye’s voice was honest, if cautious. “You have one day to prepare. Try to narrow things down; the sooner you know his exact heading, the more time you have to prepare.”

“Understood. I’ll call when I have something. Native out.” He hung up the phone, but kept the earbud in place; he was working on a timer, and while it was a lengthy one, every second counted here. Native knew he would succeed in one of his two goals; the fact that Sir Nighteye’s vision continued on beyond the time period mentioned, as they’d discussed earlier, meant that the Wendigo would be deprived of a victim.

But that didn’t mean he’d lose out on a meal. That was why Native had to put his nose to the grindstone: they simply didn’t have enough information. But with enough legwork, maybe, just maybe, they could get what they needed.

--------

Native opened the door and entered the shop, wrinkling his nose at the scent of oil and machinery in the air. Sales and installations of industrial-grade appliances wasn’t a business with a large number of different groups to investigate, but so far he’d struck out three times. No information, no idea, and no closer to the Wendigo. Six hours later, there was only this shop and one other left; if neither had any information, then something else was at play here, and he would have to start well and truly worrying.

There were only a few ways the Wendigo could possibly be preserving human flesh on the level that would allow him to spread out his killings so much. Desiccating the meat and making it into jerky was unlikely just due to the circumstances: it was what Mason had done while on the run, and he was unlikely to continue doing so with a home base. Salting the meat and keeping it in a relatively cool, dry room was also unlikely, since purchasing *that much salt* would have left a trail that was *much* easier to track than this one. No, the only possibility was option three: a powerful enough refrigeration unit to keep a walk-in cold enough.

Given just how many restaurants Sapporo had, and the fact that the overwhelming majority also used these units… it was like hiding a needle in a stack of *more needles*. Purchase manifests for these things were completely useless. No, he had to go for the *installation* logs, because this wasn’t the
kind of hardware the Wendigo could simply plug in and expect to work.

Native stepped up to the desk and rang the bell.

“One moment!”

The voice came from the back, followed by the sound of something metal clattering to the floor, which itself was followed by a muffled curse. Native reached into his pocket and withdrew his Pro Hero license, ensuring he had it ready to show.

“Sorry about that!” The young man that had called to him, and who had apparently dropped something on himself, stood before Native. A nametag proclaimed him to be Kisuke; he took one look at Native’s hero license, and stiffened, eyes widening and posture going ramrod straight. “S-sir! I apologize for my rudeness! I-is there some way I can help you?”

“Possibly.” Native returned his license to his wallet, and returned it to his pocket; wouldn’t do to lose that. “I’m trying to track the installation of a refrigeration unit powerful enough to cool a walk-in enough to act as a meat locker. The installation would have taken place in a relatively remote area southwest of the city, paid for in cash, mostly small bills. It’s also likely that whoever requested the installation was a foreigner.” He met the young man’s gaze. “Caucasian. Missing his left eye.”

The young man’s sudden intake of breath was all he needed to know he was on the right track. Native breathed a small sigh of relief; he wouldn’t have to go through yet another dozen piles of payment slips and manifests.

“Y-you mean he was a villain?”

“You saw him.” It wasn’t a question, but the young man nodded anyway.

“Three years ago,” Kisuke confirmed. “He was… I, I can’t even describe it. When he walked in, he just, just stared at me, l-like he was trying to see through me. He didn’t speak, most of the bills were torn, or stained, or both…” He shuddered. “And then there was the smell. I tried to forget, you know, maybe he was one of those eccentric types that slaughtered his own meat, you know how gaijin are sometimes.” Native nodded, hiding his scowl. “I… I can’t forget that smell.”

“Do you have any information on the location?”

“If you give me a few minutes?” Kisuke disappeared into the back. A moment later, Native heard the impact of boot on metal, followed by a litany of curses. He could understand the young man’s frustration; it was the same feeling that had so consumed him, day in and day out, for most of the past decade.

Twenty minutes passed before Kisuke returned, shoulders tense, eyes red, and paper in hand. No words passed between the two men as Native retrieved the manifest.

When Native exited the shop, he dialed.

“Report.”

“We have a location,” he confirmed.

“Good. Rest up, then get yourself to the location; Kamuy already reported in.” Native felt the ground drop out beneath him.

“You mean—”
“He’s already watching his mark. You have twenty hours.” Sir Nighteye hung up.

Native grit his teeth. The Wendigo was already here, and Native had to leave him be, because no matter if he interfered or not, the Wendigo would still succeed in his initial endeavor. He began his return trip to Sapporo’s visiting hero facilities; he needed to be ready.

Kamuy’s life depended on it.

* * * * *

“Kamuy’s vitals just dropped,” Sir Nighteye’s voice intoned. “He’s inbound. Have you found the location yet?”

“Yes…” Native replied, trying to process just what he was looking at. “And no.”

According to the information Sir Nighteye had been able to retrieve, the Wendigo’s ‘home base’ should have been essentially a small cottage in the woods, connected to a side road by a dirt trail that meandered through the woods for about a mile and a half. What Native had actually found was both exactly what he expected, and yet, nothing like what he was supposed to. The cottage was dilapidated. The structure hadn’t been protected from the harsh conditions near the mountain, and it showed. The roof had completely collapsed inward, the wooden walls seemed to be rotting away piece by piece, and what few windows remained intact were so encrusted in dirt, dust, and who knows what else that they couldn’t even be seen through.

And this all ignored the fact that the door was hanging ajar, hanging askew on only the bottom hinge.

“Clarify.”

“This isn’t a residence,” Native elaborated, “and from what I’m seeing, it hasn’t been one for at least a couple of years.” He called upon a bloodhound, and took a deep sniff, letting his Quirk augment the sensory. “But what I’m smelling says something completely different. This place stinks, and there’s a very familiar, though subtly different scent underneath it all. It’s definitely the place,” he mused, circling the ‘structure’. “I’m just missing something.”

“Look for a basement, or a cellar hatch.” Native followed Sir Nighteye’s instructions, relying on the bloodhound to guide his steps. It took some searching, backtracking, and second-guessing, but he did find what he was looking for, and his exclamation of triumph was clearly audible over the line. “Status update.”

“Found it. Mason had a tarp coated in all the detritus you would expect, secured by sticks forced through holes at oblique angles. It didn’t look like a tarp, and it certainly didn’t smell like one, but it’s where the trails all ended. All roads led to Rome as it were.”

“Good.” Native heard the clacking of keys, followed by a sharp intake of breath. “He’s inbound and moving fast, maybe five minutes out at his current pace. Kamuy’s awake, but her vitals are low; she won’t have enough of her faculties to help you. I’ve notified the authorities; more Pro Heroes are inbound, but they weren’t present in my Foresight. This means it’s all on you.”

“Right.” Native let his Quirk fade and retreated to an observational position. “Over and out.”

“Good luck.” And with that, Sir Nighteye dropped the call. Native double-checked his equipment, made sure his costume’s protective elements remained in place, and set in to wait.

He didn’t need to for long. A car engine grew closer and closer, growing louder until Native could
confidently identify it as a flatbed truck. He heard the engine shut off, and the door opened, followed
by the sound of boots on loose dirt. Native risked a glance, and saw the Wendigo hoisting an
unconscious Kamuy, dressed in civilian clothing and bound with, from what he could see, duct tape.

Mason carried Kamuy to his hidden entrance and carefully, oh so carefully, lifted the tarp out of the
way. Then he simply swung the wooden hatch open, walked down what had to be a staircase
beneath it, and disappeared from sight.

Native waited until the Wendigo’s footsteps were no longer audible through the hatch, then slunk
forward. Swiftly, and with restrained motions to remain as quiet as possible, he crept inside, and
descended into the Wendigo’s barrow.

Native had come up with a good idea of what this location was from the outside, and after actually
going down into the cellar, he was certain. This building was old, likely from when Quirks first
began to manifest. The clues were all there: the cracks in the concrete, the scent of mildew, the
buildup of dust and cobwebs in the corners. The hall he walked down was much larger than he’d
anticipated would be present, and the few doors he saw were crafted completely from metal, though
they had rusted over so much that they were probably sealed shut by now.

The structure’s origin was obvious to Native, who had seen similar locations during his time in the
United States: it was a shelter, and from just how well-lit, spacious, and fortified the place seemed to
be, it wasn’t meant for civilian use. This was a fallback for a government in hiding, such as the
bunker the British government had used way back during the Second World War. Obviously it had
fallen into obscurity and been neglected in the many decades since society returned to a stable
equilibrium, but the bunker still existed.

Which begged the question: how did the Wendigo find this place?

Native cleared his mind; no, questions like that were for Kihei to put together, and only after he was
done here. His mission remained. Native walked further into the lair (for what else could it be), only
stopping when he finally saw a door that wasn’t rusted shut. This one was new. It was a dull, matte
gray metal, just as thick as the rest, and very much resembled the kind of hatch one would find used
as doors aboard seafaring vessels. It was heavy, it was sturdy…

And there was no way he could open it without making noise.

There was no way around it. Native steeled himself, and opened the door, a burst of heated air
blowing into his face as he did so.

What greeted him on the other side was a large, mostly bare chamber, about the size of a conference
room. Far off to the left side, he could see another hatch, and to its left sat what could only be a
refrigeration unit, pumping heat into the chamber until it was just uncomfortable enough that he
couldn’t ignore it. Next to that door, seated on the ground, was a person, slowly shifting in the way
he’d seen people do after being knocked unconscious. Even without the mask he’d grown to know,
this could only be one person: Kamuy.

Off to the right lay a simple mattress, resting on the floor with no sheets, no blankets, and only a
single pillow. It had been stained yellow from sweat and red-brown from blood, and the scent
coming off of it had to be unbearable.

But Native didn’t notice. He barely noticed any of these things. Because right there, in the middle of
the room, standing almost at attention, was the wasted, almost skeletal figure of Master Sergeant
Alexander Mason.

The Wendigo.

“Was wondering when you’d finally track me down, Injun.” He bared his teeth in a rictus grin, and much to Native’s surprise, they were normal. Not fanged, not snarled or snaggletoothed or jagged. Normal.

“It’s over, Mason.” Native reached for his Quirk, and it responded in an instant, the phantasmal aura of a Kodiak brown bear surrounding him and further illuminating the barren chamber. “Didn’t think it’d take this long, but you’re finally right where I want you.”

“Is that so?” Mason’s expression cracked, and the Wendigo, that tortured, rabid beast, came to the fore. “You know, it took two tries, but I did finally learn my lesson.” Mason reached into his pocket and pulled out a small fob. He pressed the button, and Native heard the door slam shut behind him. “When you caught me, you lured me in. It was a battlefield of your choosing, an area you knew intimately, and had set up beforehand. When we fought—how long ago was it? Nine years now?”

Native snarled and rushed forward, rushing forward as fast as the bear he channeled could. He swiped at the Wendigo, the bear’s claws reaching for his foe, but Mason sidestepped at the last second. Native’s spectral claws carved out a chunk of the wall, sending chunks of concrete skittering across the floor and choking dust into the air. Native turned to meet his foe, and only barely deflected the reticulated bone claws that had subsumed the entirety of the Wendigo’s hands. He lashed out with his own claws again, but the Wendigo swiftly backpedaled away, putting distance between them.

“I was hasty, and I see that now,” Mason continued. Native surged forward once more, dropping to all fours and driving his shoulder into Mason’s gut, only to be surprised at the pain he felt. The Wendigo recovered quickly, throwing away his jacket and tearing off his shirt to reveal the bone plating he’d grown over his emaciated body. “I didn’t survey the land, get a grasp of my terrain. Again, I was fighting on an unknown battlefield, and while I didn’t lose, I also didn’t win. You escaped.” He chuckled, a raspy laugh that sent Native’s hackles on edge. “I’m not an idiot, you know. I can see when I’ve fucked up. And sure, I can probably destroy you easily now—”

Native howled and charged forward once more, engaging his opponent in close quarters. He threw out a vicious right-hand backswing, which Mason neatly ducked under before swiping at Native’s open midsection, the monster’s claws only failing to gut him due to the spider silk weave his wife had finished adding to his costume seven years prior. Mason deflected Native’s follow up left knee strike, then landed his own side kick into Native’s breastbone, driving some of the air from Native’s lungs and sending the hero skidding backwards.

“You talk too much.” Native fell into an easy combat stance, slowly making his way closer to the Wendigo.

“You say that, and yet—” Native surged forward once more, interrupting the Wendigo with a low, straight right-hand punch aimed at the monster’s groin. Wendigo moved to dodge, and Native pulled back his feint, turning with his momentum to throw an uppercut at the Wendigo’s jaw.

Native’s left fist soared upwards, but struck only air. His eyes widened, and he moved to backpedal, but he was too late; he’d been open for too long, and the Wendigo took his chance, grasping his foe’s still upraised arm and turning into a throw. Native felt his feet leave the ground, and then saw stars as the back of his skull beat his shoulders and back to the unforgiving concrete below.

“Sloppy.” Mason sat himself atop Native, wrangling the pro hero into an armbar and then pinning
Native beneath him. Sharp, narrow spikes of bone burst forth from the Wendigo’s body, spearing Native through his right shoulder and left thigh, and he barely bit back the cry of pain. “But you’re done.” Native heard a gut-wrenching sound, that of flesh and bone and gristle shifting and cracking, and—

“AAAAAAAGH!”

They say that in instances of traumatic injury, the body often fails to register the damage done to it immediately, leading to a perceived delay between the wound being inflicted and the actual pain reaching the brain. But Native now knew that was a lie.

When the Wendigo stood and kicked him in the gut, sending his back flying into the wall, that Native didn’t feel. He was too busy cradling his left hand to his chest.

And the ragged, fang-carved stumps where his middle, ring, and pinky fingers had been just a moment before.

He looked to the Wendigo, who was rooting around in his mouth for something. The monster pulled out what could only be one of Native’s severed fingers, and removed something from near the base. The light glinted off of it, and Native’s fury began to overcome the agony he felt.

“So that’s what that was… heh.” Mason flicked Native’s wedding band back into his mouth, and dry swallowed. Then he turned towards where Native had begun to push himself up the wall, the blood from his mangled hand seeping into the fabric of his costume… and smiled. “See now, Injun? You’re nothing.” Native blinked, and the next thing he knew, there the Wendigo was, claws entangled in his hair. He felt himself be pulled forward and then his head cracked against the cement wall, sending stars erupting in his vision once more. “I’ve been waiting for this moment for sixteen… long… years.” The Wendigo’s jaw distended, then opened wider than the human jaw is built to go. His teeth grew and grew, with more emerging from his gums beside them, all gnashing together in a small forest of fangs.

Native sent his prayers out. I’m sorry Kimiko, Kanna. He couldn’t help the small, deprecating grin that grew on his face. Looks like I won’t be coming home after all.

The Wendigo tore the weaker parts of his costume and ripped off the top, laying his torso bare. He leaned back, as if getting ready to thrust for the kill. Native kept his eyes wide open: he would stare death in the face, no matter—

The lights flashed, and flickered, and half of them exploded. A great blue glow built out of the corner of his eye, and both Native and the Wendigo turned to look.

There, in the corner of the room, Kamuy had managed to free herself from her bonds and stagger over to the refrigeration unit. Her right hand lay upon the bulky machine, and Native could see the sparks flying from her body, growing in intensity with every flicker of the lights. A bright blue glow began to build at the fingertips of her left, arcing together to form a sphere of ball lightning in her palm.

“Native!”

On instinct, Native called his Quirk, but it was hazy, indistinct; he had not called for any animal, nor had any come without his bidding.

Kamuy screamed. The Wendigo leapt away.

And a bolt of lightning flew from her outstretched hand straight into Native’s hazily glowing form.
“Hah!” Mason’s jaw returned to normal, and he stalked towards Kamuy, who had slumped against the boxy appliance. “You missed!”

Kamuy looked up… and smiled.

“Did I?”

Native felt the lightning slam into him, falling into the indistinct aura of his Quirk, merging with it. He could feel the power flowing into his muscles, into his nerves, into his mind. The glow around him began to darken, becoming stormy and tempestuous.

“Wendigo.” Native stepped forward, the feathers adorning the remaining half of his costume illuminated, radiating an iridescent, azure light. Electricity arced across his form, but despite that and his mangled hand, he felt no pain. He stood hunched, hair shadowing his eyes. “That’s a Native American story. You took that from us. You took our flesh, our safety, our peace of mind.” Native fixed his eyes on his foe, and let the lightning build around him.

“Well if you like to take from us so much, then here’s another one you motherfucker!” Native struck like lightning.

And the Thunderbird cried in his wake.

His mangled left hand, enshrouded in a spectral talon, raked across the Wendigo’s abdomen, tearing through the bone plates he’d grown like so much tissue paper and leaving deep, black furrows of shredded and scorched muscle in their wake. The electricity flowed into the Wendigo, the muscles in his core spasming and making him lurch forward.

Native struck with his elbow, and the lightning spread from his impact, melting and fusing the Wendigo’s ever-present brace of dog tags to his flesh even as the monster flew back into the concrete wall.

He dashed forward and grasped the top of the cannibal’s head with his right hand and hoisted him in the air, slamming him into the floor, cratering it from the impact. Blue arcs spread among the cloud of concrete dust, and the Wendigo lurched, his jerking and convulsing muscles somehow still able to propel him along. Native crouched low and pushed off from the ground, the Thunderbird’s spectral wings propelling him far faster than he had ever moved before.

He lashed out with a claw-hand, the Thunderbird’s talons carving through the Wendigo, tearing the right arm from his pale, wasted body, and instantly scorching what little muscle and bone remained at his shoulder. The force of the impact sent the Wendigo flying, and he impacted the far wall of the room with a sickening crack. He fell forward onto his stained, disgusting cot, blood falling from his shattered nose and running from a cut on his forehead into the empty, hollow socket that once housed his left eye.

Native soared towards the Wendigo, and used the Thunderbird’s spectral wings to spin into a powerful axe-kick. He shattered the armor plates along the Wendigo’s back and sent him crashing down through the cot—

—Native’s eyes widened, and he tried to grasp the Wendigo’s ankle before he disappeared from sight, but it was too late. He had already fallen out of sight.

For beneath the shattered remnants of the cot lay an open hatch, a ladder leading down into the darkness.

And Native hadn’t heard Mason’s body hit the ground.
“No!” He spread the Thunderbird’s wings with a thought, ready to dive into the hole—

—and the storm passed.

Native’s legs collapsed beneath him, every muscle in his body screaming from the pain and strain he had put upon them. All of the pain he had ignored, the pulsing agony in his left hand, the burning in his ribs, the great mass of raw pain in his back and shoulders… everything all crashed back at once, and he found himself struggling to stand back up. He made it back to his feet, but buckled almost immediately.

He would have fallen had a small figure not inserted itself beneath his right arm, and he looked to see Kamuy supporting him, her own face a grim mask.

“He’s gone,” Native gasped out. It wasn’t a question. There was no uncertainty in his voice. The Wendigo was right: he’d had the home field advantage, and if not for a set of circumstances that were impossible to foresee, Native would be dead. The more he thought about it, the more he understood, and the more he realized he’d been ignoring.

_Do you know if I win?_

He had asked this of Sir Nighteye. And the man’s response had been unsure.

_I do not know._

Looking down the previously hidden point of egress, Native knew what he meant. This hadn’t been a victory. But looking around… it hadn’t been a loss.

“What was that?” Kamuy asked, moments after the two managed to wrench open the metal door to the outside hallway. He could hear the sound of footsteps slowly growing closer, and flashlight beams further illuminated the corners that the dim incandescent lighting failed to brighten.

“All peoples have their stories,” Native began, keeping his breath shallow to not irritate his ribs. “And my great grandfather’s Quirk brought it to life. It’s always been there, for everyone in his line since. Waiting. I… I can’t use it on my own.” He looked to Kamuy, eyes resting on her hands. “It has a price I can’t—won’t—pay myself.”

Kamuy could only nod.

She understood.

When the Pro Heroes and police arrived, they collected Mason’s severed arm, and began their search of the tunnel that the Wendigo had fallen down. But Native already knew. They may have claimed his base for their own, but the truth was undeniable.

The Wendigo lived, and had escaped to feast another day.
[Kanna, Age 14]

“You’re joking.”

Dad looked at me and set the newspaper he’d been reading on the table, not even bothering to put down his chopsticks. He’d managed to grow his middle and ring fingers back in the past five months or so, but his pinky had only regrown to just below the first knuckle. There are many things I can say about the axolotl’s regeneration, but it’s not exactly the fastest out there. Combine that with the chill of winter, and the cold-blooded axolotl just couldn’t get much headway.

But that wasn’t the important part right now. No, what was important was Dad’s most recent, and in my opinion, absolutely idiotic suggestion.

“Nope!” He put the paper down and reached into his pocket, and next thing I knew his phone was in front of me, open to an email attachment sent from none other than Kamuy. “Sapporo Snow Festival is this weekend, and we’re invited. And by one of the organizers no less.” I considered tapping on the back arrow to see just what communications had gone between the two, but by the time I started moving my hand, Dad had already pocketed his phone once more.

“I haven’t been to Sapporo before,” Mom piped in, opening the rice cooker to serve herself another heaping helping; she looked a tad pale, and had only finished her shift at the hospital just before midnight yesterday. “But honey… are you sure it’s safe?”

Despite everything I expected, Dad just… smirked?

“Give me a little credit.” He began to play with the replacement wedding band on his ring finger, the silver band serving as an odd barrier between the slightly tan hand and the pale-white digit. “I’ve been keeping tabs on things up north. No disappearances, no bodies, no unexplainable thefts; hell, they haven’t even seen dead wild animals. He’s gone underground, and if I’m right, he’s not coming back out for a good, long time. Trust me, dear, it’s safe.”

“You don’t know that,” I pointed out. “Just because there’s no symptoms, that doesn’t mean it’s not present.”

Dad’s face turned blank, and he held up his left hand.

“He took my fingers. I took his base, his holdings, his supplies, and his arm. He has nothing left. And frankly? It’s not my problem anymore.” Dad turned back to his paper and resumed eating his breakfast. “The biggest problem was always finding the bastard. But I can already think of a few Quirks that could use his arm to pinpoint wherever he fled to. It’s not a matter of if anymore.” Dad raised a piece of egg to his mouth and tore into it. “It’s all a matter of when.”

I looked at Dad. He met my gaze, then turned back to his newspaper.

“Personally, I think it’s a wonderful idea!” Mom reached for the rice cooker again, but I slipped my hand past hers to grab some myself before she could finish what was left; her little disappointed moue almost made me feel bad, but hey, I’m hungry too. “Ooh, maybe we could even go skiing!”

“Mom, we’re not going to be there more than a day or two,” I interjected. “Exactly when would we have time for that? And,” I poked a leg out from under the table, “I don’t think my legs would work with skis anyway.”
Actually, I didn’t just think that. I knew that. The first time around, I was a good skier; no, scratch that, I was a great skier. That may sound like a boast, but when three of my five favorite ski trails were double diamonds, and the other two could easily be just as difficult in icier conditions, I loved skiing. And honestly, I’m more than a little sad that my legs’ being how they are means it’s simply not safe for me to do it anymore. My joints would snap in half on any of the more difficult mogul turns, and don’t even get me started on powder.

“Ooh, I hadn’t thought of that…” Mom put a hand to her chin, and looked at me with something I could only identify as pity. Damn it, I don’t want that…

“Anyway!” Dad stood up and picked up his dirty dishes. “I’ll get the train tickets. Have a good day at school Kanna!” I heard him drop his dishes in the kitchen, then Dad came back, kissed Mom on the cheek, gave me a quick hug, and went out the door.

Honestly… ever since he came back from Hokkaido missing three fingers and barely carrying himself on a crutch, Dad had been acting weird. After an initial couple days of disappointment, anger, self-loathing, the old ‘I should’ve XYZ’, and all that jazz, he just… did a complete 180. He’s been making sure he was home for dinner. He spent time with me and mom on the weekends, and we’d even had multiple little father-daughter outings. Despite all of this, I couldn’t just sit there and accept the change that had come over him, because it reminded me way, way too strongly of something I’d done myself.

That something was… I can’t even say it. Even almost twenty years later, and a whole world away, I still have a hard time saying it.

I’ll leave it at this: it was one of the biggest mistakes of my first life. And if I was reading the signs right, then something very similar, and just as self-destructive, was going to play out in the near future.

* * * * *

Saturday afternoon came, school let out, and we were en route to Sapporo.

I ended up passing most of the train ride messaging Pony before she and Kihei boarded their plane. She actually missed the past week of school to fly back to the States and visit family, something they only manage to do once a year due to time constraints. Normally, though, her dad tended to schedule the trip for vacation periods, as opposed to during the school term. This year, they made an exception. This year, they paid a visit to her mother’s grave on what would have been her birthday. It was the first time Pony could muster the will to go.

She called me after, crying and dejected. I wanted nothing more than to hug her, to hold her tight and brush her hair back and say everything would be okay, but we were an ocean apart. All we could do was talk, and I swore that once Pony got home, I would hold her tight, and hug her, and not let go until she was all cried out. But before then, I had to deal with my own demons.

We were on our way to the demon’s own hunting grounds, and I… I hate this. I hate this so much.

I don’t know if I trust my Dad anymore. Not where the Wendigo was involved.

The whole time we were on that train, I kept getting this feeling that something wasn’t right. It was a very similar uncanny feeling to the one that kept crawling up my spine every time I saw Dad these past few months, but somehow worse. My brain was screaming at me that we were tempting fate by going to Hokkaido, that Murphy’s Law was all wound up and just waiting to let loose.
Looking back, I wish I’d paid more attention to this feeling and just refused to step on that train, because I was more right than I could possibly know.

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“Welcome!” Kamuy stood before us, dressed in a blue and white yukata, her mask perched sideways on her head. I’d seen pictures of her in costume, but I’ve never actually seen her face. She looks… well, to be honest? She looks a lot like me, and it’s rather eerie. Her skin tone is just a shade darker, and her hair is more of a very deep brown than my own raven-wing black, but put those aside and it was like looking at myself in the future. She had a soft smile on her face, and though I could see bags under her eyes, they were aight with some mixture of satisfaction and triumph. Which made sense: Kamuy was one of the chief organizers of the Sapporo Snow Festival, and apparently had been for the past six years.

“Thank you so much for inviting us!” Mom bowed deeply to Kamuy, and had I followed suit immediately, I wouldn’t have noticed the heroine’s smile falter for just the slightest instant. I bowed to hide my own frown, and made sure to compose myself before pulling back upright. “Truth be told, I’ve never actually been up here to Sapporo, or even Hokkaido itself for that matter. I almost feel ashamed for not having made the trip before!”

“Oh, it is no worry,” Kamuy waved my mom’s gushing off. “If you would follow me? I’ll show you to your rooms.” With that, she turned and walked inside her residence.

We have a home with fairly typical modern Japanese architecture back in Hosu. What Kamuy had up here in the north, however? This was a full-fledged ryokan, reworked into a home for a single, albeit large, family. Kamuy led us through tatami-floor hallways lined with rice paper dividers before eventually stopping in front of one with an intricate, classic ink-block style painting of a stormy mountain upon it. She slid the door open and beckoned within.

“This one will be for you and your wife, Native-san. And this one,” Kamuy reached for the door just opposite, this one decorated with a sumi-e painting, depicting what looked like a bear, maybe, “is for you, young miss.” I gave Kamuy what I hoped was the most thankful look I could; I’ve had to sleep in the same room as my parents, and it is abominable. Both of them fall asleep almost instantly, and then they snore like chainsaws! Both of them! It’s maddening!

My room was about a third of the size that my parents’ was. It had a low table in the center, with two specially-made chairs that had a seat bottom, a cushion, and a back, but no legs placed on either side. In an alcove, I could see a futon made up with sheets and a comforter, and propped up on the wall beside it, and an expanding rice paper divider that I could use as a changing screen. There were some outlets on the walls, which I was thankful for, as well as a small television set, which I could probably do without. I took a quick look in my parents’ room, and it was much the same with one major addition: a small lounge area, whose floors were somehow lower than the rest of the room, and floored with what looked to be either sofa cushions or a very thin mattress.

“It may be cold outside,” Kamuy said, her voice coming in from the hallway, “but please avail yourself of our hot springs. They are separated by gender, and no,” her tone turned mirthful, “I will not be making an exception for married couples. If my husband and I do not bathe together in the springs, then neither shall you two.” I had to stifle a giggle; the subtext was very obvious there. No fucking like bunnies in the hot springs.

“I am sure you are tired from your journey, and the evening has grown long. If you would like to join us for dinner, then please feel free; tomorrow, the festival will begin in earnest!”

We joined Kamuy, whose real name I learned is Akama Kumiko, and her family for dinner. Her
husband, Akama Koji, was a very good chef, because despite the relative simplicity of pork cutlets, this meal was easily good enough to be in a restaurant.

After dinner, I took a nice, long soak in the hot springs, trying to keep my mind off of the worries that still saw fit to plague me. Tomorrow, we’d attend the Sapporo Snow Festival. And after that, we’d be getting the hell out of Hokkaido.

I didn’t like being here. It felt like walking on somebody’s grave.

* * * * *

If you ever wanted to see the kind of artwork that Quirks helped make a reality, then you needed to go see the Sapporo Snow Festival. The quality of ice sculptures people could make even without Quirks was absolutely monumental, and nothing short of magnificent. Add Quirks into the mix, and the ability to produce shapes and manipulate the medium in ways that made the laws of physics want to rip their hats off and eat them?

Well. Let’s just say that the giant snowflake, which on closer inspection was actually just a normal snowflake that had been kept intact and its fractal pattern grown to enormous proportions, which changed and morphed into different classic snowflake patterns while you watched, was only the first impressive usage of Quirks I’d seen so far. There was an ever-shifting ice fountain that was actually just cycling its own water to and from solid form, shifting between the shapes of a dragon, a turtle, a tiger, and a phoenix. I saw a replica of Sapporo with miniature people and cars moving across its icy streets, acting as a living diorama of the city we were in.

And then there was my absolute favorite: a pack of ice-carved Shiba Inu, brought to life and left to roam the festival crowds on their own. Though they were cold to the touch, their icy ‘fur’ felt exactly like the real deal, and these constructs certainly acted just like the dogs they were meant to represent. And let me just tell you, I love dogs. I really, really love dogs. Both in this life and the first, if I see a dog, you’ve lost me, because I will go to that dog, and I will pet it, and I will give it love and attention and friendship and everything it wants because dogs are the best and okay I’ll stop now.

“Aww. Dad, look!” I picked up one of the ice Shiba’s in my arms, and it nestled itself firmly in my grip before turning to lick my face with its ‘tongue’. It was cold, and it was wet, but none of the ice that made up its body melted on my jacket, and it started panting happily, just like a real dog.

“That’s nice, Kanna-chan,” Dad replied, but it seemed… half-hearted. His attention was elsewhere, I could tell, and it had been since we arrived. He’d been scanning the crowd, and every once in a while I’d see what I could swear was the glow of Dad’s Quirk out of the corner of my eye; whenever I turned to look though, there was nothing, and he seemed to be doing something completely and utterly innocent. Maybe I was seeing things, maybe it was the glint and glare of the lights refracting off of the ice sculptures…

But if that was the case, then why was that feeling of dread I’d been having since we arrived in Sapporo growing worse by the second.

“I think it’s cute!” Mom pulled up beside me, and the two of us caught up with Dad, standing astride him. “Now that I think about it, how hard would it be for us to get a dog ourselves? I know Kanna-chan loves them, and we’re both great with animals.” Dad made a noncommittal noise, and he reached out a hand to pat the ice dog still cradled snugly in my arms. It licked his glove when he pulled back, but Dad still made no response. “Oh come on dear, don’t be such a stick in the—”

“Found you…” a raspy, strained, too familiar voice spoke… in English. “Native…”
Dad turned in an instant, positioning himself to stand in front of my mother and me, facing the speaker. I felt my arms go limp, and the icy dog whined in protest when it hit the ground, but I was far beyond caring at this point. Unbidden, my body started to move, arms loose at my sides, one hoof in front of the other, left leg forward, shoulder width apart.

“I thought you’d still be around,” Dad said in English himself, confirming every single one of the worst suspicions I’d had this whole weekend. “Just couldn’t stay away, could you… Mason?”

The man… no. I hesitate to call this wretch a man. His body was absolutely emaciated. The cheap, worn cargo pants he wore hung so loose on his legs that the slightest breeze shifted the entire pant leg by more than half its radius, and his stance pressed the fabric tightly against a femur I could somehow clearly make out beneath the cloth. His loose jacket was open, revealing a muscle shirt that seemed to hug the contour of each individual rib, though the defined and well-outlined abdominal muscles beneath that made me wonder about what exactly I was seeing. Around his neck was a latticework of thick, ropy scar tissue, from which other scars seemed to spread in a fractal pattern at random intervals. His hair was long, lank, and thick with grease, hanging over the gaping hole where his left eye should have been.

And the right arm of his jacket was pinned up underneath the bicep, close to where his elbow should have been.

The Wendigo grinned, and I saw the teeth in his mouth shifting, growing. I sent my mind towards the pangolin, whose scales could shatter predators’ teeth with ease, and readied myself for the inevitable attack.

But it never came.

“… kill you.” The Wendigo seemed to hunch over, and as I watched, jagged bone began to cover his lone remaining arm. Something thick and white pierced through the fabric of his jacket’s right arm, growing into a spiked, barbed blade. “I’ll kill you, Native. I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you!” I saw the Wendigo lean forward, legs beginning to move, to propel that blade—

“No you won’t.” The Wendigo stopped, expression bewildered. “Look around you, Mason.” My dad spread his arms wide, and smiled. “Look at all these innocent people. Look at all these civilians, these loyal citizens these patriots. Look!” He pointed towards the festivities, and I followed his finger towards where pro heroes milled about and mingled with the people they protected, towards the police and other civil servants. I quickly looked back to the Wendigo, admonishing myself for taking my eyes off of the threat… and saw him begin to shake.

“N-no…” He took a step back, holding the stump of his right arm and the bone blade emerging from it close to his chest. “They… I… I can’t… I can’t!…”

“You can’t, can you?” Dad called his Quirk to him, and the his Kodiak bear totem erupted around him in a burst of light. The people near us gasped and back away, the crowd slowly beginning to realize something was going on. Mom tried to pull me back towards the crowd, but I… I couldn’t let her do that. I pushed her behind me with my tail, refusing to budge from my spot. My legs were shaking, and I could feel that dread transforming into pure, raw terror as it crept up my spine. Not just fear of the monster in front of me… but a sort of grim, terrible understanding. He’d planned this. He’d expected this.

“Y-you—”

“You can’t touch them. Or rather,” Dad stepped forward—no, he was Native now, the ferocity in his expression unlike anything I’d seen on his face before, “you won’t. I’m right here, though. Come and
get me. But if you miss…” Native stepped partway to the side, revealing the ever-widening, ever-growing mass of civilians surrounding us. The Wendigo’s eyes flitted between Native and the crowd, and then—

“Wrong move, Injun!”

And then he lunged for me.

I tried to move, but my legs wouldn’t budge. I tried to raise my arms to block, but they were made of lead. I tried to take a deep breath, but my mouth was ash and sawdust. I saw my impending death coming as the Wendigo raised his bone blade, and I couldn’t even muster the force of will to look away—

Native’s vicious hammer blow struck the Wendigo along his back, sending him face-first into the ground not five feet from where I stood. Native didn’t even look at me; he just wound up to land another blow onto his foe’s downed form, but right as he was about to connect the Wendigo shot up, propelled by what had to be his overgrown ribs, protruding from either side of his sternum. Native’s strike shattered the bones, sending the Wendigo falling to the floor, but he managed to right himself, and slowly rose to his feet, planting them firmly on the ground. The snow beneath him shifted and crunched oddly, and his entire posture suddenly went rigid.

“You… you…!”

“It’s over, Wendigo.” Native called to his foe. “You’re finished.”

“No!” He snarled, jagged bone spikes emerging from all across his body now, seemingly at random. “You… you… you—”

“NEW HAMPSHIRE… SMASH!”

That’s when I heard it: the sound of a massive displacement of air. I looked up, and saw it: a shape, falling from the sky, its meteoric descent barely slowed by whatever that was flapping behind it. It rapidly grew closer, becoming clearer and more visible as it fell to the earth.

To the Wendigo.

“HOUSTON SMASH!”

All Might extended his legs right at moment he connected, the extra force pulverizing every single bone the Wendigo had extruded and reducing them to nothing more than a finely-ground dust. The blast wave from his landing sent a shockwave through the area around his impact site, and I felt myself skid backwards along the ground, my hooves biting into the hard-packed snow beneath them and arresting my slide. The others around us weren’t so lucky; many of the surrounding civilians flew backwards from the blast wave and landed on their backs. Native skidded backwards and fell backwards and landed on his back, but recovered quickly and immediately began to charge towards the Number One Hero and the Wendigo.

But All Might was not one to wait. With a quick wrenching motion, he tore the Wendigo loose from the ground, and I heard something break apart and shatter as he did so. All Might ‘gently’ tossed the Wendigo into the air, and as the villain began to crest the top of his thirty-foot arc, I saw that All Might had set his stance low and pulled back his fist.

“CANAVERAL…”
All Might punched forward, and a *massive* burst of wind flew forth from the end of his punch. The ground around his feet cracked, and I saw that the sheer force of his punch had *pushed All Might into the ice and cement ground up to his knees*. But none of that compared to the Wendigo.

“**SMAAAAASH!**”

The blast wave from All Might’s punch reached the villain, and even through the roar of the wind, I could *hear* the villain’s bones snap and break and shatter. The air carried him skyward, up, up, until I finally saw the few remaining clouds in the sky break apart. I looked to the Number One Hero, and I could only stare in *awe*. Super strength was an amazing thing… but All Might hadn’t even *touched* the Wendigo. Simply the *air pressure from his punch* had been enough to carry him past the clouds, and—

“**Noooo!**”

I flinched, and saw Native stomping towards All Might, expression downright mutinous.

“I had him! I fucking *had him!* Nine! Years! Why!? *Why did you do that!?*”

All Might didn’t turn. He simply pulled himself up out of the ground… and then lifted the ground away, revealing smooth, white branches of what could only have been bone, tunneling away from where the Wendigo had stood, and branching out. I inspected the spears, following the angle at which they would have exited the ground, and traced their path as piercing through Native, piercing through me, and *continuing into the crowd behind us*.

“You were foolhardy… Yaseiki-*shounen.*” All Might finally turned to face us, and my blood ran cold. He wasn’t smiling.

*All Might wasn’t smiling.*

“Y-you—”

“Look around you!” All Might spread his arms wide and turned, gesturing towards the sheer mass of civilians around us. “These people! *They* are your charge. Look behind you!” And now… he was pointing at *me*. I froze. “This child. *Your* child! *She* is your charge.” He pointed down now, down to where the Wendigo’s bones had been tunneling, about to skewer us like kebabs. “But that? That is not *all* you have destroyed tonight, Yaseiki-*shounen.*”

“Stop calling me that!” Native yelled. “I am a *hero*!”

“… a hero?”

And suddenly All Might was in front of Native, lifting him up by the collar of his jacket. I should have cried out, should have said *something*. He was my father! I was supposed to defend him! And yet, another, much *louder* part of my mind argued, he should have defended *me*.

And he *didn’t*.

“You *used* the very people you were meant to protect. You *endangered* your own child, and *used her as bait*. You have violated the public’s trust in heroes today. But that is not *all* you have done tonight, Yaseiki-*shounen.*” Native grit his teeth, and I heard him mumble something. All Might replied, and Native stilled. I don’t know what he said.

I called on my own Quirk and felt my hearing go dead, and then an instant later, I could hear *so much more*. 
“—stop to ask yourself how? Did you even once, for one solitary instant, wonder how your foe, the nemesis you hated so badly, had managed to find success? A man who, from your own information, knew not a word of the local language, had no contacts to speak of, and no resources to call upon? Sir Nighteye did. Your friend Detective Tsunotori did. And I did. For six long, painful years we have tried to answer this question, and it was only by your actions last September that we finally had a chance. And yet here you are, not five months later, utterly destroying six years of work.”

All Might released Native, and he fell to the ground, gasping. Not once did he turn to look at me. I felt Mom wrap her arms around me, and I began to relay everything that had been said, and everything I had heard.

“Had you not interfered, the Wendigo’s threat would have been ended today. The identity of whoever has been aiding him would have been brought to light, and a far greater threat to society, far more than any single murderer, would have disappeared. Six years we had to wait for this opportunity. And all it took was one man’s obsession to destroy it all in an instant.”

Native looked up at All Might. He pulled himself up, but made no sound.

“As of this moment, as the Top Hero, I am suspending your Pro Hero status for six months, effective immediately. Take this time to reflect. Perhaps you may remember the responsibility you bear as a Pro Hero, and how terribly you have trampled upon it.”

All Might turned away from Native… and looked straight. At. Me. I squeaked, and I felt my transformed ears fold flat against my head. I blinked, and in that instant, All Might had crossed the distance between us, and had gone down on one knee to look me in the eye. But now, something was different.

Now, All Might was smiling.

“That was a brave thing you did, Yaseiki-shoujo.” He put a hand on my shoulder; it was heavy, but it was warm, and it was kind.

It was a fatherly touch.

I felt my eyes begin to burn. I… I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed that.

“Had you retreated into the crowd, I fear that dastardly villain would have attacked them in his haste to get to you! But you realized that, did you not?” He chuckled, and his other hand raised into a thumbs-up. "Recognizing when you are in danger, and acting to prevent that threat from spreading to the people around you. That is just one of the traits of a truly great hero.” He stood, and I found myself looking up in awe. I’d heard the tales of All Might, seen his exploits, and somehow, I’d thought I understood what he meant to the people of this country, of this world.

Seeing him, I realize now that I wasn’t even close to comprehending just what his very existence inspired. It’s one thing to read a comic book and see people respond to Superman’s presence. It’s another thing entirely to have him stand before you. Somehow, when All Might stood before me… I felt secure. I felt warm. I felt confident in the knowledge that everything was going to be okay.

“I hope to see your name among our ranks soon, Yaseiki-shoujo. Remember: being a hero is more than simply wearing costumes and fighting villains. It is about how you carry yourself, how you act, and what you inspire in the people around you.”

All Might gave one final salute, and with a mighty leap, he was gone… and with him, any positive feelings or optimism I had left.
I held my mother’s arms close, and the both of us looked towards my father. He walked towards us, with the air of a man defeated, downtrodden.

And when he was close enough, my mother slapped him.

“How dare you,” she spat. “How dare you! I trusted you. You said it was safe, and you lied to me. You lied to us. How could you, Kenta? How could you?”

“I had to!” He spat. Mom and I both flinched back. “He was still out there, and the top heroes did nothing! They—”

“I heard everything.” I interrupted my father, pointing to my ears. “And Mom knows everything. They weren’t doing nothing.” I couldn’t help the sneer that spread across my face. “You know, you were right. Five months ago, before you left and nearly died on us, you told me it was your fault. Well… I guess it really is, isn’t it?”

“But I… I—!”

“Kenta.” Mom pulled me tight, and moved us both a step backwards. “Kanna and I are going back tonight, without you. When you return, your things will be outside.” My fath—no. Kenta looked like he’d been punched in the gut. “I don’t know if I can ever trust you anymore, Kenta. How can I share my life with somebody I can’t trust?”

“But…” His voice drifted off as he grasped for words that would not come.

“No. No buts.” I pulled myself out of my mother’s arms, and walked forwards until I was face to face with a fallen hero.

“K-Kanna?”

“I love my dad.” I stared him straight in the eyes. “But I barely recognize you.” I saw his eyes go wide, and his jaw drop open in shock. “And I don’t know what you did with him, but I want my father back, you bastard!”

I pushed Kenta, and he fell back into the rubble. I ran back to my mom and grabbed her tight.

He didn’t even try to follow us.

** * * * * *

I didn’t go to school the next day. I saw Kenta pick up his belongings from the front step of the house, and with a last dejected look, he left. He didn’t even try to come inside. I know he saw me at the window… but he didn’t even try.

When Pony got back from the airport, I raced over to her home. I hugged her, and she hugged me. And we both cried for the parents we had lost.

** * * * * *

[Elsewhere]

The shadow beneath Mason’s broken body writhed in the light of the rising sun. His entire being was agony; the dull, unceasing gnawing in his gut seemed to tug at his very being. He could have been forgiven for not noticing the two points of light growing within his shadow.
“So.”

He didn’t fail to notice the cellular phone that had emerged from the suddenly ink-black ground beneath him, set to speaker.

“Have you given any thought to more than simply ‘tangential’ support yet… Master Sergeant?”
Chapter Eleven | To UA!

[Kanna, Age 15]

The day of February 26th dawned just like any other. I woke up, bathed, got dressed, and headed downstairs to meet my mom at the table. It wasn’t anything special, just some eggs and toast, along with orange juice, but it was filling, and that was what I needed. I took my dishes to the kitchen, and on my way out the door, I gave my mother a big hug.

“Good luck,” she said, and kissed me on the forehead.

“Thanks Mom. Love you!” I went to the door and grabbed my jacket, waiting long enough to hear my mother call back with a quick “Love you too!” before closing it. A brief minute of walking later and I was in front of Pony’s door, which opened not a minute later to reveal my best friend, with her father standing behind her.

“Do your best, you two,” he rumbled, reaching his hands out to ruffle both mine and Pony’s hair. Both of us swatted his hands away, and Pony gave her dad one more hug before we left for the train station.

While we were walking, I felt Pony tug on my sleeve.

“Kanna, isn’t that…” I followed her finger, and when my eyes finally alighted on what had caught her attention, I couldn’t help but grimace. I felt my fists clench, and my nails neat crescent moons into the palms of my hands.

“Let’s just go.” I sped up, and Pony increased her speed to match. I didn’t even spare a look back at the man who called himself my father, standing there on the other side of the street. I had more important things to worry about.

After all, today was the day of the UA Entrance Exams.

* * * * *

“WELCOME TO TODAY’S LIVE PERFORMANCE!! EVERYBODY SAY ‘HEY’!!”

Despite that raucous introduction, just about every single one of us, too mentally exhausted from the written exam we had just taken, remained completely silent. The glorious, booming entrance of Present Mic, the Voice Hero, fell completely and utterly… flat. I turned to look at Pony, whose assigned seat was halfway across the room from mine due to the sheer number of fellow Somei students applying, and we both shared a look across the hall. This guy was… well. We’d both heard his radio show once or twice, but I thought that was just a persona he put on for it, not his actual personality.

This guy? He was all loud, all the time, nothing else. Thankfully though, while he’d activated the cruise control for cool, it looks like he knew how to steer at least, because loud as his voice was, I wasn’t being deafened.

“WELL THAT’S COOL, MY EXAMINEE LISTENERS!!” Present Mic just pressed on, completely forgetting about our lackluster response. “I’M HERE TO PRESENT THE GUIDELINES OF YOUR PRACTICAL!! ARE YOU READY?!”

“Ugh, yes, just get on with it.” I murmured, ready to just plant my face in my hands. I’m fine with a
little theatrics, but get to the damn point.

The screen behind Present Mic lit up, revealing… either a really shoddy map, or just a simple diagram. Actually, it may be doing double duty, now that I think about it. It had our present location in the center, and seven branching paths in a semicircle, each marked with letters A through F.

“This is how the test will go, my listeners!” Present Mic’s volume had dropped to a more reasonable level, but I could still make out every word perfectly clearly. “You’ll be experiencing ten-minute-long “mock cityscape” maneuvers! Bring along what you want! After this presentation, you’ll each head to your assigned testing location!!”

I looked down to my exam information packet; I was assigned to cityscape C. I nudged Tenya, who was seated directly to my left, and motioned to see his.

“Area B,” he whispered. “You?”

“C.” I looked to Pony, and when I caught her eyes, she held up three fingers. My eyes lit up, and I held up the same—” Tenya nudged me to be quiet, and I turned my attention back to Present Mic, or rather, the screen behind him. I saw images begin to appear on it, and… wait. “Is that Mario?”

“Shh!” Tenya admonished me, once again. I huffed and crossed my arms, then sat back to listen to Present Mic.

“Each site is filled with three kinds of Faux Villains,” he explained, and numbers lit up on the shapes. The Goomba had one, the Koopa Troopa two, and the Piranha Plant three. “Points are awarded for defeating each according to their respective difficulty levels!!” Present Mic pushed a button on the podium, and the Mario silhouette stomped on the Goomba, threw a fire at the Koopa Troopa, and hit the Piranha Plant with a tanuki tail. I guess that was a decent way of representing Quirks, if basic. “Use your Quirks to disable these faux villains and earn points! That’s your goal, listeners! Of course,” he added, “playing the antihero and attacking other examinees is prohibited!!”

Next to me, I heard Tenya’s chair push back, and he stood up.

“May I ask a question!?” I heard Tenya stand up, looked to see what he was pointing at on his paper, and instantly tuned him out. Come on, Tenya, you’re not an idiot; if there’s a fourth enemy, and it’s listed as having zero points, then you’re not supposed to be able to stop it in the first place. It’s obviously an obstacle that we have to work around, just like, say, collateral damage that obstructed the path a villain had taken. “And you, with the curly hair!” I saw Tenya whirl around, and instantly my attention reverted to him. “You’ve been muttering this whole time… it’s distracting!” I sighed, and reached up to tug on Tenya’s shirt. No good; he ignored me and continued on. “If this is some sort of game to you, then please leave immediately!”

Tenya sat down and crossed his arms, then pushed his glasses back up his nose.

“You didn’t have to a jerk to him,” I whispered. “Some people do better with external processing.” But Tenya just shushed me again, because Present Mic had started talking. And well, what do you know: the Zero Point enemies really were just obstacles that we’re supposed to work around.

Though, given how he compared them to a Thwomp… I suddenly had to worry that they would be more dangerous than the initial description let on.

“That’s all from me!!” Present Mic finished up. “I’ll leave my listeners with our school motto. Napoleon Bonaparte once said, ‘true heroism consists in being superior to the ills of life’. PLUS
“Lucky us, huh?” Pony was speaking English, which I was reasonably certain nobody else would be able to understand.

“Maybe…” I looked around, sizing up the competition. There were some truly remarkable Quirks already on display, including a girl with vines for hair, a boy whose massive tail made mine look puny, and somebody who looked for all the world like that big blue guy from X-Men… what was his name again, Beast? Yeah, that was the one. “I’m not sure how they divvy up the points, but it makes sense that a tag-team would give both of us points; doesn’t make sense not to reward cooperation when it’s so important out there.”

“Did you have anything in mind?” Pony asked. I just tilted my head towards the door.

“You’re faster than I am, but I can get past you for a brief moment. Slingshot?”

“Slingshot!” Pony nodded.

“AND BEGIN!”

Everyone around us looked just a tad baffled, but I’d had this exact trick pulled on me more than once. I grabbed Pony’s wrist and gave a tug, called the cheetah’s speed, and the two of us raced through the slowly-widening gates of Cityscape C, the rest of the crowd falling into formation behind us. A quick thought, and my hearing died for an instant before growing more sensitive than before, letting me hear the targets before they arrived. My ears swiveled atop my head as Pony and I ran, and I could feel myself exhausting the cheetah’s spirit; I needed to find something soon, or—there!

“Pony!” I pulled up slightly to lower my speed, then jumped. An instant later, I felt the impact of my hooves on Pony’s horns, and in that same second, a robot pulled around the corner. It looked to be a tank with two arms mounted upon it, and there was a large swiveling mount where the treader base met the upper section, which held what looked to be missile launchers alongside the winches holding the arms.

“Go!” With her yell, Pony thrust forwards, sending me flying towards the robot. I called on my Quirk, and my right arm morphed, growing larger, heavier, furrier, and stronger, with thick, curved claws at the end.

I swiped with my grizzly paw and broke one of the missile pods from its mount, then focused on my other arm. In an instant, it had seemingly doubled in size, and I brought my gorilla’s fist down in a hammer blow, breaking through the surprisingly thin plating on the robot’s chassis.

An instant later I felt an impact rock the mech, and the entire thing began to lift off of the ground. I ripped my arm out of the machine’s innards and ripped the other missile pod off of its mount, then leapt off just in time for Pony to finish pulling upright, flipping the robot with her horns and sending it flying fifteen feet down the street.

“I’ve said it once, and I will say it again: when it comes to raw strength, Pony always has, and probably always will have me beat. I turned around to look at her, and—

“Duck!” I yelled. Pony responded instantly, and I pitched the missile pod in my left hand over her head. It struck squarely in the optical apparatus of a scorpion-shape robot, and not an instant later I was upon it, tearing the mechanical tail off at the base.
“This could be handy!” I commented, but then an instant later Pony rushed past me, leaping up in the air to deliver a devastating hoof-blow to another, smaller robot—a one point—that had snuck up behind me.

“These things are everywhere!” And Pony was right; we’d been moving through the mostly empty cityscape, and struck the first robot we found. Now, though, we were surrounded, with robots emerging from every nook and cranny we hadn’t bothered looking for. It was just the kind of tactic I could imagine villains using, and Pony and I stood back to back as the mechs encircled us. I returned my bear paw to normal, then had it join my left hand in gorilla-hood, and gripped the mecha-scorpion tail that I’d liberated tighter.

“Doesn’t matter,” I bit out. “Just wreck them all!” I charged, swinging the scorpion’s tail in a wide arc. The wide base at the end slammed into another of its kind, taking out its two front legs, then continued to knock over a one-point before coming to a stop against another three-point’s armored hide. I ripped the end section that I’d been using as a handle off of the tail, and grabbed it so the point faced down, then, ducking out of the way of the three point’s swinging arm, wedged the tail’s spiked tip into the gap between the other arm and its mount. With a heave and a yell, I wrenched the arm off, and picked that up to use as a bludgeon instead, making swift work of the other robots.

I turned around to see Pony stabbing one of her horns into the same gap I’d used to wrench my three pointer’s arm off, and saw her do the same with considerably more ease than I’d had. She picked up the arm and swung it, disabling the three-pointer and finishing off the last foe. The two of us looked at each other, taking deep breaths as we tried to calm our racing hearts, and shared a chuckle at how similar our strategies had been.

“Thirty-two points,” she said between breaths. “You?”

“Thirty-one,” I replied. We shared a grin, then turned to exit the narrow street before even more robots came and trapped us in—

“Move!” A voice I didn’t recognize came from atop a nearby building, and when I looked up, I saw exactly why they were talking to us. Thanks to the angle of the sun, it hadn’t cast a shadow as it approached, and we couldn’t hear it over the commotion of the battle, but there it was.

Standing over Pony and me, one of its massive hands coming down to flatten us, loomed the Zero-Pointer.

I rushed forward and pushed Pony out of the way, and called up the single strongest animal spirit I could think of, forcing it to cover my whole body. I braced myself for the impact, and when the hand came down, I used every ounce of my Dung Beetle-imbued strength, the ability to lift five hundred times my body mass, to keep the hand off.

But, and I realized this as the concrete began to crack beneath my hooves, there were two aspects to super strength. And only one of them was the raw force you could push out. The other, I remembered as the ground cratered beneath my hooves and I felt myself sinking deeper, was pressure.

If Superman comics of old had followed the laws of physics, then any time the Man of Steel tried to grab an airplane, the sheer force of his hands on such a small area should have sheared straight through the hull of the airplane. Any time he tried to lift an absolutely massive object, he should have been buried arm-deep in its insides due to having all of that force concentrated on such a small area. Superman, though, had the required secondary powers to keep from experiencing this side-effect.

I, on the other hand, didn’t.
I felt my hands break through the metal of the robot’s palm, and even though I tried, I couldn’t spread the force any wider. The Zero-Point was going to push me straight down into the concrete at this point, or bury me in a hole in its hand, and there was nothing—

“Ave Maria!”

A new voice intruded, and suddenly vines sprung forth from the ground around me, constricting and crushing the robot’s arm until the shearing force finally severed the hand from the rest of the mechanical limb. Another bunch of vines wrapped around my body, extricating me from the ground and pulling me to the rooftops. I looked around to see Pony was also up here, a set of vines unwrapping from around her body, and I looked to see who had helped us.

It was the girl I’d noticed earlier, the one with vines for hair. The vines she’d plunged into the ceiling of the building suddenly broke off, and the rest of them returned to what I assumed to be her normal… err, ‘hair’style all on their own.

“Thank you!” Pony said to her, and she bowed.

“It was nothing,” she replied, clasping her hands together in front of her. “If it is God’s will that I help wherever I am able, then I shall do my utmost.”


A religious Catholic.

“Thanks,” I muttered, “but we’ve no time to waste. Pony?”

“Right! Leeeeeeeh!” Vines again wrapped around our bodies, and carried us down to the street level. “T-thanks!”

I looked up to see that girl with the vine hair smile and wave, then turn away.

“Alright. We’ve got—”

“ONE MINUTE LEFT!”

“Shit,” I cursed, and started sprinting towards where the action was. “You go ahead!”

“Right!” Pony poured on the speed, and I was left to catch up. I saw a trio of one-points try to ambush her from behind, and dispatched them with my inalienable right to bear arms, my claws piercing their plating like so much tissue paper. Pony slammed head-first into another three-pointer, and with a vicious wrench of her neck and shoulders, sent it flying into another one-pointer that had tried to catch her from behind.

The buzzer sounded right as I tore apart another of the scorpion-shaped two-pointers that had tried to stab Pony while her back was turned.

“IT’S ALL OVER!”

I sagged to my knees, and behind me Pony did the same thing; we were supporting each other with our backs, and I was breathing harder than I’d expected from a measly ten minutes of exercise.

In the corner of my vision, I saw Pony’s hand creep behind her. I gave her a high-five, then went back to trying to breathe.
We’d gotten through the practical. Not, it was only a matter of time before we knew.

* * * *

[One Week Later]

Pony and I were both at my house, and the two of us were on absolute tenterhooks waiting for the mail to arrive. She’d gone through half a dozen apples, I had banana peels and mango skins littering the floor around me, and my hands were starting to get shaky from the amount of tea I’d drank so far. Pony, meanwhile, was talking about everything and anything so darn quickly that I could neither understand what she was trying to say nor get a word in edgewise. The only parts of what she was doing that I understood was when she suddenly hugged me, or leapt up and balled her hands into her hair, or nervously traced the lines of her horns, or… actually, you know what? It was blatantly obvious how nervous she was.

And why shouldn’t she be? The UA entrance exam results were being announced today, and we had no idea when they were coming. Only that they would be here soon, and—

“Girls!” Pony and I both perked up, and not a moment later we practically fell over each other trying to get to the door. Mom stood there with Kihei behind her, each of the adults holding an envelope with a bulky something inside of it. Pony and I each grabbed ours and tore them open then and there, and I couldn’t help my surprise at seeing the hologram projector fall out of the envelope. Both of them fell to the floor, and Pony and I shared a look.

“On three,” I started.

“Two,” she continued.

“‘One!’” We activated ours at the same time, and the images began to take shape. On both of ours, a figure began to take shape. At first glance it looked like a very big, white-furred mouse, but some of the other parts didn’t match. The tail was definitely a mouse’s, but the ears more resembled a bear, and there was something else in the shape of the ‘paws’ and body that I couldn’t quite place.

“Greetings!” Both of the projectors’ voices spoke in time. “I am Principal Nedzu, and if my name was not obvious, I am the principle of UA! From reviewing the footage of the entrance exam, I can only assume that the both of you will be playing these at the same time, Tsunotori Pony-san, Yaseiki Kanna-san. The message contained wherein is exactly the same.”

Pony and I shared a look, and turned back towards the hologram.

“The practical exam is scored based on how many villain takedowns you amass, but that is not the only way to accrue points. Indeed, the combat emphasis is unfair to those whose Quirks are less suited for that sort of confrontation, yet have made for excellent Pro Heroes in the past, such as our own Eraserhead and Midnight! As a result, we have a second, unknown method of scoring our applicants.”

The screen visible on the hologram lit up, showing the same Mario-based infographic Present Mic had displayed one week prior.

“As you recall, you gained points for every takedown, based on the points allocated to the villain type. However, there is another way to earn points!” The display shifted, showing the Mario silhouette lifting rubble off of a downed Yoshi, then stomping on a Koopa Troopa approaching what could only be a crouching Luigi, then dashing underneath a charging Thwomp and extricating what could only be Princess Peach from beneath its crushing weight. “You also earn points for acts meant
to protect and aid others! As heroes, our job is more than simply defeating villains. It is safeguarding the public, keeping the peace, and when disaster strikes, it is up to us heroes to rescue the victims!”

A scoreboard appeared behind Nedzu, with two rows. On the top row, I saw Pony’s name in Kanji and Katakana; in the second one, I saw mine in Kanji.

“Individually, you each scored thirty-eight villain points.” The numbers lit up in the first row next to our names; the column header indicated it as ‘Villain Points’. “However, due to your constant cooperation, teamwork, and protection of one another…”

A number appeared in the other column, and I could feel my jaw drop; I’m fairly certain Pony’s did as well.

“Ninety-six Rescue points, added up over time. As you might expect, this massively skewed our metrics, and we had to re-evaluate every Rescue Point allocated to the both of you.” Bits of footage flicked across the screen, and the massive numbers began to decrease. “Even once we had done that, the answer was still clear. Tsunotori Pony, thirty-eight villain points, twenty-one rescue points. You tied for ninth place in the entrance exam, and after review, we have chosen to award you that place. Yaseiki Kanna, thirty-eight villain points, twenty-two rescue points. You tied for seventh in the entrance exam, and only receive eighth due to the finisher above you having accrued more rescue points with one individual action than any other in UA history.

“With that, I would like to say to you both: Congratulations! Yaseiki Kanna-chan, welcome to Class 1-A! Tsunotori Pony-chan, welcome to Class 1-B! It is my sincerest hope that you two will inspire the same camaraderie in your respective classes that you have with each other, and help bring them all together for a brighter tomorrow. We look forward to seeing you here in one month. You two have taken your first true steps down the hero’s path, and it would be my greatest honor to guide such fine young women in their pursuit of that dream.”

The holographic Nedzu bowed before the emitter shut itself off. Pony and I stared at each other, and in a frenzy of action, we both rushed to hug our respective parent tightly. A moment later we broke off and hugged each other, and then pulled my mom and her dad into the great big hug.

We’d done it. Pony and I were officially heroes in training.
Chapter Twelve

[Three Weeks Later]

The date today was March 26th. One week had passed since Somei’s commencement ceremony. In one more week, Pony and I would be starting our high school careers at UA. The prospect had me absolutely, positively buzzing with excitement, and for more than one reason. The first reason was obvious: hero school! How much cooler does it get than that!? But the second one was much less obvious, and while I was excited for it, Pony was nervous, even dreading what was to come.

See, UA is in Musutafu ward, which is actually too far away from Hosu to simply commute by train every day. While UA provides a transportation stipend for its students, it would take two, nearly three hours of mine and Pony’s day just to commute to and from school. Theoretically we could do it, but if for some reason we were running even half a minute late, that could completely ruin whatever schedule we’d set for ourselves. Which brought us to the other option UA provided, or rather, the other two.

UA owns an apartment complex just off campus, which it allowed students to lease free of charge. They took care of the utilities, food, and other bills via a stipend, and the students had easy access to campus and housing. The other option was for UA to simply offer a stipend to pay for local housing, such as if multiple students wished to live together, or if a family had to relocate for whatever reason. Pony and I chose option two, and the two of us, along with Kihei, had spent the past week apartment hunting (Mom was too busy at the hospital to join us, but we did make sure to send video and photo for her to peruse during what few breaks she had).

Now, one week later, we had just finished moving into our new apartment. For a two-bedroom apartment, it actually wasn’t very large: we had a small joint living area that could just barely fit a sofa, our rooms were just large enough for a full- or queen-sized bed and a desk, the tub in the bathroom was cramped as could be, and don’t even get me started on how tiny the closets are! But it had a dishwasher, laundry was just down the hall, and the kitchenette had a stove and oven, which made me quite happy. I mean, yeah, I’m not the greatest cook, but I’m not burns-water bad anymore. Honest!

Mom had just left after stocking us up with groceries (this stipend option covered rent and utilities; other living expenses were on us), and Pony and I were just lounging on the sofa now. I had the remote in my hand, and the two of us were just watching some or other random slice-of-life anime neither of us had seen before. Hey, it was on, it wasn’t too terrible, and most importantly, I hadn’t seen any of the characters who were obviously interested in each other pick up the idiot ball. In fact, it almost seemed too realistic for an anime, but it was refreshing to see something other than obvious misunderstanding, which leads to violence, which leads to overblown apology, which… yeah, you get the point.

“So, like… you know how we’re in different classes, right?” Pony asked around a mouthful of apple. She took another big bite, and I couldn’t help but look at my best friend… then to the three apple cores already in a small bowl beside her… then to the two more apples she had nearby.

“What?”

“You and your apples,” I chuckled. “But yeah. Kinda bummed about it, really. Was hoping we’d be in the same class again.”

“Well, we have breaks, don’t we? Why not I try to make a friend, and you try to make a friend, and we all sit together at lunch?”
“Ooh… I like that.” I reached over to grab one of the apples, and snickered when Pony tried (and failed) to knock my hand away. She blew a raspberry my way, but I just took a big, triumphant bite. Hey, I like apples too! Not as much as Pony, but I do like them. “Soooooo…”

“So?”

“You gonna do the ‘pretty foreign girl’ thing again?”

“Hah! That’d only work if, like, Tenya’s in your class. If he’s in mine?” She pantomimed a balloon popping, but since this was Pony, she popped the imaginary balloon on her horn instead. “I mean sure, I’ll, like, give it a go. Who knows, maybe someone’ll buy it?”

“Here’s hoping! Hey, remember that one—” I was interrupted by a sound from my cellphone, namely the sound I used for any incoming email with a UA tag line. “It’s UA. Oh, I hope they aren’t saying they messed up my costume…”

“You still have to show me what you asked for!” Pony interjected.

“Did you show me yours when I asked?” I replied, pulling out my phone and unlocking it.

“Well, no, but—”

“Then you’ll see mine when I see yours; c’mon, it’ll be a surprise!… huh.” I read the email’s subject line, then scrolled down to the body, and I couldn’t help the frown that developed.

“What’s the matter?” Pony scooted towards me, leaning over my shoulder to read the e-mail. “Wait, why does the Principal want to talk to you?”

“I…” I faltered. “I don’t know.” I typed the reply button and replied that I was free, and could be over in just a few minutes. I sent that one off with a tap, and put my phone down. “Maybe it’s my medical file? I mean, I’ve got that shrink I visit every other week still; do you think maybe they just want to make sure I have one in the area too?”

“Possibly?” Pony ended up scrunching up her nose to one side and looking up out of the corner of her eyes. She often did that while thinking, and it was so darn cute. The only way to make it cuter was if she were to stick her tongue out of the corner of her mouth. “Well, nothing for it, I guess. When does he wanna see you?”

“Well, I replied right after they sent it, so—” My phone’s alert went off again. I swiped it open and took a look. “Right now, actually. I… guess I’m going to speak with the Principal.”

“Good luck!” Pony hugged me, then sat back down on the couch, finished off her apple, then stole the one I hadn’t managed to finish. “Hey, lemme know if you see anything cool, okay?”

“Sounds good!” I grabbed my set of keys from where they hung by the door, pulled on a jacket (with actual pockets), stuffed my belongings into the jacket, and headed off to go see whatever it was the Principal needed. I hoped it wasn’t too major, but given he wanted to speak to me before the school term actually started, I had a feeling it would be.

I just hoped my hero career wouldn’t end before it could even begin.

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“Ah, Kanna-chan, come in, come in!”
I’d been standing in front of Principal Nedzu’s office door, waiting for a secretary I thought was just on break or off running an errand. Once the Principal opened his door and beckoned me inside, however, I realized I’d been wrong; school hadn’t started yet, why would he make the administrative secretary come back from vacation early?

I followed the Principal into his office, keeping my eyes on the mouse… bear… thing that he was, and closed the door behind me. Jovial as the, erm, man? Fuck, what am I supposed to use to refer to him? Ugh, his name means mouse, so I’ll just call him that, I guess. Anyway, jovial as the mouse was, I’d still been called in to speak with him before school actually started, and that had me… well, a little worried.

“What kind of tea do you like, my dear? Oh, go on, sit! Sit!” At Nedzu’s urging, I pulled one of the two large, plush-cushioned armchairs back from his desk and sat in it. “I have green, black, herbal, chai, aha! Chai it is then!”

“Wait,” I couldn’t help but say, “how did—”

“You’re eyes widened a hair when I said that,” he revealed. “Not much, hardly noticeable unless you know to look for it, but more than sufficient if you do. Ah, here we go!” I watched him pour hot water into a teapot, give the pot a good swirl, and then add more water in. Already I could smell the spices in the tea, and took a deep breath, trying to let them relax me. “I suppose you were wondering why I called you in here today, no?”

“About that, um…” I shifted in my seat, trying to get comfortable. The chair didn’t have a back, which was surprising given that Nedzu himself has a tail. As a result, I was forced to wrap my tail around and have it fall off the front of the chair along with my legs, and it was swiftly growing uncomfortable. “Should I have my mother here for this?”

“Hm? Ah, no need to worry about that! We’d just discussed this issue with her before contacting you. Oh, do you take anything with your tea?”

“No, thank you.” I shifted my tail to the other side this time, and slid over to the opposite half of my chair’s cushion. Nedzu came over and placed a teacup in front of me, then one at his own position, and then walked around behind my chair. I heard him fiddling with something on the back, and then heard something fall away and hit the chair’s legs. Turning around, I saw that a large portion of the chair back was now open, and slipped my tail, sighing in relief. “That is… I want one of these chairs.”

“Aren’t they wonderful?” Nedzu picked up his tea and took a sip. “So, as to why I asked you to come in today. There were two main issues I wished to address, but now that I have you in front of me, a third has come to mind, and I do believe I shall get it out of the way first.” Nedzu set his teacup down and placed his… paws? Wait, does he have opposable thumbs? How was he able to carry the teacups over here if he doesn’t?… Ugh, this was going to drive me insane!

“I suppose that’s okay?…” Nedzu nodded at me, then looked meaningfully at the tea cup. I picked it up and took a sip, then couldn’t help but marvel. Holy crap, this was really good tea. I’m glad I didn’t add sugar; this thing had so much flavor that the tea would have cheapened the experience! “Wow, this is really good.”

“Isn’t it? I can send you the information to get some of your own, if you like.”

“Yes please!” I nodded emphatically. Nedzu smiled, and I returned to sipping my tea, feeling myself calm down.
“So, as I was saying. These two issues, and I suppose a third now. One was something I simply wished to inform you of, a school policy as it were. The other two are questions. The second one may require some deliberation on your part, and I am prepared to thoroughly educate you on all the information you would need to come to a decision.”

“Well that doesn’t sound ominous at all,” I muttered, failing to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

“Oh, do not worry! It is anything but! But we are getting off topic.” Nedzu put his teacup down. “Question one.”

“Answer one,” I couldn’t resist interjecting, then took a sip of my tea.

“Your first time around, how old were you when you died?”

What the—

I shot up from my seat and backed all the way to the door, putting as much distance between me and the being in front of me as possible. The teacup I’d been drinking from had fallen to the floor and shattered, but right now I couldn’t give a shit.

“W-what the fuck—”

“A mouse, a bear, a dog, some combination thereof? Either way I’m afraid I cannot tell; it is, after all, a secret to everybody.”

“That is not what I’m talking about and you know it!” I screamed. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, and could practically hear the blood rushing through my veins. “How in the hell could you possibly—”

“I formed my hypothesis when I observed three major clues; well, two originally, and mind your language, my dear,” I grimaced at his flippant response, “and while you have been helpful in confirming it, I suppose I do owe you an explanation. Oh, let me get that, don’t you worry, I’ll pour a fresh cup in a moment.” Nedzu hopped off of his chair and bustled over to where my fallen teacup had broken, scooped up the pieces, and wiped off the floor. He used a dustpan and a worn rag to do this, so it certainly seemed like he’d predicted my initial reaction; hell, he’d timed it so that I’d be just done swallowing a sip when he asked!

“And how do I know I can trust you?” I accused. “And how do you know I’m not some shapeshifter, or under the control of some other Quirk?”

“Impossible.” I practically leapt out of my skin when another, new voice interjected, and turned to see an incredibly scruffy, shabby-looking man come out from behind a folding divider wall. One that, now that I looked carefully, had a very convenient peep hole at a fairly average head height.

“My Quirk would have nullified it when you walked in.”

“Kanna-chan, this is Aizawa-sensei, also known as Pro Hero Eraserhead,” Nedzu introduced. The man, dressed as he was in drab, dark clothing with a ridiculously long gray scarf looped way too many times around his neck, just nodded at the introduction. “As a member of Class 1-A, he will be your homeroom teacher.”

“Indeed. And I am very interested in the answer to Principal Nedzu’s question.” Aizawa stood next to the Principal, who had since sat back down in his chair. He nodded at the one I had knocked over in my surprise. “Relax. If we had wanted to incapacitate you or otherwise cause you harm, it would have happened by now. You’re in no danger. Sit down.”
Odd as it was, his constant slouch, bored gaze, and deadpan expression did far more to calm me than Principal Nedzu’s unceasing smile. I picked the chair back up, set it in front of the desk once again, and sat down. When I did, Nedzu slid another cup of tea in front of me.

“Here, drink. It will help calm your nerves.” I did, and the Principal smiled wider. “Now, the question.”

“You don’t have to repeat it,” I muttered. I took a deep breath in, closed my eyes, and exhaled slowly. This… this was not what I’d been expecting. “I was just just shy of twenty-five years old.”

“I see, I see!” Nedzu leaned forward, putting both… paws… on the desk. “And this seeming rebirth of yours. How complete was it? Are your memories still intact?”

“Some things have grown a bit hazy over the years,” I admitted. “I can’t remember what my old face looked like, or how my voice sounded. I don’t recall what my parents or brother looked like aside from the basics, and there’s only really a few friends whose names I can still recall. General information is still mostly there, but some of it is… well, faint. Like, occasionally I’ll remember a quote in its entirety, but couldn’t tell you where it came from. And then there are some things I simply can’t forget, even though for a couple of them I really want to.”

“I see, I see. Then—” I raised a hand.


“You are a student,” my homeroom teacher-to-be said. “You shouldn’t be interrupting the Principal, no matter how ‘fair’ it may or may not be.”

I gave him a deadpan stare.

“I’m older than you.”

“Not in consecutive years lived,” he fired back without missing a beat.

“… you may have a point,” I conceded, “but mine still stands. Principal, you mentioned three main things that ‘gave me away’, as the case may be. What were they?”

“Ooh, that is a good question; I’m so glad you asked!” Nedzu rubbed his paws together in an expression of what could only be glee, and I saw his whiskers twitch more than a few times for good measure. “The first clue comes from your medical records, which I will need to get to later, actually. A note from the examining psychiatrist, Dr. Shisui, states that when he was eliminating possibilities, his removal of Major Depressive Disorder in particular prompted an odd reaction.”

Nedzu reached into his desk and retrieved what could only be a copy of my medical file. What? I’ve worked in doctors’ offices, I know what charts look like! “Specifically, his notes state it to have resembled a combination of relief and satisfaction, and that it was odd for a five-year-old.”

“That’s…” I grasped for a word. “In hindsight, that is kind of obvious.”

“Indeed.” Nedzu took a sip of his tea. I took a sip of mine, and Aizawa… continued standing in his slouched posture, but he did take his eyes off of me finally. “The second clue came during the Entrance Exam. When Present Mic-Sensei started the practical without any fanfare, you were the only examinee to immediately begin moving. This specific reaction implies one of two things. The first possibility is that you had suffered repeated traumatic experiences, and were thus on a hair trigger to respond to stimuli. However, your personal history, while containing some… shall we say, difficult moments, does not appear to possess any such tragedy, and indeed, your mood and affect show this to be false. The other option was that you had been blindsided by this exact
possibility more than once in your past, and had thus grown used to reacting instantly to an unexpected trigger. Given your complete lack of hesitation, I deemed this to be more likely.”

I frowned at this. I didn’t think anything by it at the time, I’d been too busy working with Pony to try and gain an advantage over the other examinees, but we were the first ones through the gate by a fairly notable margin.

“Okay… and the third?” I prompted.

“Your reaction to me,” he revealed.


“Most students, when confronted with my appearance, simply nod and accept what they are seeing; they are used to the sheer variety of anthropomorphic shapes they would see when walking down the street, and do not so much as bat an eye. When you saw me, however, your affect turned… analytical, I suppose you could say. You immediately began looking at my physical traits to determine how ‘human’ I was, and additionally, you were displaying several micro-expressions indicating your general confusion.”

“Now that those are out of the way,” Aizawa interjected, making me jump a little as I’d almost managed to forget his presence, “there is something I would ask of you. When your first life ended, what caused you to reincarnate, as it were? A Quirk?”

“Impossible,” I immediately replied. “If that were the case, you’d have to rewrite the history books on where and when the first Quirks emerged.”

“Oh?” Nedzu leaned forward.

“I died in the year 2018.” Aizawa’s eyes shot wide open with surprise, and Nedzu’s whiskers twitched back and forth furiously.

“Fascinating. Truly fascinating!” Nedzu leaned back in his chair. “But these are questions we can shelve for another time. On to the original purposes for which I called you here!”

“Yes, please,” I practically begged. “Change the topic, even if it’s to watching paint dry, just change it. You have no idea how weird it is to talk about that kind of stuff.”

“I do apologize, but it was both to satisfy my curiosity and to assure the safety of the student body. You understand.” I nodded, and Nedzu placed both paws on the desk again. “Now. I am aware of the media kerfuffle surrounding your father.”

“Don’t remind me…”

Unsurprisingly, the day Kenta decided that being Native was more important than being a good husband and parent, multiple people had been recording. In the aftermath of the whole thing, somebody had managed to edit and splice together the entirety of our encounter with the Wendigo and the subsequent dialogue with All Might. Of course, this person had immediately uploaded it to the internet, and I spent the remainder of my second year and the entirety of my final year at Somei as a strange combination of pity case, pariah, and object of envy.

Most people, because people are stupid, latched on to the idea that because I was Native’s daughter, I would go bad the same way he did, and did their best to try and demean me because of it. Others were envious of the fact that All Might himself had essentially praised my resolve and told me I had potential. A final group, and the one that actually used their brains, realized that what had happened
was an absolutely terrible occurrence, and actually did their best to fend off the remaining groups. Tenya and Pony were the frontrunners there, of course, and I would ever be thankful for it.

“I am aware of how irrationally people can react to circumstances, and how associations are often drawn between the actions of one person and their loved ones. Rest assured: we here at UA take an extremely harsh stance on bullying of any kind, and while roughhousing and fighting are a requirement of training heroes, malice and petty cruelty are *not*. We will not allow any such actions to occur on our watch, and if anything were to occur with your classmates, I expect you to inform us immediately. Perhaps it does not bother you as much, but it *does* tell us about the character of these potential heroes, and that is incredibly valuable information for any teacher.”

I closed my eyes, and exhaled slowly.

“I understand. Thank you,” I remembered to add. This was… the less I had to think about Kenta, the better. I just put it inside a mental box and tucked it away into a corner, to be discussed at a later date, possibly never. “What was the last thing?”

“Principal, may I?” Aizawa asked.

“You may.”

“Thank you. Yaseiki-san, in your medical records, we noted a diagnosis for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as well as the fact that you attend therapy every other week. Due to your change in living conditions, your previous clinical psychologist is now, shall we say geographically unavailable. However, we at UA would like to offer alternatives.” I looked up at Aizawa, and I could only guess that my expression was confused, because I certainly didn’t know what to say. He… smiled? Maybe? If I was being generous? “There are currently four members of staff licensed to act as clinical psychologists: Principal Nedzu, our history teacher Midnight, UA’s resident doctor Recovery Girl… and myself.”

“Wait, hold on.” I pointed. “You’re saying both of you are teachers, Pro Heroes, *and* somehow had the time to get degrees and licenses in psychology!?”

“It is a very useful set of knowledge to have as an education professional!” Nedzu piped up. “And despite his gruff demeanor, Aizawa-sensei truly does care for his students.” The man in question nodded.

“While I understand it may take you some time to determine—”

“You,” I interrupted him.

“Hm?” Aizawa gave me a look.

“You just heard that I’m… well?” I sort of waved my hand over myself. “Not quite all I seem to be. And you *didn’t even bat an eye*. While I admit you’ve certainly got your charm, Principal,” I addressed the jovial rodent… canine… I don’t even know anymore, “I sort of worry it would give the air of favoritism. Aizawa-sensei is my homeroom teacher, though, and it wouldn’t be out of place for us to be talking, would it?”

“But at all!” Nedzu clapped his paws. “I see, so your choice is made then?”

“If that’s okay with you?” I asked Aizawa-sensei. He simply smirked.

“I look forward to speaking with you… after classes let out Saturday, shall we say.”
“Same.” I polished off my tea and set the cup back down. “Thank you for the tea, and I’m sorry about the teacup. Um, if there was nothing else, should I?…”

“Ah, yes! Aizawa-sensei, if you would?” He shrugged, and… slunk back behind the divider? Nedzu hopped off the chair and came with me to the door. “Do give my regards to Tsunotori Pony-chan when you see her. You two’s performance was truly a sight to behold!” I blushed.

“Have a good day, Mr. Principal.

“And you too, my dear!” He opened the door and waved me out. “Bakugou Katsuki-kun! Please, come inside!”

I started, and actually looked around at the Principal’s waiting room. There, sitting in a chair and grumbling to himself, was a blonde with seriously spiky hair and a face that seemed to be permanently etched into a frown. He grimaced and pushed himself up out of the chair he’d been sitting in, flexing his hands in an odd way that seemed… aggressive? Can stretching one’s hands out be aggressive?

“Fuckin’ finally…” He purposefully bumped my shoulder while walking past me, and I frowned. God, what an ass. Come to think of it, something about that name was tickling my memory. I could swear I remembered something about…

Ugh, whatever. Doesn’t matter. Right now, all I want is to get back home, curl up on the couch next to Pony, eat something sweet, and chill.

I just hope that prick isn’t in my class.
“Well, this is me, I guess.” I stopped in front of the door to Class 1-A and turned to look at Pony, whose expression had turned somewhat downcast. “Hey, cheer up! I’ll still see you during breaks and lunch.”

“I know…” Pony grabbed me in a hug, and I had a moment of surprise at the suddenness of it before hugging her back. “Wonder which of us has Tenya in our class.”

“Well, if he’s in mine, then…” I shared a sly grin with Pony. She couldn’t help the cheeky expression that followed. “Break a leg!”

“You too!” Pony turned and headed towards the door to her own classroom, just one room down the hall.

I turned towards the door, took a deep breath, and opened the way into the classroom. Unsurprisingly, given I had arrived a fair bit early, the classroom was pretty empty; only one other person was here yet. What did surprise me though, and not in a good way, was the same kid I’d seen a week ago sitting in what was probably his assigned seat, legs propped up on the desk, and possibly snoozing away. I wasn’t sure, I couldn’t see his face from this angle.

“Well don’t you just look comfortable,” I deadpanned.

“Oi, oi, like it fuckin’ matters.” The boy—Baku-something or other—lifted his head up and looked at me, his eyes narrowing. “I remember you. So shitty principal lectured you too, huh.”

“Oh, no?” I looked at the seating plan in the front of the classroom; it appeared that I was the third seat back in the fourth column. “Yaseiki Kanna, by the way.”

“Whatever.” He made a sound, and went right back to possibly dozing. I just shrugged; if he was going to ignore me, then I was perfectly happy to ignore him.

Both of us looked up when the door slid open again, and multiple students poured into the classroom. The first two were a girl with skin as pink as her hair and a pair of small antenna-like horns, and a boy with spiky red hair, fierce eyes, and a very toothy smile. Behind them walked a boy with an honest-to-goodness bird head, a girl whose neutral expression could rival my own resting bitch face for lack of expression, a girl with fleshy headphone jacks trailing from her earlobes, and a boy whose blonde hair with an oddly horizontal black streak on the left side.

“Hey, hiya!” The pink girl waved to me and Grumpy sat in his chair, and I waved back. “I’m Ashido Mina! Pleased to meet you!”

“Yaseiki Kanna,” I greeted, and everyone else began to follow in kind.

“Yo! Kirishima Eijiro!”

“Tokoyami Fumikage. Greetings.”

“Jiro Kyoka.”

“Hey! Kaminari Denki, what’s up!”

“Asui Tsuyu, but call me Tsuyu or Tsu-chan.”
“Hi hi!” The last voice took me by surprise, because I hadn’t actually seen another person enter. Once my eyes focused on the source, I realized why: that was a floating girl’s uniform. “Hagakure Tohru!”

“Wait… so you’re invisible?”

“Mhmm!” The arms of her uniform bobbed up and down, almost as if she were nodding.

“Okay, I’m curious. I gotta ask: are you invisible to yourself also, or can you see your own body?”

“That’s a good question!” She replied, voice incredibly perky and emotive. Which I guess it had to be, since she didn’t have facial expressions to help. “The truth is…” I leaned in closer, and so did just about everyone else present. “A secret!”

We all groaned. Tohru just giggled, and everyone made it to their seats without much fuss.

“Yo, what about grumpy there?” The redhead, Kirishima I think he said, asked. “Hey! Ain’t ya gonna introduce yourself?”

“Shut up and die,” the Grumpus shot back in an instant. The two of them launched into a bit of an exchange, and eventually the scowling guy got fed up. “Fine! Bakugou Katsuki. Now fuck off.”

“He seems to be a very irascible sort,” the deadpan girl, Tsuyu, commented.

“He really does, doesn’t he?” I agreed.

“Indeed, kero!” Tsuyu smiled. I smiled back, then blinked. Wait, ‘kero’?

More students began to pour in one by one, and they introduced themselves one by one, some with more enthusiasm than others. There were a lot of names to remember, but I think I’d managed to catch most of them as they went by.

Yaoyorozu Momo, a girl with her hair styled in a very spiky ponytail. Todoroki Shoto, whose half-and-half hair somehow matched his half-scarred face; definitely a story there, but I wasn’t going to pry. Rikidou Sato, who was, to be frank, built like a brick shit house. Shouji Mezou, who covered his lower face and had six arms, each of which was ridiculously muscular! Sero Hanta, a rather plain-faced boy with a strange bulge at the elbows of his sleeves. Kouda Kouji, whose kind expression almost didn’t seem to fit on his boulder-like appearance. Aoyama Yuuga, whose entrance was one of the most flamboyant things I’ve ever seen, complete with an honest-to-goodness rose held between his teeth; honestly, I like him already! Ojiro Mashirao, the boy I’d seen during the practical whose tail made mine look puny.

And then came the one I’d been hoping would come my way: Iida Tenya.

“Oi, Tenya, over here!” I stood up and waved.

“Ah, Kanna-san, you are in this class as well!” He looked around for a moment, frowning when his eyes fell upon Bakugou’s feet on the desk. “Is Pony-san not with you?”

“Tenya.” I gave him a look. “We’ve known each other since we were five. You don’t need to use the -san with me. And Pony’s in 1-B,” I revealed.

“I see, I see. Well then!” I watched Tenya drop his stuff at his desk, then immediately round upon Bakugou, one hand pointing and the other pushing his glasses back up his face. “You there! Remove your feet from this desk! To do that is rude and disrespectful to the students that have come before
us, the students that will follow in our wake, and the craftsmen who created that desk in the first place!”

“Like I care. What middle school taught you that shit, you extra?”

While the two began their argument, the door slid open once more, admitting a short boy with black-green curly hair, freckles, and whose expression seemed to go pale the instant he saw the arguing duo. Wait, wasn’t he the kid Tenya was a dick to right before the practical?

“I—I’m from Somei Private Academy, as is Kanna-s—”

“Ahem!” I interjected.

“K-Kanna,” he finished lamely. “My name is Iida Tenya.”

“Somei!?” Bakugou laughed, slamming a fist on his chair. “Stuck up elitists, then? I should blow you both to bits!”

“You’re awful!” Iida recoiled. “Do you really wish to become a hero!?”

“Fuck off!” Bakugou grumbled. Tenya turned away from the jackass and to the door, and seemed to recognize the new boy standing there.

“I’m from—”

“He heard you the first time!” I yelled, interrupting Tenya. Tenya blushed, and the new boy took his chance.

“Ah, I—I’m Midoriya Izuku. Pleased to meet you, Iida—”

“Midoriya,” Tenya interrupted. “You… you perceived the true nature of that practical exam, while I did not!” Tenya began chopping the air with both hands, again doing his robot impression and very much surprising poor Midoriya. “I misjudged you! I hate to admit it, but you were the superior candidate!”

“Deku…” I saw Bakugou take his foot off the desk and stare at the newcomer, an expression of undisguised loathing on his face.

“Look, if you have a problem with him that’s fine, but seriously?” I got up and walked to Bakugou’s desk, putting a hand down on it to get his attention. “Calm down. If he’s here, he obviously did something to deserve it, and that’s got nothing to do with you.”

“You don’t know shit,” he ground out. “That fucking Quirkless bastard…”

“Wait, what?” I sputtered. “You don’t seriously mean he—”

“If you’re here to socialize,” a new voice broke in, “then get out.” Over by the door, I saw Midoriya and a girl I hadn’t noticed slip inside turn around, wide-eyed expressions of shock and surprise writ large on their faces. “This is the hero course.” Hey, wait a second. I recognized that voice!

I heard a zipper come undone, and could just barely see what had to be a sleeping bag fall to the floor, followed by Aizawa-sensei as he stepped into the classroom. He had a seriously imposing presence, and everybody in the class just fell dead quiet the instant he’d appeared.

“It took eight seconds for you to quiet down,” he began. “Time is a precious resource. You lot aren’t very rational, are you?”
“So he’s a Pro Hero too?” I heard Midoriya mutter, but only barely.

“I’m your homeroom teacher, Aizawa Shota. Pleased to meet you.” He turned around and reached into his sleeping back, and pulled out… a gym uniform? “Quickly now. Change into your gym clothes and head out to the grounds.”

I looked to Tenya, who could only stare back in confusion.

“Kero,” Tsuyu murmured.

“Kero indeed,” I agreed. “Kero indeed…”

* * * * *

“A Quirk Assessment test!?”

I had to cover my ears; most of the class had shouted that all at once, and when you have that many people all yelling nearby, it gets loud.

“What about the entrance ceremony?” The girl that had come in immediately after Midoriya, whose name I learned on the way outside was Uraraka Ochako, looked aghast. “Or guidance sessions!?”

“No time to waste on that stuff if you want to become heroes.” Aizawa-sensei turned to look back at us, though he didn’t stop leading us to our destination. “UA is known for its ‘freestyle’ educational system, which gives the school freedom to do as it pleases when constructing curriculums. That applies to us teachers as well.”

… well, guess that meant I couldn’t take anything for granted in this school, now could I?


“All but the toe touch,” I muttered. “I don’t have toes.” The entire class, sans Tenya, looked down to see my hooves, something which the majority of them didn’t seem to have noticed at all.

“Quite.” Aizawa-sensei chuffed, seemingly in good humor, and I smiled. “This country still insists on prohibiting Quirk use when calculating the averages of those records. It’s irrational. The Department of Education is simply procrastinating.” Aizawa-sensei stopped, and I saw that we’d arrived at our destination: the center of a well-kept track and field facility. We’d specifically arrived at the shotput circle, and I saw Aizawa-sensei pull something out of his pocket. “Bakugou.” The hotheaded boy looked up. “How far could you throw in middle school?”

“Sixty-seven meters,” he revealed. I was actually surprised; that was pretty damn far.

“Great. Now,” Aizawa smirked, “try it with your Quirk. Do whatever you need to. Just don’t leave the circle. Give it all you’ve got.”

“Aweome.” Bakugou did some stretches, seemed to warm up his arm, and did a couple of blank practice throws before taking a pitcher’s position. He screwed up his face, and I could see his right arm tense in a manner that did not seem to match any muscles I’d ever seen before. “DIE!”

Bakugou threw the ball, and right as he released, a massive explosion burst forth from the palm of his hand. I startled and jumped backwards, nearly tripping over my own hooves in surprise before a pair of hands pushed at my back to keep me up. I turned to see Tsuyu looking at me, and she gave a closed-eyed, somewhat smiling expression.
“Thanks,” I offered.

“You’re welcome, kero.”

“It’s important,” I turned back to Aizawa-sensei when he started talking, “for us to know our limits. That’s the first rational step to figuring out what kind of heroes you’ll be.” He turned to show us a device he’d been holding. It read 705.2 meters.

Holy shit.

That is some Quirk.

“What! This is awesome!” “705 meters? Seriously!?” “So we can use your Quirks for real! Man, the hero course is great!”

The response to Bakugou’s performance was certainly varied, but the overall tone was one of excitement.

“Awesome, you say?” Aizawa-sensei turned to regard the class, a frosty, ominous expression on his visage. “You’re hoping to become heroes after three years here… and you think it’ll be all fun and games?… Right.” Aizawa stepped forward, and I don’t know how he managed it, but his presence seemed to just ooze anxiety. “The one with the lowest score across all eight events will be judged hopeless… and will be expelled.”

… what? I mean, I’d met this man a week ago and I saw some measure of just how seriously he took his job, but… holy shit. The class was in uproar, and I wasn’t anywhere near surprised at that.

“Your fates are in our hands.” Aizawa-sensei lifted his hair out of his eyes, and I saw an obscenely creepy smile on his face. “Welcome to UA. This… is the Hero Course at UA High!”

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The first event was the fifty-meter dash. Heat number one was Asui Tsuyu and Iida Tenya, with the completely and utterly expected result of Tenya finishing in just over three seconds. I had to wave my hand in front of my face to get some of the exhaust gone; it may have smelt like citrus, but let’s put it this way: do you like air freshener? Do you like it when the air freshener is sprayed directly into your face, or so much that you can see the aerosol floating in the air? Yeah, I didn’t think so.

Tsuyu finished two and a half seconds or so later, hopping along like a frog. In fact, I could even see her tongue hanging more than two feet out of her mouth. She really is just a frog person, isn’t she?… that explains the constant ‘kero’, Japanese onomatopoeia for ribbiting. Which, by the way, is adorable.

The next heat was Uraraka, who seemed to just run normally, and Ojiro, who used his tail to essentially bound along the ground. I saw that and couldn’t help but look at my own tail and feel a bit… lacking. I mean sure, mine was way less difficult to fit around my clothes and the like, but his was super useful. After those two was the pink girl Mina, who did a strange sliding glide with a liquid that extruded from holes in her shoes, and Aoyama, who fired a laser and let Newton’s Third Law carry him across.

Next up was Midoriya and Bakugou, and while Midoriya just ran more or less normally, putting in a decent time for his age, Bakugou literally blasted himself down the track. Amazingly there weren’t any holes left in the track, but I worry that the shockwave and blast from Bakugou’s explosions affected Midoriya’s time. I looked to Aizawa-sensei, but he was busy writing notes on his clipboard.
“Next, Yaoyorozu and Yaseiki.” I looked to the other girl, tried to give a friendly smile, and started walking towards the blocks. Given that they were made with plantigrade legs and feet in mind, I had to move them out of the way, and interestingly Yaoyorozu did the same. She opened up her track jacket, and I saw a glow come from her abdomen before what could only be a motorized scooter came out of her midriff, one inch at a time.

“Oh your marks.” Aizawa-sensei’s voice brought me back to my senses, and I cast my mind to the animal I’d use. A glow built up around my legs, and an instant later, they actually began to change. The shape of my legs began to change, and I felt fur grow along the entirety of their length, which quickly became very uncomfortable; my hooves remained unchanged, because there was no way I wanted to have to redo my horseshoes early again. “Get set.” I leaned forward and prepared myself, left hoof forward, ready to push off. Yaoyorozu revved up the small motor on the underside of her vehicle.

The starter pistol fired, and the two of us were off, Yaoyorozu using her motor, and me borrowing the springbok’s speed.

The springbok is an antelope in Africa sharing the same habitats as cheetahs, generally considered the fastest sprinters. Thing is, while a cheetah is the fastest sprinter, it doesn’t have as fast of an acceleration as the springbok, which can go from zero to just under 60 miles per hour in three seconds. Obviously I didn’t have the rest of the springbok’s anatomy, but the primary musculature responsible for this was its legs, so I was able to reach just under three-quarters of what a springbok could. If this was a longer sprint, the cheetah would have been my go-to, but given the short distance, the springbok was a great alternative, and I soon found myself past the finish line in 4.03 seconds, with Yaoyorozu a bare fraction of a second behind me at 4.24 seconds.

I slowed to a stop over the next fifty meters, and once I was safely at a walk I paused to let my legs transform back to normal. I’d found that yes, while I could transform my legs into those of other ungulates, it was deeply uncomfortable. Have you ever tried to wear shoes that were too small for any period of time? That’s the sensation along the entirety of my legs, along with a slowly building discomfort that eventually got to the point that I had to change my legs back. Additionally, so far only ungulate legs were comfortable enough to last a sufficient amount of time, and if I wanted to change something, it had to be the whole leg. Also, no, I couldn’t change my legs back to being human; believe me, I’d tried that. Human wasn’t something I could do beyond my ‘base’ template, I’d found, and I had already modified my template by accident.

“That was impressive, Yaseiki-san.”

"You too, Yaoyorozu-san."

Yaoyorozu walked beside me, having picked up the scooter she’d created and shut off its engine. “I hope I’m not imposing, but may I ask what your Quirk is? I did not see you do anything in particular.”

“You needed to look down.” I waved my leg and waggled my hoof. “Also, you couldn’t see my legs, so that hint wasn’t there. I can use animal abilities in two different ways, so I was borrowing from a really fast antelope.”

“Not a cheetah?” She asked. “I thought they were the fastest sprinters.”

“Well… they may be the fastest sprinters, but they aren’t the fastest accelerators. Plus,” I waggled my hoof again, “already an ungulate.”

“Ah…”
With that, Yaoyorozu and I both fell silent and made our way back to the rest of the group, and after a few more heats, we moved on to the next event.

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The second event, grip strength, was honestly rather simple. I know that Native is capable of it, but I haven’t figured out how to use a totem to augment the ability of an incongruous body part. The optimal option for grip strength would have been to borrow the force of a crocodile’s jaw, since nothing even comes close… but that’s a jaw, and this is for hands. So, I went with the next best thing: the coconut crab.

The grip strength of a coconut crab is about ten times that of the strongest humans. I’m not one of the strongest humans, but since I’ve not worked out whatever it is that’s keeping me from shapeshifting into the all but three groups of non-mammals, I had to do with a totem, which only gave me five times my usual grip strength. This sent my grip strength from forty kilograms to two hundred kilograms… which was still nothing compared to Shouji, who had a whopping five hundred and forty!

The third event came next: the standing long jump. Bakugou and Aoyama were the initial standouts here, making insane use of Newton’s Third Law to throw themselves forward, but then Uraraka came and showed them up completely. Near as I can tell, she used her Quirk on herself, and floated so far beyond the long jump pit that she had to be stopped by a mat set up a good hundred feet out past the long jump pit. Also, unfortunately for her, the nausea from using her Quirk on herself had the poor girl doubled over and vomiting for a good couple of minutes while the rest of us jumped.

My turn came up, and once again, I found a non-mammalian totem. Come on, there was really only one choice for the standing long jump: fleas. Again, my totem could only give me half of the flea’s two hundred times its body length, but that still sent me so far that I also impacted the mat, and with much greater force than Uraraka had. Luckily, that damn thing was super cushy, and all I walked away with was a slightly sore nose.

Event four was the side hops, and again, a transformation was the way to go here. I felt my legs shift once more, and soon found myself standing on the very edge of my hooves. To try and understand what this was like, imagine that standing on hooves is like being on your toes. Got that image? Well, this was closer to walking on your toenails. Luckily, this was one change I could make to my hooves without needing to worry about needing new horseshoes: the texture on the very rim of my hooves became rubbery, and the traction was so intense that if I were to try and drag my hoof along the ground, I would need to exert a rather sizable amount of force to do so.

“Begin.” Aizawa-sensei clicked his stopwatch, and I began hopping from side to side, using the incredible agility and traction I borrowed from the klipspringer.

The klipspringer is a small antelope in Africa, whose name, if I remember correctly, literally means “cliff jumper”. This thing’s hooves are so rubbery that it can come to a dead stop with almost no issue. Klipspringers are some of the best rock scramblers in the entire Animal kingdom. You know those stories of mountain goats scaling dams? Well, the klipspringer looks at those and considers them to be amateurs, because this little critter can bound up rocky, craggy cliff faces, just by hopping from small outcrop to small outcrop. Borrowing its abilities meant I could stop on a dime, and could get back started much faster.

The side hops finished before my legs started to get too uncomfortable, and I changed my legs back to normal, running my nails along them to scratch the building itch that it brought. I don’t think it was a physical phenomenon, but I couldn’t help it.
Next up... the ball toss.

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After Midoriya’s and Uraraka’s insane performances, both of which beat Bakugou’s earlier shot (one by *infinity!*), it was my turn. I grabbed the softball and hefted it, then did a few stretches and wind-ups.

“When you’re ready.” I nodded at Aizawa-sensei, and reached for the silverback gorilla’s brute strength.

But I didn’t transform.

Instead, the totem sprung up around my entire body. I wound up, and tossed the softball with all my might, then let the spirit disperse. A few seconds later I saw the ball hit the ground a distance away, and looked to the device in Aizawa-sensei’s hand: 202.6 meters.

“Next.”

“Wait, Kanna-chan.” Tenya walked up to me, pushing his glasses up his nose. “I’ve seen you change your arms before. Why did you not this time?”

“That’s... actually. Sensei?” I turned to Aizawa-sensei. “Do you think we have time for a short demonstration? I’ll need two more softballs.”

“Go ahead.” He tossed them my way, and I caught them, placing one on the ground beneath me.

“Thanks. So as it turns out…” I wound up and tossed the softball, and it traveled a mere 34 meters before hitting the ground. “Humans, despite the fact that we aren’t as strong as the great apes, *are much* better at throwing projectiles than our larger primate counterparts.” I took off my athletic jacket, leaving me in just a tank top. Then I flexed my Quirk, and my arms expanded massively, greatly increasing in size until they matched those of a mostly-grown silverback gorilla. I picked up the other ball from the ground, wound up, and threw with all my might.

It traveled less than twenty meters.

“Due to how their muscles are positioned relative to their shoulders and backs, great apes actually can’t throw things that well, or with much speed. In fact, aside from humans, there isn’t a single animal capable of throwing so much as a small rock with enough force to stun an animal, range to not give themselves away, and accuracy for it to be a viable tactic.” I let my arms transform back to normal, and shrugged my track jacket back on. “That, combined with absurd endurance and extreme intelligence, is why humans became such a dominant force despite our relative lack of strength. Projectiles were a *game-changer*.”

“Indeed,” Aizawa-sensei spoke up. “Now, why don’t you go retrieve those two softballs so the rest of the class can have a go.”

I didn’t blush, but it was a close thing. I just trotted off to pick up the softballs and tossed them back towards Aizawa.

Then I boggled when Yaoyorozu plated her softball in iron, dropped a *goddamn cannon off her back*, and sent the softball flying into what had to be the next prefecture.

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The few remaining events were much simpler. The seated toe-touch gave me no end to trouble, since my unique leg structure meant I had to reach nearly a third again as far as everyone else to reach the ends of my hooves, and I couldn’t quite get there in the end. Upper body training was nothing more than push-ups, sit-ups, and pull-ups, and those were over with easily.

The final event was endurance running, which ended up being a 5km run. Once again I reached into my ungulate database and pulled out yet another antelope: the pronghorn.

Humans may be the endurance runners capable of going the farthest, but for middle-distance, the pronghorn antelope has us beat by a long shot. For distances of roughly six kilometers, it could sustain speeds of fifty-six kilometers per hour. For those filthy imperial system lovers, that’s right around thirty-three miles per hour. Again, while I didn’t have the rest of the anatomy to fully complement the pronghorn’s abilities, I could use the majority of their insane speed, and topped out at forty-five kilometers an hour. Plus, there’s the fact that I’m already used to running with hooved legs.

Right about seven minutes after Aizawa got us started, I crossed the finish line of my final lap, and walked with my arms above my head, breathing hard. Tenya had finished before me, as I’d expected, and so had Yaoyorozu, Todoroki, and Bakugou. Yaoyorozu had used that scooter of hers again, Todoroki propelled himself on an ice slide, and Bakugou… well, blew himself down the track at absurd speeds.

The final student, the invisible girl Tohru, finally crossed the finish line in about half an hour, a full six minutes after the next slowest, Midoriya, who had been holding his hurt finger together with another one due to his lack of a splint.

“Moving along.” Aizawa-sensei stood in front of our assembled class, and suddenly everyone, myself included, felt a sense of trepidation. “Time for the results. Your total scores simply reflect your performance in each of the events. Explaining the process would be a waste of time, so all you get are the final rankings.”

I frowned. That was… that didn’t make sense, especially not on an educational level. Wouldn’t it help to see how you were scored, such as what gained you points and what lost them? Aizawa-sensei pressed a button on the same device he’d used to show us our softball toss scores.

“That was a rational deception meant to bring out the best in all of you.” Aizawa-sensei was smiling now, and it was downright creepy.

“WHAAAAAAT!?” The class’s general reaction was pretty easy to understand, and I could certainly understand why. Some of us had Quirks that just weren’t particularly suited to a test of physical fitness, and thus the test was somewhat biased against them from the start.

“Well of course it was a lie,” I heard Yaoyorozu murmur next to me. “Didn’t take much to figure that out…”

“You don’t know that.” I nudged her. “Look at Sensei. Look how he’s acted so far. Would you really put it past him to change his mind partway through?”

“… I hadn’t thought of that…” Yaoyorozu blushed and looked away, bringing a hand to her chin and supporting the elbow with her other hand. “It actually does make some sense…"
“Anyway.” Aizawa-sensei turned around, and raised his voice so we could still hear him. “We’re done here. Your documents about the curriculum and such are back in the classroom. Give them a look.” He stopped and turned around. “Midoriya.”

“E-eh!?” The boy in question stopped, and I could swear his heart was going to stop any moment.

“Have Recovery Girl fix you up. Tomorrow’s trials aren’t going to be any easier.”

Midoriya’s poleaxed expression remained even after taking the slip, and the lot of us just stared at the placings.

First, Yaoyorozu Momo. Second, Todoroki Shoto. Third, Bakugou Katsuki. These weren’t surprising in the least. What came next, though?

Fourth, Yaseiki Kanna. Fifth, Iida Tenya.

I felt a hand come down on my shoulder, and turned to see Tenya.

“Well done, Kanna.” He gave me a smile, one that I returned. “You should be proud.”

“You too. Let’s go back to class, yeah?”

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When we got back to class, gym uniforms packed away and ready to take home for cleaning, all of us were exhausted and relieved to still be in the hero program. I ended up chatting a bit with Tsuyu on the way back to the main building, and confirmed my suspicions: her Quirk was all about being froggy.

“That’s actually really impressive!” I complimented as we headed up the stairs towards our classroom. “I’ve played around with other animals who have similar capabilities, but a frog is really just a great combination of traits all in one package. Sure, a gecko can stick better, there’s at least one salamander with a better tongue, and some spiders are better jumpers relative to their size, but frogs have all of those in one!”

“It’s nice of you to think so,” she replied, tone neutral as ever. “Most people don’t look past my expression, kero.”

While there wasn’t much tonal change in what she said, I could hear some sadness behind it.

“Well, I’ll just listen to your words instead!”

“Thank you, kero.” And again, while there wasn’t much of a difference in tone, I could tell she truly meant it.

As we entered the classroom, I couldn’t help but feel like I’d made my first new friend here.

“Say, Tsuyu-chan,” I started, calling her by her preferred name and suffix, only to be interrupted when the door to our classroom slammed open, revealing a very familiar blonde.

“Kanna!” Pony raced into Classroom 1-A and stopped in front of me, practically buzzing with excitement. “Someone fell for it!”

“Someone fell for it?” I replied, amazed.

“Someone fell for it!” She confirmed.
“Wait,” Tenya turned, shocked, “someone fell for it!”

“Someone fell for it!” Pony repeated, excited as ever.

“I’m confused,” Tsuyu piped up. Then she punctuated it with another "kero."

“Oh, sorry!” I brought Pony over. “Tsuyu-chan, this is Tsunotori Pony, my best friend; she’s in class 1-B. Pony, this is Asui Tsuyu, but call her Tsuyu-chan.”

“Nice to meet ya!” Pony gushed, exuberant as ever.


“I am leaving. Have a good evening Kanna-san, Pony-san.”

“I told y—” Tenya vacated the room before I got a chance to rebuke him. “Aaaand he’s gone.”

“So he is.” Tsuyu looked back to me. “What did somebody ‘fall for’, kero?”

“Oh! I’m American,” Pony preened. “So I just pretended I barely understood Japanese, and it worked!”

“Pony. Details. Spill!”

“Okay, okay! Hold your horses, I’m getting there!” We left the classroom, me on the left, Pony on the right, and Tsuyu actually joined us in the middle. “Right. Let me tell you about my new friend Ibara, and about Class 1-B’s biggest jerk: a boy named Monoma Neito…”
“Interlude Five | He Fell For It!”

“Pony. Details. Spill!”

“Oh, okay! Hold your horses, I’m getting there!” Pony walked on the right, and made enough room for Kanna’s new friend Tsuyu to walk between the two of them. She took the chance to admire Tsuyu’s hair; the other girl had done it in a rather intricate style with that bow in the back, and Pony considered breaking out her flat-iron so she could try it herself. Ooooor she’d just make Kanna try it first; her friend just couldn’t resist it when Pony broke out the puppy dog eyes. Anyway… “Right. Let me tell you about my new friend Ibara, and about Class 1-B’s biggest jerk: a boy named Monoma Neito…”

* * * * *

[Earlier that day…]

Pony waited until she saw Kanna walk into the classroom before turning to head to her own. Class 1-B was literally the next door over, but that simple divide felt so much more meaningful now.

Pony and Kanna had nearly always been in the same homeroom, initially so that Kanna could act as her translator while she was still learning Japanese, and then because they were simply inseparable. The one time Pony and Kanna didn’t share a homeroom was even a temporary affair; for the first couple of weeks they’d spent at Somei, the two had been in different homerooms, right up until Kanna’s homeroom teacher begged to have her sent elsewhere. Apparently her best friend was one of the most deeply sarcastic, pessimistic, and downright cynical pre-teen the teacher had ever encountered, and he simply refused to allow Kanna to remain in his class.

It didn’t help that he’d been the English teacher, and Kanna had been constantly correcting his pronunciation.

Then Somei put Pony and Kanna together, and seated the two next to one another, and the difference was like night and day. Even when that same teacher had to give his English lessons, outright cringing whenever he saw Kanna, her friend never had a single rude word or disparaging comment to say. Honestly, if it hadn’t been for the recording the teacher had made, Pony wouldn’t have believed it of her friend at all.

So yes, Pony was slightly worried for her friend. But she had her own future to worry about, and with that trepidation out of the way, Pony opened the door and stepped into Class 1-B.

Given how early she and Kanna had been, Pony was thoroughly unsurprised to see only one other student in the room. She was surprised, however, to see the vine-haired girl that had helped them during the exam… and was even more surprised to see what the girl was reading, pen in hand: an annotated Catholic Bible.

In English.

“You speak English too?” Pony asked, in that language. The girl looked up, somewhat confused, but then her face lit up with recognition.

“Ah, yes!” The girl’s reply came in English as well. She placed a thin metal bookmark into her Bible and stood up, bowing to Pony. “I remember you from the… ah, test? Ano, your friend?”

“Oh, she’s in 1-A!” Pony replied, sticking her hand out… and then thinking better of it. “Sorry,
where are my manners. I’m Pony Tsunotori, though I guess it’s the other way around here, so… Tsunotori Pony then!”

The other girl smiled.

“Shiozaki Ibara.” Ibara bowed, then clasped her hands around a cross that hung from her neck. “It is… pleasure? Pleasure to meet you?”

“A pleasure,” Pony corrected. She pointed to the book on Ibara’s desk. “If you’re working on your English, some of the words they use in there don’t, like, see much use anymore.”

“Have you read it?” Ibara asked, her eyes lighting up.

“Well, some, but not too much,” Pony admitted. “But I was baptized. Irish Catholic.”

“Irish?” Ibara asked, one finger on her cheek. “But your… ano, sur… name? It is Japanese?”

“Surname, yeah,” Pony confirmed. “But my mom was Catholic.” Pony’s smile turned wan, and she looked down. “She’s with God in Heaven now.” Pony was slightly startled when Ibara clasped her hands around Pony’s, and looked her in the eye.

“I am sorry for your loss,” Ibara switched back to Japanese for this. “I am confident that though she is in our Lord’s embrace, she is still watching you… and certainly proud.”

Before Pony knew what she was doing, she rushed forward and hugged Ibara, and felt the girl stiffen up before returning it. Pony seemed to come to herself a moment later and pulled away, apologizing profusely in Japanese.

“I-I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me, it’s… I, I don’t know, I just—”

“Peace,” Ibara held her hand up, and smiled. “It’s no worry, Pony-san.”

“Okay,” Pony collected herself, wiping a stray tear that had crept from her eye. “Okay.” She pulled herself together, then checked the seating assignments. She was next to Ibara in the third row, it seemed, and between her and a boy named… Monoma Neito?

Pony grinned. Target acquired!

“Hey Ibara?” The girl looked up from where she’d resumed her reading. “Do you think you could keep it secret that I know Japanese too?”

“I… I suppose,” she murmured after a moment. “Might I ask why?”

“Well, just think of it like a test of character. See how people treat me just based on the fact that I’m a foreigner.”

Ibara assented, the two of them shared a nod, then settled in to wait for others to show up. Pony grabbed a book of her own out of her bag, one specifically in English, and began to read.

* * * * *

More students began to enter the room, and while Ibara introduced herself in turn with the others, Pony did her best to affect a blank, uncomprehending look. This, combined with the katakana spelling of her first name, consistent um’s, uh’s, and loudly whispered questions to Ibara to translate for her, in an obviously American accent, made it very obvious to anyone willing to draw the conclusion: Pony either wasn’t Japanese, or only was ethnically. Which were both true!
And then, it was only a matter of time until somebody decided to try and talk to her.

“Hey. Psst, hey. You are Pony?” She turned to see the short-haired blonde sitting on her other side leaning in to speak with her. If she remembered the seating chart, this would be… Monoma Neito, she thought?

“Yeah,” she replied. “Uh, I’m sorry, I… kinda couldn’t read your name. I’m sorry!” She ducked her head in mock embarrassment, and the boy had to dodge out of the way of her horns. “Ah, I-I’m sorry!”

“It is okay, do not worry!” His English was decent, if accented, and she could tell from the lack of contractions that he wasn’t comfortable with it yet. “I am Monoma Neito. Ah, Neito is my… first name, yes?” Pony nodded. “The teachers here in Japan ask for introductions from student. Do you want me help you know what to say?”

“Oh, yes please!” Pony leaned forward, hands clasped in front of her; inwardly, though, she was trying not to grimace as the boy’s English slowly grew more broken. “That’d be great!”

“Okay.” Monoma smiled—or maybe leered, if she was being less generous—and leaned forward. “Repeat after me.”

And so Pony’s hunch was confirmed. Every single thing he said was wrong. Actually, it wasn’t just wrong; when Monoma gave her something to say, it always ended up being hilariously vulgar.

‘My name is Tsunotori Pony’ became ‘I’m motherfucking Tsunotori Pony’. And it only went downhill from there. Eventually her full greeting to the class would have come out as something absolutely, positively awful to say.

And it just spiraled outwards from that. Simple small talk became insulting somebody’s family, asking a question of the teacher came out as a demand for respect, asking for somebody’s name turned into saying that their ancestors were nothing but dust and bones and angry spirits, which she guessed was some major cultural insult.

Finally, everybody was present and the bell rung, signaling the start of school. Right as the tone finished sounding, the door to the classroom slid open, and a massive man came in. By Pony’s best estimates, he was about as tall as her father, which meant he topped out well over six feet, and was just as broad and muscular. He had a pair of large canines, almost like tusks, poking out from his bottom lip, and he seemed to have a constant frown on his face, though it wasn’t unhappy. If anything, it was the way his mouth was shaped, or perhaps his jaw. He wore a black suit and deep red tie, and the only piece of clothing out of place was a strange glove on his left hand.

“Settle down, settle down!” He stood at the front of the room, and smiled, revealing another pair of sharp, elongated canines on his top row of teeth. “I am Sekijirou Kan, your homeroom teacher. I’m otherwise known as Pro Hero Vlad King, if you know that one better.” He gave a small bow, barely moving his upper body and head. “I look forward to spending time with all of you, and guiding your paths towards heroism. Now, if we would all like to introduce ourselves?”

He began to call students up alphabetically. The first was a boy named Awase Yosetsu, who had a patterned headband holding his hair up out of his eyes, followed by Bondo Kojiro, who looked to be a living glue dispenser. The introductions continued, with standouts being the amazingly short Mineta Minoru (though Pony could swear he was staring at all the girls’ chests…), Ibara’s pious delivery, and Tetsutetsu Tetsutetsu’s hilariously redundant name. But finally, the time had come: it was Pony’s turn.
She got up and walked to the front of the class, her hooves clip-clopping on the floor as she did so (interestingly, UA didn’t make its students switch their shoes out, which meant she and Kanna didn’t need those darn slippers anymore!), which drew some interested attention from her classmates. She stood up front, and shuffled a bit, wringing with her hands and looking around.

“Ah… I, uh…” Pony turned to her homeroom teacher, and then back to the class. Then she reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out an index card that she’d written on before. “H-hello!” She pronounced every word of the Japanese very carefully, and slowly. “My name is Tsunotori Pony. I am from the United States, and moved here with my father a few years ago. My Japanese is still not very good, so please be patient with me. Thank you very much.” The entire class smiled and clapped, Monoma excepted, and Pony saw Ibara wink at her. She bowed and returned to her seat, at which point Monoma leaned over, face affronted.

“You not say you have speech write out!”

“My dad made sure I was prepared,” she whispered back. “Um, could you keep helping me though? It was a real help, I promise!”

Monoma seemed to falter for a bit, but then that same odd smile, one that she could only qualify as ‘greasy’, spread back across his face.

“I be happy to, Tsunotori-san.”

Pony could only smile. Ah, she loved it when a plan came together. She turned back towards the front and listened to the other introductions, blinking slightly when a vine deposited a note on her desk.

What did he tell you to say?

Pony wrote what Monoma had translated for her underneath, then tapped the vine, and saw it wrap around the note and return to Ibara. She concealed her expression well, but had to bring a hand up to her mouth to cover the grimace of disgust. The note very quickly found its way back onto her desk, and she smiled at the response.

Whatever you have planned, I would be glad to help. If he will not behave with virtue, then we must bring his conduct to light.

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“So, when do I get to properly meet Ibara?” Kanna asked after the tale was finished. “I need to thank her for her help during the exam.”

“What Monoma-san is doing may be improper, but this seems to be a tad mean, kero.” Tsuyu interjected.

“Well…” Pony began, but was quickly at a loss for what to say.

“Let me?” Pony nodded at Kanna, who turned to the froggy girl. “Tsuyu, if someone like Monoma still acts like this towards other people at this age, then he’s probably been like this his whole life. That kind of just passive sabotage is really not heroic behavior, and if he hasn’t learned that lesson already, he probably won’t without consequences.”

“Or at least embarrassment!” Pony piped in. “We’re not trying to get him in trouble, not really. Just make him feel a little silly and second-guess acting like that again.”
“Maybe. I wonder if it will work.” The trio reached the front gates to UA, and Tsuyu pulled to a stop. “I’m going left.”

“Oh, uh… we’re going right,” Pony said, and Kanna nodded.

“See you tomorrow, Tsuyu?”

“Tomorrow, kero.” Tsuyu waved, and then she was on her way. Kanna and Pony turned and headed back towards their own apartment.

“She’s nice!” Pony gushed.

“She is,” Kanna nodded. “Man… what a first day, huh?”

“Well I don’t know what your first day was like, but it wasn’t that bad. We showed off our Quirks first, then had some one-on-one practice spars against each other. I got put up against this real furry guy, Shishida? We both charged each other on all fours, but I got my horns under him and flipped him overhead!”

“… damn it, that sounds fun. You got the nicer homeroom teacher.”

Kanna regaled the tale that was her day, and Pony spent most of the way home giggling at her best friend’s expense.
Chapter Fourteen

The next day came, and unlike the ridiculous excitement of our first, this one was... well, fairly normal. UA’s hero course has its days broken up into two sections: a morning class segment, and an afternoon training segment. So during the first half of the school day, we were just normal students, even if our teachers were Pro Heroes.

Class was... well, it was fine. Aizawa-sensei taught us science, and that’s always fun. Midnight, who had the single most salacious costume I’ve ever seen (honestly, I was... actually a little affronted), taught history and art. Cementoss, who was basically a living block of cement, was our modern lit teacher; we’d just gotten started on the Tale of the Gallant Jiraiya, which had Tsuyu very excited, enough so that everyone could easily tell. Ectoplasm taught math, and just like the first time around, while I’m fairly good at the subject, I hate, hate, hate math. So much. So much.

These were all fine. Nothing too major.

And then... there was Present Mic’s class.


“Who can find the mistake in the following sentence?” Present Mic turned to the class, noticing the lot of us were rather... quiet. “ALRIGHT EVERYBODY, GET THOSE HANDS UP! SHOW ME SOME SPIRIT!!!”

A couple of the students jumped, but only Midoriya and Yaoyorozu raised their hands. Present Mic called on Midoriya, and he gave the correct answer (can’t had the apostrophe before the ‘n’), which prompted Present Mic to continue to the next bit.

“Moving on! Homophones of conjunctions! Can anyone tell me—”

I yawned, and unfortunately I wasn’t able to stop myself from making noise in time. I had my eyes closed and jaw cracked wide, and when I opened my eyes back up I saw Present Mic looming over me, arms crossed.

“This is boring, yeah? Want me to liven it up, yeah?” Present Mic took a deep breath, and all of us covered our ears, though I got the brunt of it. “Pay attention! This stuff will be super useful someday, YEAH!!”

“One problem,” I replied once my ears stopped ringing, and switched to English for the next bit. “There is literally nothing you can teach me in here.”

“Eh?” He gave me a look, one eyebrow raised. “Oh, so you think you’re like Tsunotori-san next door! Well she has an excuse, but you, huh? Well we’ll see about you, now won’t we Yaseiki-shoujo!” Present Mic walked back to the board and picked up the chalk, writing out a sentence. “IF you’re as good with English as you say, then let’s see you solve this!” He stepped away from the board, and I very nearly couldn’t help my groan, for on the board was written:

BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO

“Why did Present Mic-sensei just write the same word over and over?” Somebody asked. I think it was... wait, what was the redhead’s name again? Kirishima? Why is he always the one that speaks up, anyway?
“Kanna.” I turned to see Tenya looking back at me. “I know your English is stellar, but this is—”

"Oh, please."

I raised my hand to cut him off, and went up to the board. If Present Mic really wanted to challenge me, then, well?

Challenge. Fucking. Accepted.

“Odd as it seems,” I started explaining, and wrote out the word ‘buffalo’ to the side of Present Mic’s own sentence, “the English word ‘buffalo’ can have multiple different meanings. The first meaning is to the animal, which is similar to a bull.” I wrote the meaning next to the first word, and made a really bad doodle of an American bison, then moved to the next. “It can also be a verb, meaning ‘to bully, harass, and intimidate’, or also ‘to baffle’; not sure where that last one came in, but oh well. And lastly, the final meaning is a proper noun, referencing the city of Buffalo, New York, which is used here in adjectival form.”

I started to write out a much longer sentence, expanding what Present Mic had written to make it more comprehensible.

“Therefore, this sentence Sensei wrote could more easily be understood as saying: The buffalo from the city of Buffalo harass other buffalo, also from Buffalo, who themselves also bully other buffalo from Buffalo.” I turned back to Present Mic, whose jaw had dropped open a tiny bit and whose eyelid was twitching. “Did you want me to keep going? I could do their, they’re, and there too if you want. Or maybe just teach the rest of the class for you, since, you know, I’m already standing here.”

Present Mic sent me out into the hall.

While standing out there, I saw Aizawa-sensei walk by, holding a coffee mug.

“English?” he asked.

“English,” I confirmed.

“Oh. Heh.” He seemed to grin that creepy smile of his, and shuffled away, not saying anything else. And then a minute later he came back, expression somewhat taciturn. “I apologize. My fault for not making sure you were excused from English. Until they start with literature it’s a waste of your time, and it’s an even larger waste to have you out here in the hall. I’ll talk with Present Mic and see about getting something else set up for you to be doing, but in the meantime, feel free to head down to the cafeteria early.”

“Oh… kay?”

And then Aizawa-sensei was off again… and I guess I was on my way to the cafeteria.

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I had the cafeteria almost completely to myself for half an hour before classes ended and students started to flood in. This also meant I had plenty of time to decide what I wanted to eat for lunch, and to get my food before the line started to form.

I saw Tsuyu when she came in and waved to her, and she motioned that she wanted to get her lunch first. Then Pony entered with the vine-haired girl from the entrance exams next to her, Ibara I assumed, and I was standing up and waving at her like a lunatic. Pony practically skipped over, which was a rather noisy affair given her hooves, and Ibara just followed her, expression bemused.
“What’d you get?”

“Eh, just a chicken donburi bowl.” I motioned to the bowl on my plate, with perfectly-grilled teriyaki chicken, fluffy white rice, and sauteed vegetables. “It’s really good, though!”

“That is to be expected,” the girl next to Pony said, brushing some of her vine-hair behind her shoulder. “Lunch Rush’s cooking is practically medicinal. It’s a pleasure to meet you properly, Yaseiki-san.”

“It’s just Kanna,” I replied. “Shiozaki Ibara, right?” She nodded. “Well go on, you two, go get lunch! I’m not going anywhere!”

“Kay!” With that, Pony once again skipped off, the sound of her hooves on the floor drawing a couple interested glances, and Ibara just followed along in her wake, letting Pony chatter on and on. I did notice, though, that Pony actually switched languages and slowed down when she saw another member of 1-B get close.

“I got donburi too, kero.” I looked up to see Tsuyu sit down across from me, and just as she said, she’d picked out the exact same meal I had. Hers did have extra chicken on it though, and much fewer vegetables.

“Dang. I should’ve asked for mine to be like that…” Tsuyu just gave a froggy smile and tucked in while we waited for Ibara and Pony to come back. The two returned two or three minutes later; Ibara sat next to Tsuyu with her sushi, and Pony scooted in beside me with a large bowl of piping-hot shoyu ramen.

“So what do you think of classes so far?” I asked Ibara and Pony.

“Your homeroom teacher is Aizawa-sensei, yes?” Ibara asked. Tsuyu nodded, punctuated with a quiet “kero,” and I saw Pony holding back a smile. “He may be a gruff sort, but he is an excellent teacher. His devotion to his profession is truly admirable.”

“English was so boring!” Pony moaned. “It’s my first language! Why do I have to sit and listen to stuff I knew when I was four years old?”

“Present Mic-sensei threw Kanna-chan out of English, kero.”

“Ugh, Kanna! Not again!” Pony groaned, burying her head in her hands. Ibara reached out a finger and tilted Pony’s horns away from in front of her lunch and resumed eating. “Kanna, what is with you and English teachers?”

“It is not the first time this has happened?” Ibara fixed me with a wry smile. “You are truly a wicked one, Kanna-san.”

“Present Mic-sensei challenged her with a weird sentence. Have you done that one before, Kanna-chan?”

“Hah!” Pony guffawed. “Has she done it, you ask. Worse! That’s exactly what she challenged the English teacher back at Somei to do! And when he couldn’t, he demanded Kanna’s homeroom change so he didn’t have to see her every single day!”

“Pony…” I buried my face in my hands. “Stop it please…”

“Never!” Pony cheered, raising her chopsticks in the air. Then she darted over to my donburi and stole a piece of chicken before I could stop her.
“H-hey!”

“Yummy!”

Then Tsuyu shot out her tongue and grabbed one of the two pieces left.

“You too!?” I cried. Then I quailed as a green vine snaked from under the table and took the last piece, leaving me with just vegetables remaining. I looked to Ibara with narrowed eyes, and put my hands flat on the table. “Et tu, Brute?” Then I turned my hand into a bear paw and speared one of her pieces of sushi.

“E-excuse me!”

“What? I’m fine with turning the other cheek to just one of you, but all three? Oh no no no!” I tossed the piece of Ibara’s sushi into my mouth, chewed—and gagged. “Ack! Wasabi! Why!!”

The three other girls just laughed at my plight.

* * * * *

The lunch hour ended and afternoon arrived, so Tsuyu and I bid a fond farewell to Pony and Ibara, and returned to the classroom. There, we awaited the arrival of the teacher who would be handling our first basic hero training session, and the class’s excitement was already ratcheting up to a crescendo. And with good reason: this was what we’d come to UA for! But for me, this was where I’d finally be able to learn something I hadn’t already spent some time covering in my last life. Everything else had been review more or less.

Now, though? Now it was time for new stuff.

“I HAVE!—”

The door slammed open, and a very familiar figure flung his way through the door.

“COME THROUGH THE DOOR, LIKE A NORMAL PERSON!”

“It’s All Might!” Somebody said, Kirishima or Rikidou probably. “Incredible… he’s really gonna teach us!”

“That’s his Silver Age costume!” I heard Midoriya say. And now that he mentioned it, that costume did look differently than the one I’d seen a bit over a year ago.

“Hero Basic Training!” All Might’s every motion was bombastic, energetic, and endlessly enthusiastic. “The class that’ll put you through all sorts of special training to mold you into heroes!” Then, more quietly, “it also gives a ton of credits.” I leaned forward, and watched as All Might palmed a plastic card before turning it to face us. “No time to dally. Today’s activity is this! Battle Training!”

All Might pulled out a clicker from one of the pockets on his utility belt, and pressed the button.

“And for that… you need these!” The wall to our left rumbled and, slowly, panels slid out from it. “In accordance with the Quirk Registry and special request forms you filled out before being admitted—"

“Costumes!!!”
Everyone in class stood up, myself included, and we rushed for the walls.

“The cases are numbered according to your placements during Aizawa-sensei’s trials yesterday. Once you’re changed, come out in ranking order to Training Ground Beta!” All Might turned, and with a flair of his cape, stood in front of us in a classic, absolutely heroic pose. “Looking good is very important, ladies and gentlemen! Look alive now! Because from today on?”

All Might gave a flourish of his cape, and raised a fist skyward.

“You’re all HEROES!”

I rushed forward for case number four, and dashed to the locker rooms to change into my costume. I opened the case, examined the contents… and smiled.

It was perfect.

* * * * *

I marched down the tunnel to Training Ground Beta, a step behind Bakugou, and with Tenya just a hair behind me. While Bakugou’s costume was pure intimidation, and Tenya’s looked almost exactly like his father’s, mother’s, and brother’s costumes, mine was, like Yaoyorozu in the lead, inspired by pure practicality.

On the upper half of my body, I had what was essentially a halter top, the cloth stopping halfway up my back to leave my arms and shoulders bared for bear, and it was held up by a strap around the back of my neck; I had to pull it on over my head, but once it was in place, the tightness left almost nothing to the imagination… or it would have, if not for some padding on the chest and abdomen. I like my vital organs where they are, thank you very much.

The lower half of my costume consisted of spandex pants, with some protective padding to prevent damage to my hips, knees, and groin, and thicker padding around my knees and… I guess other knees would be the best way to describe them. The pants went down to just above my hooves, and was additionally padded to protect this thinner portion of my legs. I’d have to get my mother to help me weave spider silk into the costume, or finally figure out how to make it myself.

I had a utility belt cinched around my waist, with a couple of useful items that I may end up needing at some point: a first-aid kit, rubberized hoof covers to help with stealth, goggles for windy, smoky, or wet conditions… and epi-pens.

The last piece of my costume was the most interesting. It was a hood, attached to the front of my costume’s top but button fasteners, like the hoods on some winter coats. Inside of the hood was the single most important addition to my costume that I would need in a few situations my mom had been able to come up with: adjustable ear protection on a sliding mount. I could transform my ears, but that often changed their position on my head, and this meant normal earmuffs wouldn’t work for me. Simple earplugs wouldn’t necessarily either, since the interior anatomy of my ears was variable as well. So, aside from being fixed on a sliding mount, the ear cups also had a button on the sides, one I could trigger from the exterior of the hood. If I pressed those buttons, stiff, sound-absorbent foam would expand, filling the entirety of the earmuffs and essentially plugging my ears, no matter what shape they were in.

Lastly, my costume’s color scheme was composed of earthy green and brown colors, the Plantae to my Quirk’s Animalia. I thought it was a nice touch, and the costume designers really managed to make it look good!
I walked up beside Tenya, my hooves making a distinct clopping sound on the pavement, and surveyed the other future heroes around me. Most similar costume sensibilities to mine: Yaoyorozu for exposed skin, and Kaminari for comfort factor. Most extravagant costume was a toss-up between Tenya, Bakugou, and—wait, no, it *definitely* went to Aoyama. That man was abso-fucking-lutely *fabulous*!

“Shall we begin, my wards?!” All Might boomed once we’d assembled. “It’s time for Battle Training!!”

“Sensei!” Tenya *immediately* began talking, and raised a hand. “This appears to be the same field used in the Entrance Exam. Will we once again be performing cityscape maneuvers?!”

“Nope!” All Might didn’t miss a beat. “You’ll be moving on to step two! Indoor anti-personnel battle training!” Most of the class seemed puzzled by this, myself included. How was this step two? “Villain battles are most commonly seen outdoors,” All Might explained before we could ask, “but statistically, the most heinous villains are more likely to appear indoors.”

“Not in my experience,” I muttered. Both times I’d encountered the Wendigo, I’d been very much outdoors. Then again, it’s entirely possible that the Wendigo was the outlier, existing so many standard deviations beyond the norm for a villain of his caliber that I couldn’t even compare that monster to anything else. If I thought about it that way, it made much more sense…

“Listen up!!” I was pulled from my reverie by All Might’s shout, and realized I’d quite possibly missed some important information; I’d have to get it from Tsuyu later. “Here’s the deal: the villains will be hiding a nuclear weapon in the hideout, and the heroes have to go in and take care of it! The heroes have a limited amount of time to either capture the villains or secure the weapon. The villains must either capture the heroes or protect the weapon until time is up. Your partners will be decided by…”

All Might reached behind him, and somehow or other, he produced *an actual wooden ballot box from his cape*. I boggled. How the actual hell—was the carrying that thing the whole time and we just didn’t notice!?

“Drawing lots!”

“Is that really the best way?!” Tenya immediately burst out.

“Makes sense,” Midoriya, ever the voice of reason, broke in, “because pros often have to team up with heroes from other agencies on the spot during emergencies—”

“Let’s just get to it!” Bakugou burst out, stomping forward to draw his lot. One by one, the rest of us all picked out our papers, and got assigned to teams.


“Moving on!” All Might placed his hands into *another pair of boxes* (where does he get these things!?) “First up are… these!” He pulled his hands out, clutching a pair of rubber balls. “The heroes are Team A! The villains are Team D!” All Might casually tossed the balls behind him, where they *buried themselves into the side of a concrete building*. “The villain team goes in first! The timer starts in five minutes, when the hero team sneaks in. The rest of us…” All Might pointed behind him at the building with the A and D balls buried in the side, “will watch via CCTV! Come
along, children!”

On our way in, I approached Yaoyorozu and gave a light tug on her elbow, and after entering the control room from which we could watch A and D teams go at it, the two of us drifted off to the side.

“Was something the matter?” Yaoyorozu asked, arms loosely crossed under her chest.

“Your Quirk does best with prep time, right?” She nodded. “Have you thought about anything you can create in advance? Like, maybe even right now?”

“Well…” She brought a hand to her chin and started thinking. “Now that you mention it, are you able to make yourself resistant to bright light and loud noises?” She waved at the monitors, where we could see Bakugou and Iida get themselves ready. “In those close quarters, it could be very useful.”

“Nothing for light, but I have ear protection built into my costume,” I mentioned. She nodded, and focused for a moment. A glow built up at the exposed skin on her back, and—“wait, is that a matryoshka doll?” Yaoyorozu smiled, held the doll towards me… and opened it up.

When I saw what could only be an honest-to-goodness flash-bang grenade inside of it, I couldn’t help the smile that crossed my face.

* * * * *

The clash between Midoriya and Bakugou was… it was…

Fuck. I don’t even know how to describe it other than to call it a Clash of the Titans. I’d thought Bakugou could put out some serious damage with his explosions, but…

Midoriya didn’t punch anything other than air! That was All Might levels of strength! That amount of raw air pressure is the same damn thing I saw All Might do to the Wendigo a year ago!

Where the hell did they find this kid!?

Almost as impressive was how Yaoyorozu completely deconstructed everybody’s performance and strategy during the challenge, which proved to possibly be even more useful than actually watching the first one at all.

There was no time to waste, though, and the next bout began, with Todoroki and Shouji going up against Ojiro and—wait, don’t tell me Tohru’s getting completely naked!? She was!!

Unfortunately for Ojiro and Tohru, their preparations didn’t matter at all, because the iceman cometh. In the blink of an eye, the entire building was completely frozen over, so much so that we could even feel the chill in the basement. I morphed my arms into polar bear limbs and got close to Yaoyorozu, who gave me a thankful nod at the warmth provided.

Two more matches passed, each one relatively simple, but eventually Yaoyorozu’s and my team came up in All Might’s selection lotto.

“Team G will be the heroes! And Team C will be the villains!” I turned to Yaoyorozu and nodded, which she returned. We had prep time.

Things were about to get… difficult for Kaminari and Jirou.

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“Their win condition is fairly obvious,” Yaoyorozu said as she began to set up, extruding racks that fit over the door frames and sectioned metal panels to slide down them. I grabbed the plates as they popped out of her legs and back and onto the floor, sliding them into position.

“They want to blitz us,” I finished. “Could you make some simple lightning rods, and maybe get me a piece of sheet metal to put under the bomb? I don’t want Jirou to just vaporize the concrete with sound.”

“Of course, one moment. On that note…” five simple metal rods with a round top and a sharp base popped out of Yaoyorozu’s upper back, followed by three sections of metal sheeting. “Will your costume’s ear protection be enough?”

“If it isn’t, then I’ll complain,” I muttered. My arms expanded massively, and I plunged the lightning rods into the walls around the room, then lifted the bomb onto the sheet metal. “Wouldn’t bother with flash-bangs; with how fast those two want to come after us, we won’t have time to trigger them once they show. How much longer do we have, Yaoyorozu-san?”

“Momo-san is fine,” she told me, sliding the last piece of metal over the final doorway; the only entry points we wouldn’t have advance warning for were the ceiling, the floor, and the window. “One minute. Are you ready, Yaseiki-san?”

“Yes, and call me Kanna. Ears on; I’m not gonna be able to talk after this.” I pulled the hood of my costume up slid the ear protection into place. I saw Yaoyorozu put earmuffs on, and she gave me a thumbs up. I changed my arms from gorilla to bear, then focused. My throat seemed to balloon to twice its size while the skin turned black and rubbery, while on the inside of my throat, I felt my vocal cords shifting and loosening, and with further focus, I could feel something deep in my chest change. This was the single most complex and multi-part transformation I’d tried, but if it worked, then this was going to be interesting. I took a deep breath, and instantly felt reinvigorated by the immensely improved oxygen efficiency of my changed lungs. Shit… this may be a change to look into keeping more or less permanent for fights! But enough of that.

For the final phase of my preparation, I reached for another insect totem, and felt the glow surround the entirety of my body. I held as still as I could, then opened my mouth and, with the combination of my changed throat, vocal cords, and the totem spirit, began to hum.

Even if my ear protection wasn’t on, I wouldn’t have been able to hear it. This strange combination of orca and tiger produced sound two different ways, ultrasonic and infrasonic, but what clinched it was the totem of the tiger moth.

There’s some debate on how tiger moths manage to affect the echolocation of the bats that prey on them, but what we do know is that they can somehow spoof a bat’s sonar incredibly well. Tiger moths are so good at this, in fact, that if you tethered a tiger moth to a line and sent three bats at it, the tiger moth would probably survive for a fairly long duration.

Jirou Kyouka’s Quirk, Earphone Jack, let her plug the nearly-indestructible metal earphones at the end of her long, extensible earlobes into objects. I’d seen her use them for personal audio input by plugging herself into her phone, and I was willing to bet she could use just about anything for audio input that way, technological or not. Hence, the ‘white noise’ I was producing. Orca and tiger sounds are particularly powerful on their own, but with the tiger moth totem directing them, I could possibly even spoof her hearing entirely.

Two minutes passed, with me creating as much noise as I could and Momo producing matryoshka after matryoshka filled with sound-dampening foam, littering the area with them, before we saw the first signs of intrusion. The metal plates on one of the door sparked with electricity, and an instant
later they seemed to crumble and come apart, destroyed by some unknown process I couldn’t figure out without watching. I stopped my humming, letting the tiger moth totem go as I dashed forward to meet the newcomers.

Kaminari’s smirk was the first sign I might have made a mistake. He moved forward to meet me, ducking underneath my first swipe and striking me with an open palm to the gut. I was nearly blinded by a great flash, and felt a burst of heat, but… I didn’t feel anything like what I’d expected. There was none of the involuntary muscle clenching or flash of unbearable pain, and I took the opportunity to smack the expression of stunned realization off his face with a backhand, then forced him down onto the floor with my paws, careful not to gash him with my claws.

I turned to see how Momo fared against Jirou, and balked for a moment. Jirou stabbed her earphone jacks into the staff Yaoyorozu was using, and she suddenly dropped it; before the staff could hit the floor, it shattered into pieces, the sheer magnitude of sound practically disintegrating it from inside; Jirou took the opportunity to slide Momo’s ear protection off of her head, and jumped back.

Then the air shimmered as a burst of something came from the front of Jirou’s boot, and Momo flew back a ways, hitting the wall and covering her ears with her hands as she tried to recover.

I swiped Kaminari one more time and tossed him into the wall, then turned to Jirou, took in a deep breath… and roared.

Killer whales, along with sperm whales, humpback whales, and many other species, can use their sonar to produce powerful sonic blasts, confusing and stunning their prey. Tigers, on the other hand, had a roar so incredibly deep that much of it verged into infrasonic frequencies, powerful enough to cause feelings of dread and malaise and carry for miles.

These, combined with the close quarters and acoustics, meant that when I roared at Jirou, the conflicting mess of ultra- and infrasound stunned her for just long enough that I had time to close the distance, where a single swipe with the fruits of my inalienable rights sent her careening into the wall, joining her teammate Kaminari on the floor.

“… match—ver!” I heard filter through my ear protection. I pulled my hood back, and looked up at the ceiling. “The hero team is incapacitated! The villain team wins!”

Momo pulled herself up off the floor and walked over to me. I let my arms turn back to normal, and gave her a high-five.

“Thanks for the save,” I grinned. “He didn’t expect the lightning rods.”

“I hadn’t expected her to be able to destroy my staff,” Momo admitted, “but I’m glad you were able to help.”

We helped Kaminari and Jirou up, and returned to the command room.

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“So who would you say was the best team?” Kirishima asked. We were back in our classroom after training, and the only ones missing now were Midoriya, who was still in Recovery Girl’s infirmary, and Bakugou, who had left almost immediately after we got back to the classroom, expression somehow both downcast and angry. “Honestly, if they’d been set versus anyone else, Ojiro and Hagakure would’ve sucked to go against! Like, how do you fight something you can’t even see coming!?”

“Uh, you did see Tsuyu and Tokoyami too, right?” Jirou put in. “Sero, you and Kirishima can guard
the doors all you like, but if they come in the window, they come in the window.”

“Hn.” Tokoyami, as I’d expected, just made a gruff sound and sat on his desk. Which, of course…

“Desks are not meant to be sat upon; please get off!”

… caused Tenya to berate him. Complete with his usual repetitive air chopping, of course.

Then the door opened, Midoriya walked in, and the entire mood of the class changed.

“Midoriya’s here!” Kirishima led off. “Welcome back man!” He leapt up from his position and went to the poor kid, alongside Ashido and Rikidou. “Dunno what you were saying back there, but that was a wild battle!”

“H-huh!?” Midoriya stammered out. I sighed and got up, clip-clopping to the front.

“Nice dodging!” “We were all super pumped up after that crazy first round!” Then the rounds of proper introductions, which Midoriya had missed the first time around due to nearly being late, began.

“I’m gonna go grab Pony,” I said to Tsuyu on my way out. “Wanna come with?” She shook her head.

“I have to head home, kero.”

“Alright,” I shrugged. “See you tomorrow, then?”

“Tomorrow, kero!” Tsuyu affirmed.

“Ah, you’re heading home Kanna-san?” I heard Momo say, and she came to the door.

“Just Kanna is fine, no need for the -san,” I answered. “And yeah I was. Why, what’s up?”

“Well…”

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So, remember how, a long while ago, I’d said the Iida were loaded? I take it back. They’re just rich.

The Yaoyorozu, on the other hand, are most definitely well and truly loaded.

“It’s enormous!” I heard Pony murmur, and next to her Ibara simply gaped in awe.

“W-welcome!” Momo beckoned us in, the slight blush on her face completely eclipsed by her absolutely radiant smile. We followed her inside, and she and Ibara removed their shoes while Pony and I slipped on our hoof slippers. “Would you like anything to eat or drink? Some tea, cookies? Ah, I’ll just go get some of each! Be right back!” Momo flounced out of foyer—and yes, it was a proper foyer—then poked her head back in. “Ah, the lounge is the third door on your left down that corridor!” She pointed off to our right, and then next thing we knew, she was gone. Ibara, Pony and I all looked at each other, then just… followed her directions.

When we got to the lounge, all of us just boggled again. The place had massive, wonderfully plushy armchairs, fancy glass coffee tables with great big hardcover books on them, two big L-shaped sofas on either wall, and an absolutely massive projector screen on the left wall. Directly opposite the door and on the right wall, great big bookcases and cabinets completely covered all available space, filled to the brim with media cases of all kinds, changing color to indicate whose collection it was. A little
placard on the top of the smallest (but still really big!) distinct section had a peach pictured on it, and closer inspection was enough to tell me that Yaoyorozu Momo… was a **massive nerd**.

“Sorry for making you wait!” Momo practically glided into the room, a tea tray on one arm and another completely covered with pastries on the other. “Ah, I see you saw my collection! Well, well? Was there anything you wanted to watch?”

“Should we not do our homework first before indulging in hedonism?” Ibara interjected.

“Right, right! Sorry!” Momo pulled her books out and flipped *straight* to her English book. “So Kanna-san—”

“I told you just Kanna is fine,” I groused.

“Sorry, sorry! Kanna-chan then!” I made a small, guttural grumble and just hung my head, much to Pony’s and Ibara’s amusement. “Could you perhaps help me with my English, then I’ll help with your math?”

“I would appreciate the assistance with mathematics as well,” Ibara mentioned, “although some aid with English would not be amiss.”

“Ooh, actually could I get some help with Japanese and science?” Pony added. “Some of these Kanji are **super** weird and I can’t tell them apart, plus physics is a **huge** pain!”

“So long as one of you three is also good with Japanese history,” I groused as I pulled that notebook out of my bag. “I swear, how many times did these people have to change their names during the Sengoku Jidai? Just…” I threw my hands up, forgetting that I’d been holding my notebook, and practically dove for it. The other three girls laughed.

And so, although our soon-to-be fifth member was not present, the study group was born.
Chapter Fifteen

Another morning, another day of school. Unfortunately for Pony and me, actually getting in was slightly more difficult than the other days we’d had so far. Loose lips sink ships, and somebody had apparently let slip that All Might was teaching at UA now. The previous two days, the reporters had kept their distance, but today, they were completely galvanized. Actually getting in through the school gates was a difficult process, and I saw Midoriya and Uraraka squeeze past as best they could, all while they were accosted by reporters. Then I could see Tenya get on a soapbox and proselytize a bit, even from this distance, followed by more than a few students I didn’t know, then Bakugou and his personal brand of ‘manners’.

And all this in the brief time it took me and Pony to walk the last block to school. Which meant that now, it was our turn to negotiate the reporters.

“Hi! Hello! Excuse me!” We very quickly found a reporter shoving a microphone into our face, an expression of raw hunger on her face. “NHA News! What’s it like having All Might as a teacher!?”

I tried to dodge around her, but the reporter just interposed herself between us and the gate to UA. I grit my teeth, growled low in my throat, and scowled.

“Pony, go ahead. I’ll be right there,” I murmured in English, drawing confused looks from the reporter.

“Are they admitting foreign students to UA!? What does this mean about UA’s confidence in our own home-grown future heroes!? Are the rumors that All Might is part American tr—hey!”

I ripped the microphone out of the reporter’s hand, and once I saw Pony go through the gate, I turned my full ire onto the camera.

“Did none of you,” I began, “none of you think, just for even one solitary microsecond, just what kind of idiots you are?” The reporters went dead quiet. “No? Do none of what passes for TV journalists here have more than two brain cells to rub together? Shall I spell it out for you?”

“M-miss,” the reporter I’d stolen the microphone from tried to take it back from me. I just spun out of her way.

“Think. All Might is the number one hero. This means he has enemies. And here you all are, shining a great big spotlight on exactly where to find the one person they most want to take out. And what’s this? He’s surrounded by civilians and potential hostages day in day out? Why, that’s just an all-you-can-eat buffet of dastardly delights, well isn’t it?”

“I remember you!” I heard someone call from the back. “You’re Native’s daughter! What’s it like attending UA as the daughter of a disgraced hero!?”

“Argh!”

My fraying temper finally snapped.

I threw the microphone on the ground and stomped on it with my hoof, breaking it in half.

“Get your sorry asses out of here, and have some goddamn journalistic integrity!” I turned on a hoof and headed for the gate, the sound of my hooves on the pavement clearly audible to anyone in the vicinity. Pony waited for me, a worried expression on her face.
“I heard what they said.” She wrapped an arm around me and pulled me close, and I leaned my head on hers. “Are you okay?”

“I… yeah.” I breathed in deep, smelling the vanilla shampoo Pony uses. “Yeah. Just… just give me a minute.”

We stood there in the hallway for a fair bit. It was only when Ibara came downstairs to see if we were running late did we realize the time, and just barely made it to class.

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“Good work with yesterday’s battle training,” Aizawa-sensei began. “I’ve looked over your grades and evaluations.” And then he began to critique everybody who he thought could use some work.

“Todoroki. Watch your output. Yesterday was fine, but in a real building you would have caused large amounts of collateral damage.” The scarred boy nodded. “Sero, Kirishima. Situational awareness. The window is just as important as the door where Quirks are concerned.” The two slumped down in their seats a bit. “Kaminari, the same goes for you. The lightning rods should have been obvious. Yaoyorozu.” Momo perked up. “Always have a backup. You won’t always have allies who can cover you. Yaseiki.” This time I looked up. “Tone down the lethality. I don’t want to see you accidentally disembowel a classmate.”

I blushed and looked down. Aizawa-sensei continued, until he finally got to his final two.

“Bakugou.” The hotheaded boy looked up. “Grow up. Stop wasting your talent.”

“… got it.” I’d expected an outburst from Bakugou. I hadn’t expected the somewhat quiet, albeit simmering introspection he seemed to give off.

“And lastly… it seems Midoriya ended yet another day with a broken arm.” Aizawa-sensei looked straight at him. “Learn to control your Quirk, because just trying isn’t going to cut it.” He brushed his hair away from his eyes. “I hate repeating myself. But you do have potential, assuming you can overcome this. Work at it, Midoriya.”

“O-okay!”

“Now,” Aizawa-sensei’s tone shifted to something calmer, loss direct. “On to homeroom business. Sorry for the sudden announcement, but today…”

All of us leaned in, and Aizawa-sensei grew quiet, letting the tension build.

“You’ll pick a class president.”

“That’s such a normal thing!” Multiple students all cried out at once, and once again I had my hands over my ears to block it out. I pulled my hands away… and instantly wished I hadn’t, because the cavalcade of yelling had me slam my hands right back over my ears.

“I wanna be president! Lemme do it!” “I’d like to do it.” “The position was made for me~.” “I wanna be a leader!” “Pick me, pick me! I got this!” “I’ll be the fuckin’ president, bastards!”

“Quiet down, everyone!”

I actually jumped in my seat when Tenya stood up and slammed his hands down on the desk, yelling over everyone. The entire class quieted, and all eyes turned to my old friend.
“Leading the many is a task of heavy responsibility… but ambition does not equate to ability!” Tenya’s brow was furrowed, and I could practically feel the tension in his voice. “This sacred office demands the trust of its constituents! If this is to be a democracy, then I put forward the motion —”

Tenya thrust one hand skyward, the other slamming down on the desk like a gavel.

“—that our true leader must be chosen by election!”

“This is just a classroom! Not a congress!” “But Iida, we haven’t known each other long enough to build any trust, kero.” “And everyone’ll just vote for themselves!”

“That’s precisely why,” Tenya began, cutting off all other interjection before it could form, “anyone who manages to earn multiple votes will be the best-suited individual for the job.” Tenya turned to Aizawa-sensei and made his trademark robo-chop towards our teacher… who was already zipping himself right back into his sleeping bag. Of course. “Will you allow this, sensei?!”

“However you do it,” he muttered while flopping right back down onto the floor, “just make it quick.” And like that, Aizawa-sensei was out like a light.

“I’ll pass out paper ballots.” I stood up and started tearing along the folds of a piece of paper I’d torn from my notebook. “Once you’ve written yours in… wait, that’s where he kept it?” I reached behind the podium up front and pulled out a ballot box. “All Might actually carried this thing all the way out there?…” I shrugged. “Whatever. Just put them in here, I guess.”


And with that, we all sat down to fill out our votes. Bakugou was the first one to put his in the box; Tenya was the last. Once they were all in, I got up and walked to the board, emptied the ballot box, and turned to the chalkboard.

“I’ll write in the votes as I read them off.” I opened up the first paper. “Midoriya Izuku, one vote.” I wrote his name, and opened the next. “Oh, this one’s mine. Yaoyorozu Momo, one vote.”

“E-eh?” I saw Momo blush and stammer a bit. I just gave her a wink, then went back to writing on the board.

“Mashirao Ojiro, one vote. Bakugou Katsuki, one vote. Kirishima Eijiro, one vote. Yaoyorozu Momo, two votes.” The next one surprised me. “Midoriya Izuku, also two votes.” The boy began to stammer and sweat in his seat, but I did my best to ignore him and kept counting the votes.

“Last two,” I opened them both up at once… and blinked. “Huh. Looks like we have a runoff!” I tore up another piece of paper and tossed the ballots out, when Tenya stood up.

“Kanna-s—” I cleared my throat again. “K-Kanna, you did not vote for yourself!?!”

“You didn’t either,” I fired back, and he stilled. “Plus, I don’t want to be the first class president. Maybe another year, sure, but now? Hah.” I smiled, set the ballot box back on the podium, and sat back down. “I’ll be fine behind the scenes, and someone had to be master of ceremonies for this. Aizawa-sensei wasn’t.”

“Not all of us want the spotlight,” I heard Aizawa mutter. We turned to look at our teacher, but he’d already rolled right back over… and started snoring.
The ballots came in again, and the results were clear. Close, but clear.

“And it looks like class president, with eleven votes, is Midoriya Izuku!” I cheered.

“E-eh? Eh!? EEEEEH!?”

Y’know? I almost felt bad for the poor kid!

* * * * *

“So who’d you pick for your class president?” I asked Ibara and Pony, moments after Momo sat down (yay, she joined us!) with her okonomiyaki and donburi. For someone whose Quirk so heavily relies on caloric input, was it really surprising that she had an absolutely voracious appetite?

“Actually, we selected Monoma Neito-san,” Ibara revealed. I actually let my jaw drop, and it was only Tsuyu shutting my mouth that made me realize this. “And I am the vice president.”

“B—wha—I thought you told me he was a jerk!” I rounded on Pony, who shrugged.

“I mean yeah, that was the initial impression,” she said around a bite of yakisoba, “but honestly? He’s just a tad arrogant, and it’s not without reason. I mean, he did get in on recommendation.” Bu—wha—him!?

“Ah, I think I know who you’re talking about,” Momo mentioned. “Blonde hair, dark eyes, constantly has a smirk on his face?” We all nodded. “It is little wonder he also made it in off of recommendation; his Quirk is absolutely incredible, and is quite possibly the greatest training tool available to Class 1-B.”

“It is,” Ibara confirmed. “The ability to copy Quirks so that we can essentially practice against ourselves, or acquire an outside perspective on our own abilities, is not something that can be taken lightly. Alas,” her expression turned sheepish here, “that is how I learned that the thorns on my vines grow longer and sharper as they tunnel through nutrient-rich soil.”

“Does his Quirk change his appearance for all Mutation-types, kero?” Tsuyu asked.

“Depends on the mutation,” Pony piped up. “When he copied Shishita’s, he didn’t really change that much, just seemed to get stronger, but when he copied mine he grew a pair of horns!”

“No hooves?”

“No hooves.”

“Aww…” I slumped. “Would’ve been funny to see him stumble.”

“The vines actually grew from his arms when he copied mine,” Ibara revealed. “His arms were devoid of arm hair after he switched to using a different Quirk.”

“But still… president?”

“We had a team exercise with Ectoplasm-sensei. Monoma-san took charge and coordinated everybody with an ease I wouldn’t have expected from somebody our age.” Ibara smiled. “He is a capable leader.” Then she frowned. “I only wish he would show more maturity in the actual classroom. Already I can see that he is of two minds, simultaneously mature and childish, and it is… irksome.”
“Not as bad as that Mineta boy, though!” Pony shuddered. “Ugh, I swear he’s trying to undress me with his eyes! Kanna, if you see a super short boy with a weird purple mohawk—”

“Hello my beauties!” Pony and Ibara stiffened up, and as one all five of us turned to look at the newcomer, who was so short he had to lean against a chair instead of the table. “Ibara-chan and Pony-chan are talking about me! But what’s this?” He leaned in, a faux gasp on his face. “Pony-chan can speak normal Japanese!” His smile turned… I… is this what Pony meant? I felt unclean. “What would the class say! The beautiful foreigner, a devious minx! Ah, I can feel my heart throbbing, what a scandal! Oh, what ever shall I d—EEEH!”

I reached out and grabbed the small boy by the front of his collar, pulling him in close. His eyes looked up to mine, then immediately drifted down to where my chest pushed out my blouse, and I could see his hands reaching up, fingers already grasping at the air. I let go of him and scooted back, practically ending up on Pony’s lap, and slammed my legs together and pulled my skirt down as far as I could.

Why did they let this deviant into the hero course!?  

“Oh Mineta~,” Pony sing-songed, wrapping her arms tight around me and holding me in place. “If you keep this a secret, then…”

“Then?” He leaned forward, and I blanched at the drool trailing down from the corner of his mouth, and at how his eyes were riveted onto how Pony’s chest pressed against my back. “Then!? Then!? THEN!?”

“I’ll get Kanna-chan here to give you a ki~ss!”

“Woohoo!” He punched the air and quite literally jumped for joy before I could get a word in. “JACKPOT! You have yourself a deal!” Mineta skipped away, literally on cloud nine, and I turned around to stare aghast at my traitorous best friend.

“Wh… bu… WHY!?”

“Oh, Kanna, Kanna, Kanna…” Pony shook her head, and her smile turned devious. “I said you’d give him a kiss. I never said your head would be human when you did it, did I?”

I stared. I just stared at my wonderful, beautiful, amazing, devious best friend.

“Remind me,” Tsuyu piped up, “not to get on Pony-chan’s bad side, kero.”

“While his is truly a sin I cannot forgive,” Ibara muttered, hand clenched tightly around her crucifix pendant, “my mind cannot help but speculate what horrors you intend to visit upon that poor child… perhaps some measure of mercy would be in order, Kanna-san?”

“Remind me never to be near that boy in my costume,” Momo murmured, having devoured her okonomiyaki while we were talking and begun digging into her pork donburi.

“Sorry Ibara,” I grinned, rubbing my hands together as I thought about just what fresh hell I’d visit upon Mineta, “but saving his soul is your job. I’ll just get him primed and ready for y—”
All conversation in the cafeteria stopped as we heard the alarms blare.

“SECURITY LEVEL THREE HAS BEEN BROKEN,” the mechanical voice on the PA system announced. “ALL STUDENTS, PLEASE EVACUATE IN AN ORDERLY FASHION. SECURITY LEVEL THREE HAS BEEN—”

“Everyone up, up! Follow me!” I looked up to see a tall, broad-shouldered blonde with small, dark eyes, a button nose, and what looked to be the beginnings of a brilliant smile, tempered by the shadows under his brow. “Level Three means somebody has infiltrated the building! Please, follow me and stay close!”

The five of us all nodded and hopped to our feet, congregating around the tall, stout boy as he helped us navigate the crowd. He got us into the hallway and pulled the four of us along the side wall in a daisy chain (Tsuyu just crawled her way along the side), eventually leading us to just before the wall bled into the window. He held up a hand to make us stop, where we held close to the wall to resist being carried along by the harried crowd, and stuck his head through the wall. I gaped. Pony gaped. We all gaped.

A moment later, he pulled his head back through the wall and gave us a thumbs up, complete with relieved, beaming smile.

“False alarm!” He declared happily. “The reporters from outside somehow managed to get through the gates, but there’s no danger other than that. That’s a Lemillion-percent guarantee!” The five of us all sighed, relief covering all of our features. “Now, how to get the word out… do any of you have a thought?”

“I could—” Tsuyu started, but I raised a hand to cut her off when I heard a very familiar engine whine started up.

“I think someone’s already got that covered.”

And sure enough, Tenya’s voice boomed down the corridor, silencing the throngs of students and pulling everybody back to their senses with one quick, impromptu speech.

“Everyone! EVERYTHING’S FINE! It’s just the press; there’s nothing to panic about, we’re fine! This is UA! Behave in a manner befitting this great institution!”

Was it any surprise that, upon our return to the classroom, Midoriya abdicated his position as class president and appointed Tenya in his place? Or that none of us disagreed with this choice? We all heard him take action and step up. He acted exactly as a leader should in his position.

And I couldn’t have been more proud of my friend.

* * * * *

“So glad we get hero training in the afternoon,” Jirou muttered as we filed back into the locker
rooms. “Could you imagine having to just go back to class after something like that?”

“Nope!” Tohru responded, only visible as she dashed ahead of us by the floating gloves and shoes that she probably held in her hands. “Nice adrenaline rush, though! I was so doing better tha—w-wha…?” Tohru’s voice stopped, and she drifted back out towards us, her footprints suddenly visible and _sweaty_. “G-girls? Uh, you… you better come look at this…”

“Tohru-san,” Momo murmured, pushing past us to the front of the pack. “What are you talking a… oh… oh my goodness.”

The rest of us immediately piled in after Momo to try and see what cat had gotten her tongue… and stilled.

All of the locks on our gym lockers had been torn apart and quite literally _ripped_ into pieces. Fragments of shredded metal coated the floor, and while Momo produced a broom and dustpan to sweep the mess up, I looked to see gouges in the metal of our lockers that closely resembled _claw marks_. Four of them in a row, like some wild animal had come through here. But what kind of animal could have gotten into the UA locker room without us noticing?

“No, they’re definitely not.” I morphed one hand into a bear paw and laid my claws to match up with the rents in the sheet metal. “See? There’s only four claws, and the spacing’s all wrong.”

“Everybody, check to see that nothing’s missing!” Momo ordered.

We all complied immediately. I walked over to my locker, number 17, and pulled it open to check on my uniform, gym clothes, and costume case. They were all there, but…

“Girls?” I reached into my locker and pulled out a plain white envelope, with a strange bulge at one corner. “Did any of the rest of you find something in your lockers?” At the chorus of no’s and shaking heads, I frowned and turned towards them, showing the envelope in my hand. “You don’t think somebody managed to just sneak something into my locker during that alarm thing, and I just didn’t notice it?”

“Was it on top of your clothes, kero?” Tsuyu asked.

“Yeah…”

“Well?” Jirou looked at me, arms crossed over her chest. “Are you gonna open it up or not?”

“S-shouldn’t we get a teacher first?” Mina asked, looking at the great rents and clawed gashes in our lockers.

“Momo already went to go do that, kero,” Tsuyu interjected. I looked to the envelope in my hand, and unsealed the top. I propped the top open, held an open hand beneath it, and tilted the ovoid object inside into my hand—

“GAH!”

I tossed the _thing_ away from me, and dropped the envelope like it bit me, jumping back to put as much distance as I could between that _thing_ and myself. No, he couldn’t… that’s, that’s impossible, this is _UA_—
“N-no…”

I backed into a bank of lockers and pushed tight against them, feeling my knees knock and my hands begin to shake. I felt cold, and I couldn’t get enough air, *why couldn’t I get enough air oh gods breathe I need to breathe I need to—*

“K-Kanna!?” Momo, who had just arrived with Midnight in tow, rushed forward and grabbed me before I could crumple to the floor. I raised a finger and pointed at the *thing* I’d pitched into the corner.

“T-t-that… that, that—” I stammered.

“Deep breaths, Yaseiki-san,” Midnight ordered, crouching down next to me. She put a hand on the small of my back and rubbed softly, and I tried to slow my breathing. “What is it?”

“It’s a… ring?” Ashido picked *it* up from where I’d tossed it. "But it’s all melted. Ew!"

“T-t-that.” I pointed at the silver lump in the corner. “Two y-years ago, my f-father fought a villain. H-he, he *ate* t-three of his f-fingers.”

“Were they on his left hand?” Midnight asked. I nodded.

Ashido threw the ring away.

“Somebody, hand me that envelope.” The envelope seemed to float up into the air on its own, and a moment later Tohru placed it in Midnight’s outstretched hand. She reached inside and pulled a single piece of plain, white sheet of printer paper out, unfolding it. “It’s in English,” Midnight said, voice bewildered.

“H-he’s here,” I stammered. “T-the villain, h-he’s after me a-a-and my f-father. For y-years.” I saw what was written on the ‘letter’.

**FOUND YOU, INJUN.**

**MISS ME?**

“The Wendigo…”

Midnight had to carry me to Recovery Girl, who injected me with a mild sedative to help alleviate my panic attack.

When Pony and I got to the front gate, Aizawa-sensei was waiting to escort us home. We invited him inside, but he declined.

I think he stood vigil outside our apartment all night.
Chapter Sixteen

UA was closed the day after the reporters managed to get in and I found the Wendigo’s note in my locker. Repairs and recalibrations to the security system after the press’s irresponsible vandalism, they said.

I knew better.

Right when school would have started, Tenya showed up on our doorstep and refused to leave, declaring that it was his duty to safeguard the class against danger. I didn’t have the heart to turn him away, and so he stayed with Pony and me the whole day. Momo, Tsuyu, and Ibara all came over at various points, and while I enjoyed having my friends over, the atmosphere was tense.

After all, it wasn’t every day that a villain manages to sneak a threatening letter onto UA’s campus.

It was while Ibara was with us, baking cookies and making the apartment smell just heavenly in an attempt to liven the mood, that the day turned from bad to worse. There came a knock on the door, and since they got past whatever sentries I’m absolutely certain UA posted as an early warning system, I felt safe in the knowledge that I could open it without risk.

“Coming!” I called. I slid the chain lock out of the way, undid the deadbolt, and pulled the door open.

When I saw who stood there, I immediately wished I hadn’t.

“Kanna-chan…” There, at my door, stood my father.

Kenta.

Native.

“I—” he floundered. “I came as soon as I heard! You—are, are you okay?”

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and counted backwards from ten. I… I can’t deal with this. Not this. Not now. Not on top of everything else. I turned away from the door and back into the rest of the apartment. Pony and Tenya, having heard the commotion, both ducked their heads out, and I could see their expressions both turn dim when they saw who it was.

“Native-san.” Tenya was the one to speak, and stepped forward to the door. “I do not believe your daughter wishes to see you this instant. Perhaps she will deign to speak with you later, but for now, please leave.”

“But I—”

“Mister Yaseiki.” Pony spoke in English this time, and came up behind Tenya, her small height letting her appear directly under his outstretched arm. “Please.”

I was already in my room and face-down on the bed when I heard the door close and the deadbolt click shut. My hands and shoulders shook, and I could barely keep my breathing under control I’d screwed my eyes tightly shut, but still I felt them burn, and the pillow beneath me grew damp.

I couldn’t. With all this and everything else, it was just too much. More than anything else, anything in the world, I’d wanted to just rush forth and give my dad a hug, and cry into his
chest, and just let it all out as he brushed my hair and told me everything was going to be okay.

But I’d shut him out so fully, and kept him so far out of my mind and away from my thoughts, that I don’t know how to let him back in anymore.

I miss my dad. I… I still don’t know how I’m supposed to tell him that. I don’t know if I’m ready to say it.

And I don’t know if he’s ready to hear it.

* * * * *

I guess I’d apparently tired myself out to fall asleep, because I found myself waking up from a nap what could only be a short period later. I lifted myself up from the pillow, and saw Ibara sitting there next to me, a fresh-baked plate of chocolate chip cookies in her hand.

“Kanna-chan. I know it is not my place to pry,” she began… and fell silent. She seemed to be searching for the right words to say, and in her silence, she offered the plate forward. I took a cookie off the plate and took a nibble.

It was good.

“Pony-chan and Iida-san told me about what happened.” She looked me in the eye, one hand wrapped around her crucifix. “Between you and your father. I will not pretend to understand what you have gone through, but…” She took a deep breath, and it came out in short, ragged spurts. “I… I will say this from experience. The longer you let this last, the worse it will grow.”

I finished my cookie and looked to Ibara. She had an expression of sadness on her face.

“My birth was very hard on my mother,” she revealed. “I was born with my Quirk, and just as some babies have hair at birth, I already had vines. They…”

“There were complications,” I finished for her.

“My parents tried to have another child various times throughout my childhood. I have no siblings.” She sighed. “When I was… eight? Nine? One night, I found myself awoken by a great crash. I went out to find my mother had torn down a grand crucifix we had hanging upon the wall. She stormed into her room and then into mine, and had I not been wearing my cross, she would have thrown it into the hearth.” Ibara looked up at the ceiling, or possibly past it. “She had lost her faith in the Lord. She left me and my father that night, and for three years we had no sign of her. When she returned… she was changed, but more importantly, we had changed.”

“What happened?” I found myself asking.

“She had found God anew, but in the time that she had left, we had poisoned ourselves against her. I did not have my mother to help me when I began to grow into womanhood, and I resented her for it. My father resented her for leaving, for making him worry, for forcing him to raise me without any help. By then, we had grown independent of her, and we did not know how to let her back in. That took another two years.” Ibara covered my hand with her own. “I have had my mother with me again for a year now. I prayed every day that God would forgive my mother; I never once considered that I had needed to forgive her myself.”

“God helps those who help themselves,” I couldn’t help from saying.

“Indeed,” Ibara replied. “And you need to help yourself. The onus does not solely rest on your
father.”

“I know that!” I snapped. And then I slumped. “I’ve always known it’s not just him that has to change. We have to be willing to take him back. And, and I want him back, so, so badly!” My eyes grew hot. “I just… how do I do it? How am I supposed to just let that anger go?”

“You don’t let it go.” Pony appeared in the doorway, and pulled me up from the bed, dragging me into a hug. “You don’t let it go because you can’t. But you can move past it, and keep it from tying you down.” Pony pulled back and held me by the shoulders, looking me in the eye. “I can never let go of the fact that my mom died thanks to the Wendigo. But I’ve never let him rule my life. Not like your dad has. Not like you have.”

I… she’s right. Damn it, but Pony is right. Gods above, I… I’ve been such an idiot. We’ve been such idiots, both of us.

I reached out and hugged Ibara, who stiffened before hugging me back, very stiffly and awkwardly, and picked up my phone. I had to dial the number in the long way, having long since deleted the contact from my phone, and raised it up to my ear.

“Dad?” I asked when I heard him pick up. “Can… can we talk?”

* * * * *

Ibara, Pony, and Tenya all left the apartment to go shopping, or out to dinner, or something in order to give me some privacy. I called Aizawa-sensei to let him know about where we would be, in case UA wanted to post a sentry to stand watch over where both of the Wendigo’s primary targets would be. He obliged, and actually arrived himself to stand vigil.

“And in case you need me for other purposes,” he clarified. I’d almost forgotten he would be my acting psychologist; we didn’t have our first session for another three and a half days. “Does he know about…?”

I shook my head. Aizawa-sensei nodded and went outside, seeming to casually lean out over the balcony. I recognized the tension in his posture, though: he was ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice, and his goggles hung in an easy to access position. If the Wendigo decided to show, he’d find himself limited to what changes he’d already managed to make, and Aizawa-sensei was very good at handling that kind of combatant. But that didn’t matter, because hopefully, the Wendigo wouldn’t matter. Not for me. Not anymore.

One minute passed, and my father arrived.

He was scruffy, and had at least three days of growth on his face. His hair hung loose and un-styled, more of a mop than anything that was meant to resemble a hairdo, and nothing like the carefully cultivated and tied-back mane he usually kept. There were dark bags under his bloodshot eyes, and the only real saving grace here was that his breath at least smelled fresh. His clothes were rumpled, there was a coffee stain on the leg of his jeans, and the shoes he wore seemed to have a hole forming on the outsides, near the little toe.

“Kanna-chan.” He stepped forward, and I took one back. He crossed the threshold of my apartment, but I didn’t let him pull me into the hug I knew he was after. I walked to the small table Pony and I had just outside our kitchenette, pulled out the chair, and sat down. He took the hint, closed the door behind him, and did the same.

We sat there for a few minutes. Neither of us said anything. I don’t think either of us knew what
we could say. This was, after all, the first time I’d been in the same room as my father for the past year or so. And I’d actually invited him inside.

I didn’t know what to say.

“Are—” he started, then immediately cut himself off. “No, that’s… that’s a dumb question. Of course not. You… he—”

“I’m so tired of it.” My father fell silent, and looked at me. “It’s him. It’s always coming back to him. It’s been ten years, and he’s still…”

I didn’t know how to finish it.

“You’re right.” Dad looked down. “It’s my fault. If I’d just—”

“No,” I stopped him. “Please. Just… when is it enough? I’m tired of all this, Dad.” I heard a sharp intake of breath. This was the first time I’d called him what he was since that night. “I’m sick of being scared of leaving home. I’m sick of worrying about my family. I’m sick of not being able to call my dad, ask him how his day was, because I don’t know if he’s too busy chasing a cannibal to talk to me.”

“Kanna-chan—”

“When do we let it go?” I asked. “When do we stop letting him run our lives? When do we actually get to live?”

He flew out of his seat and pulled me into a hug. I let the tears I’d been holding in for a year fall, and let out all that frustration, all that impotent rage and hate, all that listless resentment I’d been carrying.

For ten years, we’d let the Wendigo control our lives. For ten years, I’d just sat back and watched as he tore my father apart, picked him to pieces and left behind somebody that I didn’t recognize.

Ibara was right. It wasn’t just his fault for letting the Wendigo consume him. He was just one man, and when he most needed the help and support of his family, we weren’t there. Even though I knew, I understood what he was going through, I’d just… ignored it. I let the Wendigo win.

It wasn’t just Native’s fault that he fell.

It was also mine for not catching him sooner.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think about things. About him. About me.” Dad ran his fingers through my hair as he held me to his chest. “All I ever did was play into exactly what he wanted. Even following and chasing him like I was?… no more. I’m done.” He pulled me back and looked me in the eye. “If Mason wants us, he can damn well come for it. But I’m not going to just sit around waiting and put everything else on hold. That man stole my life from me.”

My father pulled me in close, and I rested my chin on his shoulder.

“I’m taking it back. One piece at a time, I’m going to take it back.”
[The Next Day]

Aizawa Shota was not a hard man to understand. Some would say that he was mysterious, or that he pushed people away, or that he actively tried to make himself more mysterious and difficult to comprehend to cultivate an air of mystery about him. They’d try to prove this by pointing out that he never stuck around past the point of apprehending a criminal, always disappearing before the spotlight could shine on him. They’d try to prove this by looking at his lack of public appearances of late, or the complete absence of hype around his heroic persona Eraserhead. But they were so very wrong.

The truth? Aizawa Shota was an introvert. He didn’t like to spend too much time talking to people, and acted to minimize the amount he needed to interact with others. Human contact was an exhausting endeavor, the type of thing that drained him dry and made him want to crawl into bed and close everything out.

And yet, he was a teacher. It was a contradiction, one that seemed to have no explanation. But that was just another aspect of Aizawa Shota’s nature: he was, at heart, a hero. He followed the same ideal that All Might ascribed to, but in his own way. Aizawa knew he could never be the symbol of hope that All Might was, or the harbinger of judgment that Endeavor signified. What he could do, though, was ensure that on the day that All Might must pass the torch, when Endeavor extinguishes his flame, When Present Mic steps off stage, that somebody would be there to take their places.

Despite all his introverted nature, Aizawa Shota enjoyed teaching. No, he didn’t just enjoy teaching; he loved it. The thrill that passed through him at seeing the potential he fostered grow from an ember to a brilliant pyre gave him a measure of satisfaction that no amount of criminals apprehended or villains defeated ever could. It was the potential that he lived for. It was why he expelled the students who didn’t have it, or refused to try and grasp it for themselves.

And it was why he was so enraged when his student was threatened.

Aizawa Shota did not wear his heart on his sleeve. He kept it wrapped up tight, locked away beneath locks and chains. It was one of the most difficult parts of teaching heroes: no matter how hard you try, or how well you teach them, something is going to happen. The world is cruel, and random. No amount of preparation can save you from a freak accident. He put his passion into his work, but kept his heart safely hidden from the dismay, the regret, the what-ifs that would otherwise consume him when hearing what fates befell his former students.

But this student was still under his care. This student had only just entered his care. And while she was so far removed from what he would have considered normal that he had to carefully measure how he acted around her… he was still her teacher. He was still responsible for her.

That was why, when he saw that Yaseiki Kanna had not arrived to school that day, he could not help the outward frown that formed. A quick check with Sekijirou Kan told him that her friend and roommate, Tsunotori Pony, had arrived that day. And a brief conversation was all he needed to decide his course of action.

Once he finished explaining exothermic and endothermic reactions, Aizawa Shota informed the Principal that he would be leaving campus for a brief errand. If he was back late… then oh well. He had a duty to attend to.
When Aizawa Shota rang the door bell to his student’s apartment, the last thing he expected was to come face-to-face with a set of claws, each dripping noxious green venom from its tip. It was only through sheer force of will that he did not activate his Erasure Quirk, and instead inspected the woman before him.

She had the same raven’s-wing black hair as her daughter falling to the middle of her back, but her skin was a few shades paler, and her eyes were deep brown instead of amber. And, of course, she lacked the same permanent mutations her daughter had… and the same propensity for literal interpretations of the US’ Second Amendment. The venom was a nice touch, though, and he made sure to add that to his list of things to discuss with his student as she grew into her Quirk. Impressive, yes. Incredibly dangerous… even more so.

“You have five seconds to tell me who you are before you wish you’d die,” the woman threatened.

“M-mom!” Aizawa looked past the woman in front of him, or at least he tried to. An instant later and her ears had grown to immense proportions, matching those of an elephant’s blocking any line of sight he had.

“Four…”

“Aizawa Shota,” he introduced, raising his hands in surrender. “Your daughter’s homeroom teacher.”

The woman blinked, then gasped in recognition, and in that momentary lapse of concentration her animal features returned to human. Interesting, he noted; faster adaptability gave way to permanence.

“Eraserhead! A-ah, I’m sorry!” The woman apologized, bowing to him as she stood aside. “Yaseiki Kimiko, Kanna-chan’s mother.” She bowed again, flustered. “I hope you’ll forgive me; we can’t be too careful right now, not with—”

“I know,” he interrupted. “I would have done the same thing in your situation.” He looked past her at the apartment: small, but neat, though he saw that a pair of bowls sat next to the sink while a frying pan and a mixing bowl soaked in soapy water. A couple of loose articles of clothing lay on the floor and sofa, but nothing like he’d seen at other students’ homes. “Might I speak with Kanna-san?”

“Here.” Aizawa turned to look, and was thankful that his generally neutral expression could mask his reactions. Kanna looked… her appearance was disheveled and unkempt, eyes bloodshot and half-lidded from lack of sleep, hair a mess that desperately called for a brush, and she was leaning against the door frame to support herself, wearing a loose mens’ t-shirt and sweatpants. If he didn’t know better, he would have said she was hung-over. Closer inspection, though, revealed otherwise. Her eyes kept partly drifting shut, and she’d propped herself up on a door frame so she didn’t fall over. The area around her eyes was also red, and she was sniffling. She didn’t show any signs of a cold, but given the visitor she’d had last night? Well, they’d had a year to catch up on. She’d likely rushed over here the instant she’d been able, and not left her daughter’s side since.

And a lot of emotional baggage to try and get through.

All of this wasn’t even counting her mother, whose protective nature had gone into overdrive upon hearing the news, it seemed. He’d read Kanna’s file: when on call, her mother could not simply disappear, not when the service she provided was irreplaceable. She’d likely rushed over here the instant she’d been able, and not left her daughter’s side since.

It was good that she wasn’t alone, Aizawa thought. But right now, he needed privacy.
“Yaseiki-sensei—”

“Kimiko-san is fine,” she interrupted.

“… whole damn family…” Aizawa shook his head in exasperation. “Kimiko-sensei,” he gave a nod at the woman’s doctorate with the suffix; Kimiko scowled at the formality, but didn’t comment. “If I could have some privacy to speak with my student?” He looked at her, and the promise in his eyes seemed to be enough for her.

“… Alright. Kanna-chan, I’ll run to the convenience store; anything you want?”

“Chocolate,” came the instant reply. “And tea.”

“Right, of course, what else would it be?” Kimiko just shrugged and pulled on her spring jacket, then fixed Aizawa with a glare. He returned it with as much force as he could without activating his Quirk, and that seemed to satisfy the woman.

Once she left, Aizawa turned to his student, and guided her to the sofa. She complied without protest, immediately leaning back into the cushions and closing her eyes. Aizawa snapped once or twice to get her attention, and she grumbled.

“You should have thought of that before going without sleep.”

“Couldn’t.” Her head lolled to the side, and she looked out the window. “Talked to Dad. Too much to think about.” Her hands gripped the fabric of her shirt tightly, but not hard enough to make her knuckles go white. “He got away, didn’t he.” It wasn’t a question. She sighed, full of a weariness a girl her physical age shouldn’t be capable of feeling. “Of course he did, who am I kidding… not even a trace, as usual, right?”

“Not quite.” Kanna’s head shot up. “Principal Nedzu found a scent in the girls’ changing rooms that didn’t match with anything he expected. It took some assistance from the police, but we found what it was: whiskey. Faint traces of whiskey.”

Kanna shook her head.

“I feel like you’re telling me something important, but…”

“It was a liquor that Principal Nedzu had smelled before, and he narrowed it down to a specific year of a very expensive label. The police are investigating every bar known to have purchased that particular liquor. Wherever the Wendigo is, or whoever is helping him, they will not be able to continue it with this much scrutiny.” Kanna just nodded. “I have a request.”

“Hm?”

“With your permission only. I would like to inform the class.” He saw her pale, and heard the sudden intake of air. Her fists clenched tighter, and began to shake. “You are not the only one in the class who has faced a villain. Perhaps you will find camaraderie in places you don’t expect. And even if not, perspective is a powerful thing.” She closed her eyes, trying to avoid making contact with his. “Let your friends help you.”

For a long moment, she didn’t respond. Aizawa checked his watch; he needed to head back soon. As it was, he was pushing the time he had available. He made to stand up, pushing himself up from the couch.

“… alright.”
Aizawa stopped, turning to face his student. She still looked a mess, but there was something else in her eyes that hadn’t been there before.

“Tell them. Just…” She got up and stood in front of him. “Don’t make me sound like I’m some pity case. I… everyone needs a day.”

“Hn.” He nodded, and put a hand on her shoulder. “Get some rest.” He turned to the door, and opened it to see Kanna’s mother there, waiting against the railing. “I expect you bright and early tomorrow,” he called back into the apartment.

“Thank you, sensei.”

He left the apartment and closed the door behind him, standing next to Yaseiki Kimiko as they stared down at the street below.

“She’s a strong one, your daughter.” He saw her turn to look at him, but he kept his gaze straight ahead. “Give her a hand with non-mammalian transformation. She may be overthinking it.”

“Thank you.” She pushed away from the balcony. “What makes you say that?” He shrugged.

“She made commentary to that effect towards another student with a similarly versatile Quirk. Smart people have a bad habit of recognizing their own faults in others, and being completely blind to it themselves.”

Aizawa Shota left his student’s mother to her own devices. He needed to get back to UA campus before class began.

***

“Sit down,” Aizawa commanded as he entered. “We have something to get through before Hero Foundationals today.”

“Another pop quiz!?” “Man, I was looking forward to this all day!” “Bring it on, bastard…” “Never a dull day, kero.”

Aizawa Shota activated his Quirk.

His eyes burned red, and his hair flew up, the energy output of his Erasure making it stand on end. The entire class stilled.

“Now that I have your attention,” he lightly scolded, “you may have noticed one of our number is not present today.” Yaoyorozu Momo raised her hand, and he gave her a nod.

“Sensei, what exactly happened in the changing rooms yesterday? Midnight-sensei managed to get some details out of Kanna-sa—” Iida and Tsuyu, entertainingly enough, both cleared their throats. “… Kanna-chan, but we still don’t have the full story. What happened yesterday? Who, or what vandalized our changing room?”

“That,” Aizawa removed a remote from behind his podium and clicked it, activating the room’s projector and standing to the side, “is what I aim to explain.” Once the projector had warmed up, Aizawa pressed another button, bringing up a series of news articles, prepared in advance. The headlines were telling.

*Foreign Deserter Disturbs Peace.* Dated ten years prior.
Pro Hero Scallopina Found Murdered. Dated eight years prior.

Ainu Abductions & Abdications On the Rise. Four years.

… And a Glass of Chianti. Two years.


“One of the greatest threats you will meet as heroes is the villain that simply refuses to go away. Whether it be breaking out of prison, escaping to live another day, always seeming to be one step ahead, or simply pure dumb luck, you will eventually find that one tenacious villain. These are often called a hero’s ‘Nemesis’ by the media. For Yaseiki-san’s father, Native, this nemesis is the Wendigo.” He turned towards his class. “If you are squeamish, look away now. But know this: what I am about to show you is just as much a part of a Pro Hero’s life as anything else. You will eventually have to accept the fact that for somebody, somewhere, you were too late.”

Aizawa waited a moment to see if anybody would take his offer, but all remained resolute. He pressed the clicker… and brought up the images.

Crime scene photographs available from US media outlets. Images from the Wendigo’s first appearance in Japan, with bloodied, jagged bits of shattered bone littering the streets of Hosu Ward. Pro Hero Scallopina’s brutalized, eviscerated corpse. The ‘meat locker’ that had been discovered in Hokkaido. A close-up of Native’s left hand after the Wendigo had devoured his fingers.

Aizawa clicked once more, this time bringing up an online video from one year earlier: All Might’s encounter and subsequent defeat of the Wendigo. A brief glance at the class showed him that Midoriya had been about to speak up, but thought better of it; good. Now if only the other one would grow up.

Hopefully this would help.

He clicked the remote, bringing up the clearest image of the Wendigo that had been captured one year prior. His skin clung tightly to his muscle and bone, clearly outlining every line and motion. He had snarled teeth, limp and lank hair, and a ruined hole where his left eye used to be. What was more telling was the pinned-up right sleeve… and the giant blade of bone extruding from the torn end, as well as the bladed extrusions from his left hand, radius, and ulna.

“The Wendigo managed to escape from confinement in the United States, and followed Native to Japan. His actual motives are not entirely known,” that was a lie; Aizawa knew exactly what the man’s motives were, “but we do know that he has marked Native and his daughter Kanna for death. He is a patient, cunning foe, and every time he has appeared, he was stronger than the last.” He looked up to his class, and saw all of their eyes riveted to the screen before them, memorizing every single detail of the monster on display. “The method by which he grows in strength is the consumption of human flesh.”

“Y-you mean he wants to kill and eat Kanna-chan!?” Tohru cried, shooting to her feet. “That… that’s—!”

“This villain is not the type we normally have to teach about. Despite his meticulousness, he often strikes outdoors. You cannot form a strategy of approach, because that is exactly what he wants, as Native nearly learned the hard way.” He clicked back to the picture of Native’s hand, missing its three fingers. In the front row, Ashido Mina gulped, and covered her mouth.

“This is the villain that infiltrated UA yesterday.”
The class’s responses were varied. Some were obvious: Yaoyorozu Momo covered her mouth with one hand, eyes wide; Asui Tsuyu blinked her eyes slowly, one at a time, refusing to take her eyes off of the image before her; Midoriya Izuku shook in his seat, muttering what could only be an analysis of the situation to himself; Iida Tenya grit his teeth and stared down, eyes closed tight and shaking in frustration.

Bakugou, though, was the outlier.

“Let him fucking try!” He shot up from his desk and shoved it aside, posture guarded but aggressive. “If that cannibal bastard dares try to come for us again…”

Bakugou punched one fist into his palm, and an explosion burst forth from the contact.

“I’ll tear that bitch apart and feed him his own intestines.”

Aizawa stared at his student. He stared deep into Bakugou’s eyes, searching for something. And when he found it, he smiled.

“Just as All Might told you all three days ago: as of now, you are all heroes. There is responsibility in that title, and prestige as well, yes… but also danger. This is merely the first time you truly see it.”

Aizawa walked to the classroom’s entrance, and grabbed the sliding door.

“It will not be the last. Now come; it’s time for training.”

His students grabbed the metal briefcases with their costumes and flew out one by one, eager and anxious to exit the classroom. All except for one student, who still stared straight at the Wendigo’s projected image.

“Oi, sensei.”

Bakugou Katsuki just stood there calmly, all of that explosive temper of his seemingly drained away. There was a calm, razor-edged focus to him.

“You know about that sludge villain shit last year, right?”

“Mm.” Aizawa simply murmured his acknowledgment. “What about it, Bakugou.”

“I didn’t want any fucking help. Help didn’t give a shit and came anyway.” Bakugou walked over to the far wall of the classroom and grabbed his case, labeled 03. He stared at the sole remaining case, one row down, the 04 emblazoned upon it. Aizawa took a step back as Bakugou moved to exit the classroom, case slung over one shoulder.

"Her Deku wasn’t there for her.” His fist slammed against the wall, the explosion scuffing the metal underneath. “It won’t happen again.”

His piece said, Bakugou exited the classroom, going to rejoin his classmates with Cementoss outside. Unbidden, a small, genuine smile spread across Aizawa’s face.

It was moments like this, Aizawa Shota reflected, that made it all worth it.

The birth of a hero.
Friday dawned bright and early, and all I wanted to do was roll over and go back to sleep. Unfortunately for me, that wasn’t an option, because Pony was having none of it. She flounced in, threw the covers back, and quite literally dragged me out of my bed.

“Up, up! Come on!”

I groaned and flailed a bit, but Pony was having none of it. She lifted me up until I had my hooves underneath me, then let me go, and I nearly fell back forward onto my wonderful, soft, comfy mattress, if not for the fact that Pony had grabbed my arm and tugged backwards. Now I was vertical, and… oh wow, I really smelted.

“… I’m gonna go shower.”

“Make sure to wash your hair!” Pony hopped over to the kitchenette, and I could hear her rummaging around in the fridge and the cabinet next to it. I cast a cautious eye over at the clock; we had an hour and a half until school started. My alarm hadn’t even gone off, but Pony had dragged me out of bed any… way… oh no.

“I don’t hear the shower running!” Pony sing-songed back towards our rooms, a slightly sharper note to her voice. I felt a chill crawl down my spine and nearly broke one of the bathroom tiles under my hoof in my haste to get to the shower and turn it on. I washed my body and face, then spent the next five minutes getting the accumulated grease and grime out of my hair, followed by making sure it was conditioned and free of tangles. We actually kept a couple of combs in the shower for exactly this purpose; Pony had gone through three of them already. Her horns made some knots and tangles so much worse.

I finished up in the shower, shut the water off, and let myself drip-dry a bit. I used my hand almost like a squeegee, trying to sluice as much water off my body as possible before the towel soaked up the rest. I pulled the curtain back… and saw Pony standing there, my towel spread in her arms. Oh no.

“Come on, come on! Blow dryer’s waiting for you!”

I hung my head.

I wasn’t getting out of this, was I?

-------

By the time I’d finally escaped from Pony’s grasp, she’d managed to get me all prettied up and putting my best face forwards. I no longer looked like I’d gone three rounds with a bottle of vodka and lost. Instead, I had my hair up in a loose ponytail, some of the locks hanging out and pinned back with a hairpin. She’d also managed to get some small measure of makeup onto me. It wasn’t much, just enough to make me look presentable again, but she’d already had to stop me from licking off the lip gloss three times. And our walk to school was only two blocks.

We got to campus and split off, me heading into 1-A and her hopping off to 1-B. I opened up the door to 1-A… and the conversation stilled.

Not everyone was there, obviously, and I was glad for it. Pony and I had arrived early, even despite
how much I resisted her ministrations, and only a handful actually came at this time. Tsuyu turned in her seat, and offered me what I could only guess was a froggy smile. Jirou, Kaminari, and Kirishima all turned to look at me, and Momo looked like she was about to say something. She didn’t get a chance, though, because the last person in the classroom got up and blocked me at the door, quieting everyone else.

Bakugou stood in front of me, hands shoved deep into his pockets, looking straight down into my eyes. He had a good three and a half inches on me, so I had to look up to meet his gaze, and kept my expression as dead as I could. His own expression was, to be frank, oddly calm. Pensive. This was probably the first time I’d really seen Bakugou without that permanent furrow in his brow, and it was… unnerving.

We just stood like that for a moment. I didn’t know what he wanted, and I wasn’t willing to give an inch. Finally, he seemed to have come to some conclusion, and grinned. Wait, no; this wasn’t one of the vicious, bloodthirsty grins I’d seen from the boy before. This was an actual, soft smile.

Then he gave me a pat on the head and ruffled my hair a bit, and went to sit back down.

I stared.

I blinked.

I stared some more. And just… stood there. I… what… huh? But, that was… and he just… eh?

“I have no idea what just happened,” Kirishima spoke up, breaking me out of my reverie. I looked to Tsuyu, who seemed to be busily inspecting the exact same page she’d been reading when I walked in. Momo appeared to be just as dumbfounded as I was, along with the rest of the students already present, and—

“You’re blocking the door.” I jumped and skipped a few paces forward, turning to see Aizawa-sensei slip into the room behind me. He gave me a look, and raised an eyebrow. “If you need to see the nurse…”

I shook my head and made my way to my seat, two back from Bakugou. He didn’t react as I passed.

I have no idea what the hell that was about earlier. To be honest, I don’t think I want to. It was easier to understand Bakugou when he was just all rage and explosions and constantly furrowed brows. Now? I… don’t know.

This was weird.

* * * *

Aside from a couple of interested and curious looks from my classmates, nothing seemed to come from whatever it is Aizawa-sensei told them yesterday. I gave Tsuyu and Momo the third degree during lunch, but neither of them seemed to have an explanation for just what had come over Bakugou earlier. It was a puzzle that was probably going to bug me for a fair bit of time, and again, I felt like there was something I’d forgotten, some piece of information I could slot into place that would make the other boy’s actions perfectly understandable. As it was, all we had to go on was confusion, and since they weren’t in our class, Pony and Ibara didn’t have any ideas either.

Aizawa-sensei unzipped himself from his sleeping bag and stood up once we were all inside, and pressed his ever-present clicker, making the storage racks holding our costume cases slide out from the left wall.
“Get dressed and meet out by Cityscape C. Bakugou, leave your blast gauntlets. Hagakure, make sure to also wear some normal clothing please. Aoyama, no cape.” The three named students all groaned or griped in some manner, and Aizawa silenced the three with a Quirk-assisted glare. Without any further questions, we grabbed our cases and filed out of the classroom.

I stopped outside of the girls’ changing room, feeling like my hooves had turned to lead. I had my hand out to pull down on the handle, but… I…

A large, long-fingered hand came down on top of mine and guided it to the door, and I turned to see Tsuyu at my shoulder.

“Kero,” she offered. I smiled at her, and we entered the changing room side by side.

The lockers had been mended, and new locks provided. Somebody had put a temporary replacement onto mine, and when Momo came over and unlocked it for me, I gave her a smile and a quiet thanks. We changed into our costumes and made our way out of the changing room, rejoining the boys as we made our way to the cityscape. I hadn’t been back to this one since the Entrance Exam, and it would seem that despite all the damage the lot of us had inflicted upon the area, it was none the worse for wear.

Aizawa-sensei led us to a large, empty clearing in the center of the cityscape, where two people waited for us. The first was Cementoss, the blocky, slate-grey literature teacher, and quite possibly an actual block of cement that had developed a Quirk. I wasn’t actually certain, and nobody was willing to tell us. The other figure, however, had everybody’s hackles raising, and Midoriya specifically started to mutter under his breath, interspersed with whimpering.

Recovery Girl stood there on the field next to us, an unmistakably perturbed expression on her face. Whatever was about to happen, she obviously didn’t like it.

And anything Recovery Girl didn’t like boded ill for our continued health.

“Aizawa-sensei. I assume you did not explain to your class, as per usual.” Our homeroom teacher just shrugged, then turned to face our class.

“Show of hands,” he began. “Who here watched the UA Sports Festival four years ago?” Not a single hand remained lowered. “I will assume you remember the second competition.”

“Oh, it was Quirkball!” Midoriya burst out. “Competitors played soccer, but could use their Quirks so long as they didn’t directly harm each other!”

“That was its final appearance,” Aizawa-sensei replied. “Recovery Girl refused to allow it to continue.”

“Seventeen broken legs!” She slammed her hypodermic needle-shaped cane into the ground. “Eight broken arms, twelve broken ribs, six torn ligaments, twenty-seven teeth knocked loose, three cracked skulls, five concussions, and one ruptured spleen!” We all turned back towards Aizawa-sensei… who just shrugged.

“Cementoss and I are here.” Aizawa-sensei looked over us, lingering especially long on Midoriya, the most injury-prone among us. “This is meant to be a change of pace, allowing you to enjoy yourselves and de-stress from the recent happenings while still receiving useful, valuable training. To that end…” Aizawa-sensei pointed behind us, and when I turned to look, my eyes widened. “We will not be doing this alone.”

Class 1-B entered the clearing, led by their homeroom teacher, Sekijirou Kan, a mountain of a man.
dressed in a black suit I was certain would burst at the seams any moment, his fine dress disrupted only by the odd gauntlet on his left hand. A few paces back, I saw a blonde dressed in a three-piece suit, the tails of his jacket falling to the back of his knees, and with multiple timepieces along his waist. Next to him was Ibara, dressed in something that resembled a toga, though it stayed up on its own without needing to support excess on the left arm like most togas did.

“Teams will be composed from members of both classes, A and B, to get you acquainted with your fellow class.”

As they made their way onto the clearing, I looked around for one specific member of 1-B. I managed to catch sight of the tips of her horns, but the actual rest of Pony was too short to see behind her classmates until they came to a stop and Pony pushed herself to the front. I forced my own way in front of the rest of my class and waved to Pony, and she waved to me, and… and…

… what in the…

“Kanna Kanna Kanna!” And then an instant later Pony was on me, hugging me for dear life, and oh lord I think I just felt my ribs creak—

“Pony,” I gasped, “air!” She loosened up her hold, but didn’t do much more than pull back to inspect my outfit.

“Your costume’s so pretty! I like it!” Now she let go, and did a twirl, showing off the entirety of hers. “Well? What do you think, huh? Do you like it?” I was about to open my mouth to respond when she instead dragged me by the hand to directly in front of the wannabe Arsene Lupin, mouth still going a mile a minute. In English, of course. “Oh, this is Monoma! He’s been teaching me all sorts of things! I bet my Japanese is like super good now! Let me try, let me try!”

“Okay…” I let the thoughts of Pony’s costume go for now; I’d have to counsel her on that one later. “So, if I were to ask you to introduce yourself?”

“Um…” Pony made a slightly exaggerated thinking pose, then snapped her fingers and clapped her hands, pointing at me, and speaking in Japanese. “I Tsunotori Pony, meanest mother fucker in town!”

Behind Pony, I saw Monoma rapidly pale and try to slip away, though the hand of his homeroom teacher upon his shoulder kept him from going anywhere. Ibara had her face in her hands, but I could clearly make out the tiny guffaws that slipped out. The only other member of Class 1-B who seemed to have a reaction other than shock and confusion was Mineta, the pervy little shrimp, who had outright shoved his fist in his mouth and was biting down to keep from laughing.

“Wow! That’s… uh…” I was doing my best to keep a straight face, but from how Aizawa-sensei’s shoulders were shaking, it wasn’t really working.

“All you bastard better show respect, or I beat shit out you!” Pony delivered all of this terrible, b in the most bubbly expression I could ever have imagined, and Monoma had gone completely silent, his complexion completely and utterly ashen. Pony turned and clip-clopped towards Monoma, and hugged him tight; I could practically hear the strain on his bones. “Thanks for teaching me so many new and interesting curse words and so much profanity!” Everybody present went dead silent.

… for just an instant before Pony, Momo, Ibara, Tsuyu, Mineta, and I all couldn’t hold it anymore, and burst into raucous laughter at the expression on Monoma’s face.

Because that last bit had been said in perfect Japanese.
Pony let Monoma go and skipped back to stand next to me, radiating a smugness that was so very uncharacteristic of her.


“Worth it!”

* * * * *

Once teams were set up, Cementoss cleared a large enough area for four separate five-on-five soccer games, with boundary walls between the games, as well as a sort of watchtower so that he and Aizawa-sensei could keep an eye on us. Pony, Tenya, Ibara, and Monoma were my teammates; Ibara chose to play goalie. Against us stood Bakugou, Tsuyu, Bondou the living rubber cement jar, Honenuki (whose lack of lips was slightly unnerving…), and Tsuburaba, whose smug grin was almost as good as Monoma’s, stood in the goal.

“Is everyone ready?” Cementoss boomed. A cheer went up from the lot of us. “These balls were made by the Support courses. They can take all the punishment you can give.”

A hole opened up in the center of the cement ‘pitch’, and from the hole came what looked to be… just any other soccer ball. I was expecting something more interesting. But no. It looked just like any other soccer ball.

Tenya and Bakugou squared up around the ball. Monoma tapped Tenya on the back of his ungloved hand and took up position to Tenya’s left, making sure to pull up his pant legs to account for the sudden growth of engines on his legs. Pony was on the right, and I set up behind them, ready to shapeshift at a moment’s notice.

“Begin!”

Tenya and Bakugou both burst forward, each rushing for the ball, and while Tenya managed to land the first hit, Bakugou’s explosive Quirk threw him off balance and away from the ball, allowing Tsuyu to corral it with her tongue and begin bringing it down towards my team’s goal. Tenya and Monoma both turned to try and boost after her, but the ground beneath them suddenly turned into quicksand, and they sunk in down to their ankles. Pony and I turned to trap Tsuyu in a pincer, but we needn’t have bothered; as our froggy friend brought the ball close to our goal, vines suddenly burst forth from the concrete and ensnared Tsuyu before she could jump. She lashed out with her tongue again and sent the ball towards our goal, but some of the vines covering the goal slapped it away and towards Pony, who quickly began to carry it up the field.

I reached for the basilisk lizard, and just as I expected, Honenuki’s Quirk turned the ground beneath Pony’s hooves to quicksand. She kicked the ball forwards and went down on all fours to escape, but wasn’t quite able to reach the edge. I ran over the quicksand thanks to the basilisk lizard, turned my right harm into a gorilla’s, and yanked Pony out of the quicksand by her horn. She didn’t quite get close enough to the ball to actually hit it again, though, because suddenly Bakugou blasted in, stealing the ball before Pony could reclaim it.

I motioned for Pony to handle him, and turned to go get Monoma and Tenya out of the muck Honenuki’s Quirk trapped them in.

“What animal!?” Monoma asked, making sure he got a solid grip on my hand.

“Basilisk lizard!” He nodded, and an aura sprung up around his entire body. “Just legs!” The glow
faded from his upper body, and I saw the shape define itself. Monoma ran across the quicksand, and I joined him to meet Pony up front, joined by Tenya after he built up enough speed to clear the unstable ground in one leap. Monoma let go of the basilisk right as he approached Bakugou, touching the other boy before giving him a taste of his own explosive medicine.

“Son of a—”

Pony didn’t let him finish, because in that instant she managed to get behind Bakugou. With one quick sweep of her horns, she flung him into the air and towards Honenuki’s quicksand, which he only barely managed to keep himself clear of. But that was all the opening Pony needed to shoot the ball off towards our opponents’ goal…

… only to bounce off of solid air. Right, Tsuburaba, Pony said that was his Quirk.

“Hit it ’til it breaks!” Pony called, and I turned to see Tenya winding up for a quick of his own. The rebound came his way, and with another whine of his engines, his foot slammed into the ball, rocketing it towards Tsuburaba and his solid air shields. It broke through his shields, and the first goal went our way.

“Nice shot!” I gave Tenya a high-five, and Monoma came up to refresh his charge of Tenya’s Quirk, resetting the stopwatch on his waist in the process. He went around and did the same for me and Pony, then jogged back to our goal to refresh his grasp of Ibara’s as well. Then we got ourselves set back up, and prepped for our foes’ offensive. Tsuburaba kicked the ball over to Bondou, who spewed his rubber cement to fill back in the quicksand Honenuki’d set up earlier, letting him dribble it up our way. He had some decent footwork, and—

Then a vine burst forth from the concrete and knocked the ball out of bounds.

Pony, Tenya and I all turned to look at Ibara, who waved her hands and shook her head. We looked to Monoma instead, who had small vines growing from his arms, a grin on his face, and who couldn’t keep back his chuckling. On the other end of the field, Bakugou grabbed the ball, and pulled back for the throw-in.

“Fuck you!”

Bakugou threw the ball, propelled by a truly prodigious explosion, straight for our goal. Ibara’s vines put up a decent effort, but at the speeds that thing was traveling, only Pony could have intercepted that thing safely.

And so the game was tied up one to one.

“Bakugou!” We turned to look at Cementoss’ and Aizawa’s guard tower. “No more of that.”

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In the end, we won 4-2. Honenuki and Bondou were obscenely good at area control, but Tsuburaba just wasn’t quite the goalie Ibara was, and Tsuyu simply could not get Bakugou to go along with her strategy. He was bull-headed, he was unflinching… but he was also the source of both their goals, so, he had that going for him. Which was nice.

Once the games were all wrapped up, we were all sent to the changing rooms together, and I resolved to talk to my best friend about… well.

“Pony?”
“Yeah?” She was still wearing her costume, and stood in front of me expectantly, her hands clasped in front of her. I closed my eyes, and took a deep breathe… and set in.

“What the hell are you wearing?”

“How?” Pony blinked. “Uh, my costume?”

Pony…” I reached out and pushed down her costume’s stirrup, attached to the outside of her lower legs, with my hoof. “This doesn’t detach.” I pulled on one of the leather straps, meant to act as reins, and Pony’s head jerked forward with it. “This is—Pony, you can’t have loose straps and handholds like this! That’s just asking to get hurt!”

“Hey, you have a hood! That’s something to grab onto!”

“Alright.” I turned around. “Tug.” Just as expected, she did, and my costume’s hood popped off, sending Pony stumbling back a bit. “And now that they’ve over-committed, they’re open.” I turned back to Pony, and saw her eyes getting a bit shiny. “Pony, I… please…”

“I patterned it after a Clydesdale!” She started crying, and turned away from me. “I thought it was really good! I liked it! But it’s, it’s…” She pulled her costume off as fast as she could, not even caring that she stood in just her underwear, before even opening her locker. I rushed forward to grab her in a hug, and tried to calm her down.

“Shh… it’s okay, Pony…” I brushed her hair with my fingers, just like my dad always did for me. “Look, you can redesign it! It’s not final! And I bet you can keep the horse theme, just switch Clydesdale to cavalry or, or something! I don’t know!”

“Kanna?” Pony sniffled.

“Yeah?”

“Everyone’s watching us.” I turned around to see most of the girls in both of our classes just… looking. Ibara, Tsuyu, and Momo were very pointedly looking elsewhere.

“Do you mind!”?

They all managed to hurry up, change, and vacate the locker room within the next minute or two, leaving just Pony and me behind.

“You should head home.” Pony gave one last sniffle and wiped her last tears away, giving me one more hug. “I’ve got detention I guess. I’ll try and come up with some new ideas.”

“It’ll be great,” I smiled, squeezing Pony tight one more time before letting go. “Sorry for being a bitch.” She laughed. I smiled. “I’ll have dinner ready when you’re back, okay?”

“Don’t burn it again!” She called.

“Oh, screw you too Pony, that was one time! One! Time!”
“You should head home.” Pony gave one last sniffle and wiped her last tears away, giving Kanna one more hug. “I’ve got detention I guess. I’ll try and come up with some new ideas.”

“It’ll be great,” Kanna smiled, squeezing Pony tight one more time before letting go. “I’ll have dinner ready when you’re back.”

“Don’t burn it again!” She called after her friend.

“Oh, screw you too Pony, that was one time! One! Time!”

Pony laughed at her friend’s expense, letting the humor wash away the negativity she felt. Kanna was her best friend, yes… but she could be such a *bitch* sometimes. Yes, she was a great friend. Yes, the two were protective of each other and always had the other’s back when things got rough. But Kanna had a *temper*… and sometimes it made things difficult. The problem Pony had in just shrugging it off is that usually, Kanna was pretty good at keeping any outbursts private.

For Pony’s costume design to have been victim to her best friend’s sharp tongue… Kanna knew something Pony didn’t. She’d have to grill the shapeshifter tonight. Right now, she had detention… and someone to talk to. But first…

Pony whipped out her phone and shot off a text to Kanna. *Don’t forget to use the kitchen timer!*

The reply came almost instantly.

*I know, damn it!*

Pony giggled, shut off her phone, and walked into classroom 1-B, where she and Monoma would be serving detention together for one day… then it would be just her. She saw her classmate sitting at his desk, chin on his arms, his half-lidded eyes and furrowed brow enough indication of his annoyance to anyone. Pony looked to the front of the classroom, and started. That wasn’t Kan-sensei.

“Oh, don’t mind me!” Principal Nedzu waved Pony to her seat. “Go on, sit, sit! Just pretend I’m not here! I’m sure you two have a fair bit to discuss, hm?” She stood there for a moment, blinking, until Nedzu completely dismissed her from his attention, burying his nose into some or other paperwork he’d brought from his office. Pony turned and walked to her desk, sitting next to Monoma. He turned away from her ever so slightly, just enough that she wouldn’t be visible out of the corner of his eye.

“Hey, Monoma?” He didn’t respond. Pony leaned towards him, and he shifted further away from her. “I, uh… just wanted to say good job. During the training today, you know?” He didn’t respond. “I-it was really cool, you know! Like, you’d never used Kanna’s Quirk before, or that other boy’s, and you still managed to use it really well!”

He didn’t respond.

“Fine!” Pony harrumphed and crossed her arms, turning away from Monoma. “Don’t talk to me! See if I care. Hmph!”

Pony considered bringing out her cellphone and turning it back on, but that would probably get Principal Nedzu to actually pay attention again. Besides, Monoma didn’t have *his* phone out, and he definitely would’ve been screwing around on it right now rather than just—
“How long?”

—sitting… wait, Monoma just said something, didn’t he?

“How long would you have let me think you were…” He floundered for words.


“What? No! I—”

“I’ve heard all of those,” Pony interrupted him, “and more. I moved here ten years ago, Monoma. I didn’t know any Japanese, and kids are cruel. They’re especially cruel if they have something to set you apart from them. She sighed, and looked down at her hands. “It did let me know who was worth being friends with, though. The ones who didn’t care I wasn’t from Japan, they were nice, and I even became friends with some of them.”

“And the others?” Monoma asked.

“The ones like you?” Pony clarified. Monoma looked away, ashamed. “Kanna’s like a mama bear. She scared them off.” Her smiled turned sardonic. “Maybe a little too well, actually. Kanna and Tenya—”

“That’s engine legs, right?” Monoma interjected.

“Mhmm,” Pony nodded. “Anyway, eventually I only really spent time with Kanna and Tenya. She’s scary when she’s mad.”

“And you’re scary when you’re happy,” he groused. They sat in silence for a few more minutes before he spoke again. “It rankles, you know.”

“Huh?” Pony gave him a look. “What does?”

“My Quirk.” Monoma slumped in his seat. “It’s a great Quirk. Excellent, even. I already know I’ll be a great part of any hero team. But it’s just that: a team. I’m never going to be one of those great Pro Heroes who stands entirely on their own merits, like All Might and Endeavor.” He looked at Pony, and chuckled. It wasn’t at anything funny. “If there’s nobody around for me to work with, I’m basically Quirkless.”

“Monoma—”

“I’m dependent on others,” he interrupted. “I don’t like that. I got in on recommendation because otherwise I may not have even had the chance to score a single damn point in the normal entrance exam, or I’d score so many there’d be none left for anyone else, and it’s entirely on whether or not I could get close enough to copy a Quirk. There’s even a recommended students exam, and I had to do something different from them!” He slammed his fist down on his desk, and Pony jumped. “If I’m left alone, I’m nothing. A ‘hero’ with no Quirk and no options. That’s why, when I saw your first name on the seating chart, and it wasn’t Japanese…”

He trailed off.
“Monoma?” Pony put a hand on his arm, trying to comfort her classmate. He put his over hers, and she took his hand, squeezing it for comfort.

“I’m not sure why I thought it, but an idea popped into my head. Maybe, if there was someone dependent on me for a change…”


“Thought it’d be funny.” He scoffed. “Sweet little thing like you with the mouth of a sailor… I dunno. The contrast just seemed hilarious at the time.”

“It was.”

“Huh?”

“It was kinda funny.” Pony held his hand with both of hers now, leaning into him. “Sorry I made you look bad, Monoma.”

“No. I deserved it.” He smiled now. It was small, but it was real. “Guess I’ll attract more flies with honey, eh?”

“Well maybe not flies,” Pony quipped, returning the smile, “but put it on some apples and you can get a Pony or two.”

“Wonderful!”

Both Pony and Monoma jumped as Principal Nedzu leapt up and stood atop the desk.

“No, no, you two go back to your discussions! Pretend I’m not here!” Nedzu hopped back down, and both Pony and Monoma stared at him for a moment, each giving the other a blank look as he started humming.

“Monoma—”

“Neito is fine,” he interrupted.

“Neito… is, is he humming what I think he is?”

“If you think that’s a shoujo anime opening… then yes,” he confirmed. “Yes, it definitely is.”

“Oh?” Pony gave him a look, smile turning coy. “Is somebody a fan of magical girls and pretty boys?”

“I like romances okay!”

* * * * *

“I’m home!” Pony called as she walked in, tentatively sniffing the air to see if Kanna had actually managed to succeed at cooking for once.

“Welcome ba—”

The kitchen timer went off, interrupting Kanna, and Pony couldn’t hold back the laugh as her best friend nearly ran into a wall trying to get to the oven. Kanna opened it up, reached in, then seemed to realize she didn’t have her oven mitts on right before touching whatever was in there.
“Don’t forget to turn the oven off!” Pony called, skipping back to her bedroom to change.

“I just did!” Kanna all but shrieked back. Pony couldn’t help but cackle at Kanna’s distress; that girl may have been talented in many areas, but outside of maybe three or four recipes, cooking was not one of them.

Pony changed out of her school uniform and into her favorite casual, not-going-out clothes: yoga pants and a tank top. She wasn’t going anywhere, she didn’t care if her clothes left nothing to the imagination. Who was going to see her, Kanna? Like they hadn’t seen each other’s everything many times; hell, Pony had ambushed Kanna outside the shower just that morning!

“So, what’s for dinner?” Pony asked.

“Teriyaki chicken stir fry with carrots, bamboo shoots, green beans, and baby corn,” Kanna replied. “And no apples! I made dessert, so at least try that first!” She set a bowl down in front of Pony with chopsticks and a spoon, then sat opposite Pony at their dinky little kitchen table. Pony took a look: dark meat chicken and the vegetables, served over rice.

“Thanks for cooking.” Pony dug in, and noticed something. “Kanna… did you burn the rice?”

“… maybe…?”

“Kanna, we have a rice cooker!” Pony shot back, incredulous. “How do you burn rice in a rice cooker?”

“Fine!” Kanna pushed her chair back and stood up. “I’ll go toss our dessert in the trash, since it’s obviously burnt too, and—”

“Hey, it’s okay! I’m just teasing!” Pony turned the rice over with her spoon, revealing just the smallest bit of browning on the grains. “See? It’s not even burnt! You probably just left it in the rice cooker for too long, or something.”

Kanna looked at her. Really looked. Pony almost started to squirm before Kanna sat down and went back to eating.

Pony breathed a sigh of relief, and dug in. For all that she liked to rib her best friend’s utter lack of culinary skills, when it came to the very few recipes Kanna actually did know, she was… not bad, actually. Of course, given that Kanna’s comfort zone was about as small as Pony’s was large, that wasn’t saying much. She had four recipes that Pony knew of, and there seemed to be no common thread between them: omelets, chicken stir fry, crab cakes, and—

Wait.

“Kanna?” Pony asked.

“Hm?” Kanna, who had managed to practically inhale her own dinner, already stood at the sink, cleaning out her bowl.

“Dessert.” Pony took her last bite, and got up to toss her bowl to Kanna. “You didn’t.”

“I did.”

Kanna pointed at the little circular cups currently covered in aluminum foil, and Pony felt her excitement ratchet up a few notches. That was the only dessert Kanna knew how to make, and she’d gotten tons of practice: molten chocolate cakes!
“I figure you’re going to need a little chocolate therapy in a minute.”

And *that* sent Pony’s excitement crashing down through the floor.

“Uh…”

Kanna didn’t respond though. She just finished with the dishes, and beckoned Pony to follow her into her room. Kanna sat down at her desk, turned on her computer’s monitor, and pulled up a web browser that she’d kept minimized.

“So, I… uh, I was more than a bit harsh on your costume today,” Kanna began, sheepish.

“Oh-huh.” Pony crossed her arms and gave Kanna a *look*. Kanna looked away and back to her computer screen.

“Yeah, sorry about that. But, well, uh… there’s one *other* reason other than what I said. I couldn’t exactly say it right there, though, so…” Kanna pointed at her screen, and clicked over to one of the tabs she’d had open. “Figured I may as well just show you.” Then, after sliding the volume down to zero, Kanna pressed play.

And it quickly became clear to Pony just *what* Kanna was showing her.

“Kanna… that’s… that’s—!” She was at a loss for words.

“Yep.”

“That’s just like my costume!” Pony pointed, face rapidly paling.

“Yep.” Pony grabbed her friend by the shoulders and stared her straight in the eyes.

“*Kanna* *what the hell?*”

“Yep.”

“*KANNA!*” Pony pointed one shaking, tremulous finger at the screen. “*That is PORN!*”

“Now do you see why I was so—”

“How do you even know about this stuff?”

“I plead the fifth.”

“This isn’t the United States Kanna!”

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“Okay.” Pony took another spoonful of her molten chocolate cake, noting with some mild amusement that there *was* a slightly burnt section at the very edges of the tureen. “Good call on the chocolate. That… what. *The hell.*”

“Just… don’t think about it.” Kanna shuddered. “Really, *really* don’t think about it. *Anyway!*” She pointed her spoon at Pony, then quickly whipped it back towards her mouth as wonderful, delicious chocolate nearly dripped from it. “Mmph. Redesign!”

“No straps!” Pony dropped her spoon and made an ‘X’ with her arms. “No reins, no stirrups, no leather, no *nothing* that looks like… like…*that!*” She slumped. “Darn it. I wanted some way to carry
“Well, think about what you’d need,” Kanna began. “Something for them to hold on to, somewhere for their legs to go that’s out of the way, or even just a way to stay on. Maybe look into some high friction surface, or something that’ll make people stick unless they twist themselves off of it?”

“On the small of my back and around my waist,” Pony added. “That way I can move on all fours or on two legs, and they won’t have to readjust. What about handholds that can’t be used against me?”

“Heck if I know. May need a bulkier top for this, though. Maybe a breastplate, or cuirass?”

“So long as I don’t look like one of those girls from those bad JRPG’s you love!” Pony fired back. “I know I look great, but outlining my boobs in metal is just tacky. And stupid. Though some protection would be nice… wait.” Pony leveled her own spoon at Kanna. “Why doesn’t your costume have protection?”

In answer, Kanna raised an arm and grew scales all along its length. Then she stood up, grabbed one of their kitchen knives, and ran it along her scaled arm, to no effect.

“Alright, I get it!” Pony grumbled. Kanna just smiled, then grabbed the sharpening rod out of the block. “What’re you doing?”

“I just dulled one of our knives to prove a point. If I don’t do this now, then the point won’t stick, will it?”

“… was that supposed to be a pun?”

“Maybe?” Kanna shrugged, then resumed sharpening the knife.

“Kanna?”

“Yeah?”

“You are such a dork.” Pony poked at the sides of her tureen with her spoon. “Also you burnt this a little bit. See?”

“What? No I didn’t.” Kanna put the knife and sharpener back in the block, then crossed the two steps to the table to see just what Pony was talking about. “See, that’s not… wait… oh, come on Pony, that’s not even slightly burnt!”

“Just a little singed?” She offered. Kanna just offered a one-fingered salute and shoved another spoonful into her own mouth, grumbling around her mouthful of chocolate. “Hmm, yeah, definitely tastes a little burnt around the sides. Here, you try!”

“Pony, just eat the damn chocolate…”

“I’m trying, but it’s burnt to the sides.”

“Oh shut up!”
Chapter Eighteen

Sunday dawned, and despite the fact that I’d turned my alarm off, I still woke up with the sunrise, around six in the morning. I rolled over and buried my face in my pillow. The sun didn’t go away though, which meant that I had to get up and face the day. I threw back the covers and slid my legs over the side, stood up, and stumbled into the bathroom.

And saw that Pony had beaten me to it.

“… I’m just gonna go get breakfast.”

“Make some eggs?”

“Yeah, yeah…”

I plodded my way out to the little kitchenette, opened up the fridge, and grabbed our eggs, the milk, some butter, and bacon. I’m a bad cook; no, wait, scratch that. I’m a terrible cook, but there’s a few things I know my way around pretty well. Omelets are one of those things, and so I cracked the eggs into a bowl, got a skillet onto our dinky little stovetop, put a small wad of butter in there, and—

“All yours!”

—immediately dropped what I was doing to rush to the restroom. I get thirsty during the night, so I keep a water bottle by my bedside. This also means that when I wake up, I really really REALLY need to pee!

“Don’t forget to flush!” Pony called.

“One of these days, Pony!” I yelled back. “Just you wait!”

“Love you too!”

* * * * *

“So did Tsuyu and Momo ever get back to you?”

“Afraid so,” I replied. “Momo’s already got plans, and Tsuyu had to decline. She’s spending the day with her family. Apparently her parents work really late, so she doesn’t get to see them much during the weekdays.”

“Oh, does her family live around here too?”

“Eh,” I hedged. “Close enough that she can take the subway, far enough that it takes a half hour on the dam thing.”

“Darn. Hey, think we can drop in at Casa de Tsuyu one of these days?”

“Ask her.”

“Kay! Oh, Ibara’s place is just a block down that way.” Pony took a right at the next street, and I followed her, trying not to think about how we’d accidentally pulled a partial ‘twinsies’ today. She’d gotten dressed in a pair of skinny jeans, a tank, and a light spring jacket over it. I’d gone into my closet and picked out… a pair of skinny jeans, a comfy button-up top, and a light spring jacket over it.
I said one of us would have to change. She just blew me a raspberry, grabbed her purse, flipped on her sunglasses, and out the door she went. I just shrugged, grabbed my little satchel-purse, slung it over my left shoulder to rest on my right hip, and barely remembered to lock the door behind us.

Ibara invited us over yesterday to meet her after Mass at her family’s church. Her father was a minister, or pastor, or whatever the heck the distinction was, and not a celibate priest like you’d find elsewhere, and the Shiozaki family actually lived out of the church they ran. There’s a whole lot of specifics that I’m missing, but please, don’t ask me. I was a Jew the first time around, am somewhere in between Buddhist, Shinto, and atheist this time, and don’t really care all that much about religion in the first place.

She’d actually asked if we would like to attend the Mass itself, and was only the slightest bit put out at the fact that neither Pony nor I had any particularly religious inclinations. I had my misgivings about it, Pony was really only Catholic during the high holidays, and neither of us could muster the energy to force ourselves out of the apartment that early. Yes, we were up at six in the morning. Yes, we could have made it to Mass, and heard Ibara and her father speak. Would it have been nice of us? Yes. Would we definitely do it another time, and plan a day around it? Yes. But that day was not today.

As we grew closer to the Shiozaki’s church, we saw worshipers filing out, identifiable by a combination of their dark, formal clothing and the crosses they all wore around their necks. Some were actually removing their crosses and slipping them into pockets and purses, while others simply hid them underneath shirts. This was a little sad, but not altogether surprising: Christianity was an incredibly small minority in Japan, with not even one percent of the population following the faith. Given that the Japanese still had some backwards views on things such as religion, creed, and nationality, it wasn’t too surprising that these people wanted to hide it.

Pony and I ascended the front steps of the church, the sound of our hooves unmistakable against the stone stairs and the wooden flooring, and Pony quickly took her chance to skip up to the front.

“Hello!” Our friend looked up from behind the podium, and stepped out to greet us. Pony launched forward to give her a quick hug, which I could tell made her just a tad uncomfortable, but she took it in stride. Pony may have spent most of her life in Japan, but she was still American, and raised with American values. She’s much more touchy-feely than the Japanese tend to be, and I was all too willing to accommodate her.

“Pony-chan, Kanna-chan, I’m glad you could make it.” Ibara’s voice was serene as ever, and her soft smile, in combination with the backdrop provided by the church’s stained glass windows, had her looking absolutely radiant. She had on a light blouse and cardigan combo, along with a grass-green skirt that fell to her knees, complemented by simple, dressy black flats. She wore no makeup, and had no jewelry on other than her ever-present crucifix pendant. “Were Tsuyu-chan and Momo-chan not able to come?”

“Afraid not,” I said. “Momo’s got plans, and Tsuyu wanted to spend the day with her family. We’ll have to get them another time, huh?”

“Indeed.” Ibara turned towards the confession booths, and I followed her gaze to see a man in priestly clothes, with perfectly normal hair, busily performing some or other task I couldn’t quite identify. “Father, I’ll be heading out now!”

“Weren’t you going to introduce me to your friends?” He stood up from whatever he was doing and headed towards us. Ibara’s father had a kind face, the lines of age just beginning to wear crows’ feet around his eyes. He wore rimless rectangular glasses, and smelled faintly of roses.
“Ah, m-my apologies!” Ibara flushed slightly, but closed her eyes, touched the cross around her neck, took a deep breath, and visibly calmed down. “Father, these are two of my friends, Tsunotori Pony and Yaseiki Kanna.”

“It is a pleasure. I am Shiozaki Shirou. You may call me Shirou-san, Shiozaki-san, Father, or whichever makes you comfortable.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Father Shiozaki!” Pony gushed, all smiles and sunshine.

“Same,” I said, tone much more casual. “Sorry if I’m prying, but your name… your parents didn’t name you for Amakusa Shirou, did they?”

“Ibara-chan, where did you find these two?” The pastor was all smiles now. “Indeed, Japan’s unofficial saint is indeed my namesake. Most do not pick up on that immediately, though; perhaps my daughter’s friends share her faith in our Lord?”

“Not me, nope, sorry.” I waved my hands in front of me, almost to ward off the attention. “Pagan heretic here. Pony’s the one who got baptized.” I grabbed Pony by the shoulders and pulled her in front of me. “This is the one you want!”

“K-Kanna!”

“I apologize Father, but we really must be going!” Ibara managed to insert herself between us and her dad, used her vines to turn me and Pony around, and frog-marched us out of the church. Once we were properly outside, Ibara gave a sigh of relief. “I am sorry for that, but my father has a way of nattering on, as it were. If you had given him the chance, he would have performed an impromptu sermon for the two of you, then and there.”

“Oh…”

Pony and I exchanged a glance, and silently vowed that, unless we absolutely had to, we wouldn’t be giving Ibara’s dad a chance to corner us in conversation again. Nothing was worse than a personalized sermon… okay, maybe not nothing, but not much!

“So, what do we wanna do?” I asked.

“Well…”

* * * * *

Pony suggested a movie. Ibara suggested the zoo. I was the tiebreaker.

“Oh my goodness Pony look at the otters they are so damn cute.”

We went to the zoo.

“I wanted to go to the movies…”

I sighed. Pony had been a little glum since I sided with Ibara and outvoted her. I cast a glance at Ibara, and was very glad she took the hint and headed off to go look at the next exhibit over.

“Pony, I know you wanted to go see that new rom-com—”

“It wasn’t just any rom-com,” Pony interjected. “There’s hardly any good ones that come over from the States. I wanted to see a Hollywood movie that wasn’t more superheroes and action for once. We’re living that now, it’s not fun anymore.”
“I know, I know, but it’s not like it’s gonna be gone from theaters next week. It just came out! You can probably see it any time during the next month!”

“You’re just saying that cause you hate rom-coms.”

“What? I do not!”

“Yes you do. I see you pull out your phone every time I take you to one. I can see you gagging and pantomiming choking yourself any time they do one of those really sweet romantic gestures.” Pony gave me a side-eye glance. “‘You’re not as subtle as you think, Kanna.”

“Fine, okay?” I leaned against the railing and stared at the otters playing around in the water below us and eating fish the zookeeper tossed their way. “I don’t like rom-coms. I mean, I don’t hate them, but they’re just… cheesy. That’s now how romance works. It’s not that easy, and I don’t like that movies keep trying to say it is.”

“It’s not supposed to be realistic though! It’s just… darn it Kanna, if you really don’t like them, why do you keep letting me drag you to see them with me?”

“Cause you’re my friend, Pony.” I gave her a smile, and took hold of her hand. “And friends do things for their friends, even if they don’t really like those things themselves. So come on, stop being a sourpuss!” I swept my free arm wide. “We’ve got a whole zoo of wonderful animals to enjoy! Besides, it’s a nice day out, the cherry blossoms are in season.” I looked at Pony. “Come on, show me a smile.”

She did.

“You know, for someone who hates cheesy lines, you sure did give me one yourself there.”

“Hm?”

“Friends do stuff they don’t like with their friends cause that’s what friends do. Where’d you read that one?” Pony’s smile turned sly. “The bottom of that last skillet you ruined?”

“Damn it Pony, that was three years ago!”

“Yeah, and there’s a reason we don’t let you near salmon anymore!”

“There was a cart selling confections just around the corner,” a new voice added. I turned to see Ibara, who was holding—and there Pony went.

“Oh my god caramel apples thank you Ibara you’re the greatest!”

I chuckled a bit, shook my head, and massaged the shoulder Pony had just about wrenched out of its socket rushing to get her treat from Ibara. That girl and her apples, I swear…

“Pony-chan, the other ones are for Kanna-chan and myself!”

“Kanna won’t eat hers, let me have it!”

****

I never did get my caramel apple. Pony gave me the puppy dog eyes and I surrendered it. Of course, she was paying for it now, since we were at a cafe and she was too full to get a pastry. Ibara though? She was still hungry.
Apparently, most fruits and vegetables don’t really fill her up, and just give more strength and ‘volume’ to her vine-hair. This actually made her lunch choices at school much more meaningful: I never saw her fill up on vegetable-heavy dishes, despite the fact that she literally had plants for hair. Nope, it was all protein and carbohydrates, with a few vegetables if she couldn’t avoid it. For most people, simple carbs like white bread and bagels were empty calories. For Ibara, it was the healthy options. And since she could just purge extra calories and fat by growing out her vines a ton and then breaking them off at the desired length, she got to stay perfectly skinny and keep her figure flawless.

I’ll admit it. I was jealous. Until I figured out how to shapeshift into things that actually expelled various substances in sufficient quantities, like many invertebrates did, I was stuck actually watching what I ate. Do I exercise? Yes. Is that enough to outweigh a weekend of eating nothing but sweets and wonderful, delicious fatty foods? No. No it wasn’t.

“You know Ibara,” Pony began after taking a sip of her lemonade, “I actually forgot to ask this at the zoo, but what’s your favorite animal?”

“Hummingbirds.” Ibara’s answer was instant.

“Really?”

“Mhmm.” She took a small bite of her strawberry and chocolate crepe, and only continued talking after she’d swallowed. “If I don’t do anything with my vines for long enough, or I have enough fruit in a short amount of time, or even just plant them in a pot with good soil, they’ll actually flower and bloom. Hummingbirds love the scent, and when I was younger and that happened, my mother would take me to the park. We’d just sit there and let the bees and hummingbirds come up, and occasionally a hummingbird would sit there with us.” She rested her chin on her hands, and smiled softly. “It was one of the first things I did with my mother after she found herself again.”

“Aww… that’s so sweet!” Pony, as expected, practically had stars in her eyes. I gave her a poke in the cheek, and she gave me a look.

“Come on, you were being adorable.”

“I knoooow, but you do that every time Kanna!” She harrumphed and crossed her arms, but couldn’t keep a straight face and started giggling. Ibara and I joined her, and once the three of us calmed down, Ibara took her chance to ask in kind.

“What about you two? What are your favorite animals?”

“Hers are bears/horses,” Pony and I said at just about the same time, pointing at each other.

Ibara looked at me. Then she looked at Pony. Then back at me. Then back at Pony. Neither of us had moved, and we were still pointing at each other. Ibara took another bite of her crepe to hide her smile or laugh or whatever reaction she had.

“What? My name is Pony, and I like my name.”

“I’m part Navajo, and while that’s not really justification on its own, my mom, dad and I all like bears. You should see my teddy bear collection back in Hosu.”

“She’s got thirty different teddy bears,” Pony stage whispered.

“Like you’re one to talk, you’ve got, what, twenty-five different horse figurines?”
“Twenty-seven!” Pony corrected proudly. “And three of those were from you!”

“You two…” Ibara laughed. “It truly shows that you’ve been friends for years.”

“And that won’t be changing anytime soon!”

“Ditto! Sorry Pony, you’re stuck with me for—hang on, look over there.” I pointed down the street, trying to make sure it wasn’t super obvious. Pony and Ibara both followed my finger towards a very dour, grumpy-looking, familiar teen with spiky blonde hair that really needed a comb.

“That’s that explosion Quirk kid from your class, isn’t it Kanna?” Pony asked. “What was his name, Bakuda?”

“Bakugou,” I corrected. “I wanna see what he’s up to. Feel free to follow or—” I heard the sound of chairs scooting behind me. Ibara still had the other half of her crepe in hand, and I turned to see Pony sucking down the rest of her lemonade in an instant. “Okay then. Follow me, and keep quiet!”

Pony gave me a look, then pointed down. I followed her finger, and blushed a bit. Right. Hooves. Kinda hard for us to keep all that quiet… and I wasn’t allowed to use my Quirk in public outside of emergencies yet, so I couldn’t quiet it down.

“Alright… just keep as quiet as possible then?” Pony shrugged. Ibara shrugged. So I shrugged back and nodded my head in Bakugou’s direction.

We left the cafe (oh don’t worry, it was one of those ‘pay up front at the counter’ places) and slunk across the way as quickly as we could, making sure to stay out of Bakugou’s line of sight. He walked with a slouch and had his hands buried in his pockets, and absolutely refused to get out of the way for anyone. Well, okay, that was an exaggeration. He moved aside just enough that he wouldn’t hit a kid with a piece of taiyaki in his hand. But everyone else he just sort of lowered a shoulder and shoved them out of his way. I could see Ibara frowning, and I knew she wanted to say something, but I held a hand up to stop her.

Bakugou walked along for about half a block before he ducked into what looked to be a Yodobashi Camera, which, despite the name, doesn’t only do cameras. It does everything electronic. I followed him into the store, then paused when I didn’t hear Ibara and Pony following me. I turned to look back, and they just waved me on.

“Go on, go on,” Pony waved me off. “Go stalk your boyfriend some more!”

“He’s not—” I stopped myself. “Nice try.” Pony laughed, Ibara giggled, and I just turned to see Bakugou walking up the escalator. I had to hurry to catch up with him, and only barely saw him out of the corner of my eye as he ducked down an aisle on the fourth floor.

Video games. Of course. Even someone as madly determined as Bakugou was needs to unwind every so often. I followed him down the aisles until I saw him checking out a demo station that had been set out, one with a fighting game loaded up on it. A fighting game that was… oddly familiar. Really, really familiar.

Alright. I’ll bite. This isn’t quite the same universe, no, but there was at least a century between my first death and my rebirth. Which begs the question.

*How is Guilty Gear still a thing!*?

I saw Bakugou pick up a controller and go into the versus mode, which was apparently connected to the other demo console on the opposite end of the aisle. Not quite an arcade setup, but it was good
enough. I crept around two aisles so I could get there unseen, picked up the controller, and pressed \textit{Start}.

\textit{HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER!}

“Alright bastard,” I heard Bakugou half-say, half-yell from the other end. “Let’s see what you got.” Bakugou’s character select cursor immediately went to, who else, Sol Badguy. I just grinned and picked my favorite, though I really couldn’t remember much of how to play her: Dizzy!

The stage loaded up, the round began… and I began to \textit{cheese}. I played keep away, spammed Dizzy’s projectiles, and just played as infuriating a round as I could. I barely remembered how to play this game beyond the basic inputs, but for as aggressive as Bakugou was… he actually wasn’t any better! I won the first round, which elicited a litany of curses from the other end of the aisle. I couldn’t help but laugh at that.

“Think this is funny!?” I just laughed a bit more in return, and the second round started.

Bakugou actually managed to catch my fighter and trap me in the corner for a bit, never a fun place to be, and lost most of my life trying to block properly and get out. Button mashers are actually really annoying to properly defend against, since they don’t follow any of the expected attack patterns you’d expect a skilled player to do. What? I used to play fighting games. I wasn’t the best, but I’d been at least good enough to get past the first round or two of an amateur tournament.

I lost the second round, and the third one began. I abandoned my previous strategy and closed on Bakugou’s fighter with mine, using the most basic combos that were the same across almost every fighter in any game you could imagine: light medium heavy, medium light, heavy light medium. That kind of thing. Bakugou almost recovered, but I still managed to win the final round.

From the other end of the aisle I heard an inarticulate yell of rage, followed by the poor controller being slammed down into the little mesh holder far harder than it deserved, and Bakugou’s stomping footsteps creeping down the aisle. I put my controller down and crossed my arms over my chest, smirking a little at my win.

“Cheap shit, you little—Yaseiki?”

“You know, it’d probably help if you checked the move list before playing,” I quipped, inspecting my nails instead of looking at Bakugou. “Or, like, maybe not picking the first character you see?”

“The fuck’re you doing here.” His brow furrowed even deeper, which actually surprised me a little, since I didn’t know it actually could go deeper than that. His brows were nearly at right angles to the corners of his eyes, which actually looked really unnerving.

“What, I’m not allowed to play video games? Girls like them too, you know.” I reached over towards one of the display cases and grabbed a card advertising a new JRPG I’d been meaning to get, one of those titles with a silly, ‘Engrish’ name that was actually really good when I tried the demo. “Sure, fighters aren’t usually my thing, but whatever.”

“Tch.” He brushed past me, bumping his shoulder against mine in the process. I turned to see him slouched down again.

“Hey, wait a sec.” I followed after him, matching his speed when he upped his pace. “It was just a game, Bakugou. Look, if it’s bugging you that much, how about a rematch?”

“Shit wouldn’t matter,” he muttered. “You already won.” I paused for a moment to parse what he was saying, and more importantly, what he \textit{wasn’t}. By the time I realized I’d actually paused, not
just mentally but also in my movement, Bakugou was already gone.

I walked out of the store to see Pony and Ibara both looking at me, puzzled expressions on both their faces.

“He came out even angrier than he went in,” Pony explained.

“His anger seemed to compound when he saw the two of us,” Ibara continued for her, “and he shoved the two of us aside rather roughly when he could easily have passed between us. Did something happen?”

“I…” I floundered for a moment. “I honestly don’t know. I saw him playing a game up there, so I figured I’d join in as the other player and be his opponent, but then I won, and…” I trailed off.

“Aaaaand?” Pony prompted.

“He got sort of… I dunno. Not quite depressed, but in a funk? Like he wouldn’t have had any fun if he didn’t win, or something?” I sighed. “I probably owe him an apology for being sarcastic up there, but that definitely doesn’t explain why he seemed so put out.”

“I don’t know either,” Pony admitted. “Ibara?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t a clue,” she said. “You would know him best, Kanna-chan.”

“Yeah.” I deflated a bit. “I know. Come on girls, let’s go do something fun. Maybe that’ll make me feel like less of a bitch than I do right now.”

“Hey, shouldn’t we pick stuff up for dinner while we’re out?” Pony mentioned. “I’m cooking, though! I like our apartment not burnt down.”

“Pony, I swear to God—ow!”

“Do not,” Ibara admonished, bringing her hand back, “take the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Sorry…”
Chapter Nineteen

[Two Days Later]

First period Tuesday began with a Chemistry lesson from Aizawa-sensei. This is a subject I’m particularly good at, so long as it doesn’t get too deep into the math-heavy areas, such as calculating the energy of electron orbital valence shells… I think that’s what they were called. Simple stuff, like balancing chemical equations and calculating reaction energy is pretty easy. But there’s a reason I abandoned my Chemistry major pretty darn quickly my first time through life. And if you guessed that it’s because I despise higher-level mathematics, you’d be right.

The lesson finished up, though, and in came… right. Ectoplasm. Math. Ugh. Another forty-five minutes of metaphorically bashing my head against a wall later, and Ectoplasm left, giving way to Cementoss and modern literature.

This was a fun class: we’d just gotten into the real meat of The Tale of the Gallant Jiraiya, also known as “Jiraiya Gouketsu Monogatari”, also known as the original story that has nothing to do with flashy ninjas and tailed beasts. One thing I’m ever so thankful for is that that series seems to have been lost in the post-Quirk turmoil, and hadn’t reemerged in any meaningful form. No more silly running with arms back! People actually run normally, and with good posture, even in anime!

Cementoss assigned us an essay on how the themes from the story affected Japanese culture and literature to this day, and I saw Tsuyu practically buzzing in her seat. Jiraiya’s legend had some serious frog and toad imagery in there, and is one of the reasons the amphibians are so revered in Japanese media to this day. Ogata Hiroyuki was a serious badass using ‘frog magic’. Don’t underestimate that stuff.

But after Cementoss left, my nemesis walked in.

Present Mic.

It was time for English class. He’d basically tossed me out of the classroom every single day last week, since apparently Aizawa-sensei hadn’t managed to come up with anything else for me to do, and Present Mic was still frustrated at my snark. Sure, he appreciated the occasional assistance with pronunciation, and having somebody to sic on the students having issues; what teacher wouldn’t? But if he heard my tone change from normal to annoyed, snarky, sarcastic, or anything in the middle, he blasted me with really obnoxious, high-pitched sound, directed in such a way that nobody else could hear it.

Needless to say, when I saw him walking in, I was far from happy. But then…

Then Aizawa-sensei walked in behind him, and motioned for me to join him out in the hallway. Remind me to go see Ibara later today, because there is a God and he is good.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to spend any more time in there than you had to,” Aizawa-sensei said after I joined him in the hallway and closed the door behind me.

“You have no idea.” I shuddered. “Note to self: try not to make Present Mic any more annoyed at me than he already is.”

“Hn.” Aizawa-sensei started walking, and I followed him. “I can’t make an exception for you to go outside and work on how you use your Quirk, because that’s what your entire afternoon is for. You still need to spend at least half the day doing actual learning, not simply training. That said, we
actually don’t have any free foreign language teachers during this period.” He looked at me over his shoulder. “That’s assuming you’re even interested in learning French.”


“Ah.”

“I’m more than a bit rusty with French,” I admitted. “Hard to get decent practice.”

“Remind me to introduce you to Togata-san.”

“Who?”

Aizawa-sensei didn’t answer, and instead just kept leading me down the hallway. We passed classrooms 1-B through 1-D, and then took a turn past the teacher’s lounge and office area. I noted we were running out of areas he could be leading me, and… wait. No. He wouldn’t.

“Sensei… what exactly did you get ‘set up’ for me, anyway?”

“I figured you could do with some practice on one of your worse skills.”

Aizawa-sensei took one more turn, and I followed him… and froze when I saw what was at the end of the hall. I turned to try and get away, but his scarf suddenly lashed out and wrapped me up, dragging me towards him, and now I couldn’t get away. Aizawa-sensei dragged me into the one place I was dreading he could take me… and called out.

“Lunch Rush. I have your ‘helper’ for lunch prep.”

I was wrong. There is no God. There is only the devil… and his name is Aizawa Shota.

“Oh, wonderful!”

The tinny voice came from the back of the cafeteria, and from a door that I’d never seen any of my fellow students enter came Lunch Rush. I didn’t know the name of his Quirk, but what I did know is that if he willed it, he could temporarily augment the Quirks and other abilities of whoever ate his food. Lunch Rush routinely appeared at disaster sites to provide food for both the rescuers and the victims, and he’s credited with improving overall performance upwards of fifty percent at any site where he’s spent more than a day cooking.

I couldn’t actually tell what Lunch Rush looked like, since his metal… mask… thing covered his entire face. In fact, I’m not even sure whether that’s a mask or his actual body, since the rest of him was garbed in a covering chef’s jacket and tall hat.

“You must be Yaseiki Kanna-chan. Oh don’t be shy, come in, come in!” I found myself grabbed by the wrist, and I looked back at Aizawa-sensei with a betrayed look. He was just smiling that creepy, self-satisfied smile of his, and his shoulders were shaking with laughter as he waved goodbye. Lunch Rush brought me back into the prep kitchen, and I quickly found a jacket, apron, hairnet, and hat tossed my way. “Get dressed, quick! Ooh, I love student helpers!”

“Even the ones here under duress?” I groused, slipping the jacket on, sliding the apron over my head, and gathering my hair into a rough bun before I covered my head with the hairnet and hat.

“Even them. Come, come, we’ve much to do!” Lunch Rush put me in front of a cutting board and dropped a chef’s knife in front of me. “Tell me, how well do you know your way around a knife? If
I give you some potatoes and vegetables, can you cube and chop them, respectively?” I was about to open my mouth to say that yes, I could, when I suddenly found myself inundated in potatoes, carrots, scallions, daikon, and more. “Excellent! Once all those are done, come join me at the stove!”

I grumbled, but quickly got to work. Cooking may have been one of my biggest weaknesses, but that really only applied once I actually had to start applying heat to things. So long as it was just prep work, like mixing, chopping, dicing, mincing, marinating, or anything else you can think of to prepare food for the actual cooking process, I was fine. My issues begin and end with fire, heat, and keeping an eye on how done things get. You know the adage about watched pots never boiling? Well, for me, an unwatched pot will inevitably boil over.

Every. Damn. Time.

About twenty minutes later, I’d finished chopping up everything Lunch Rush wanted me to, and brought it over for him. He looked up, or at least I think he did, and beckoned me over to join him by the stove. I gulped, but walked over.

“Ah, excellent! Now tell me, how much experience do you have with actually handling the stovetop? What have you made, or know how to make without a recipe to guide you?”

“The only things I don’t burn,” I muttered and started to count off, “are well-done eggs, stir-fry, crab cakes, and one dessert that doesn’t matter right now.”

“Hmm… well, it’s better than nothing,” he murmured, then clapped his hands and bid me come closer. “Now, are you at all familiar with a wok?”

“No in the slightest…”

“Well then, let us remedy that! I’ll be teaching you how to make fried rice; you’ll watch me for the first batch, I’ll help you with the next, and then you can try on your own!”

I burned two batches before Lunch Rush switched me over to stir-fry instead. Then he declared that I’d be joining him every single time I would otherwise have had English.

I actually broke down and cried for a little bit.

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“Hm…” Pony picked at her chicken donburi with her chopsticks, inspecting the meat. “You know, something’s different about this today.”

“You’re definitely just imagining it,” I groused.

“No, no… it definitely looks different. Tastes different too. Maybe he switched from white or dark meat to the other?”

“Pony, it’s always dark meat in there, it’s juicier.”

“No, it definitely tastes different.” She took another bite, chewing it tentatively. “Yep,” she spoke around the chicken, “it definitely tastes familiar…”

“Pony, just shut up and eat.”

“It tastes really familiar actually.” Pony fake-gasped, and snapped her fingers. “This tastes just like that stir-fry you made the other night, Kanna!”
“Pony…”

“You were helping Lunch Rush instead of having English class, weren’t you?” I slammed my head down on the table, and Pony crowed in triumph. “Hah! She admits it!”

“Oh be nice,” Momo added in, chowing down on her own chicken donburi. “It tastes just like every other time. Kanna-chan may have cooked it, but it’s still Lunch Rush’s recipe.”

“It tastes the same to me,” Tsuyu added her own two cents. “Is Kanna-chan really that bad of a cook?” she asked Pony. “I thought it was just you teasing, kero.”

“Bad? Hah!” Pony nudged me in the side, and I grumbled. “Calling Kanna a bad cook is like calling fire a little warm! Kanna, should I tell them about the time you tried to make Valentine’s chocolate?”

“I groaned. “Or when you tried to make apple pie for my birthday?”

“Pony, come on,” I whined.

“Or how about that time you smoked your family out of the house trying to make tempura? Or maybe—”

“Pony-chan!” I looked up at the new, familiar, male voice, just in time to see Monoma Neito slide in next to Pony. “What a surprise!”

“N-Neito!” Pony stuttered. Wait, since when were these two on first-name basis?

“What the hell had happened in detention on Friday!? “H-hi!”

“Last I saw you, you were hyperventilating under your desk after hearing Kanna-san here was helping Lunch Rush today!”

I turned slowly, ever so slowly to look at Pony, who had developed a fluorescent blush. Monoma was practically leaning on her shoulder, and the smug grin on his face was, for once, oh so satisfying. He leaned across Pony to whisper to me, though it ended up actually being a stage-whisper.

“Ibara-san and I had to quite literally drag her out from under her desk.”

“And splash her face with cold water,” Ibara, who had been sitting across from Pony the entire time, added, voice serene as ever.

“And make sure she didn’t try to run away from the cafeteria and go without lunch.”

“And—”

“I get it!” Pony slumped. I’d resumed my face-plant on the table, but this time it was because I was laughing so hard I didn’t trust myself not to guffaw loudly enough to draw the entire cafeteria’s attention. Pony grabbed my arm and shook me back and forth, then buried her face in my shoulder. “Kanna, save meeeeee!”

“Just eat your burnt chicken, Pony!” I barely managed to get that bit out before breaking into laughter again.

“Ha! You called it burnt!” Pony crowed.

“But is it?”

“… no.”
“Then shut up and eat your chicken Pony.” I reached to the plastic bag that once held Lunch Rush’s produce, and dangled it in front of Pony. “Otherwise you don’t get these wonderful apples I snuck out of the kitchen…”

“Gimme!”

“Ah ah ah!” I wagged a finger in front of her. “Lunch first, then dessert!”

“Fine…”

The whole time this exchange was going on, Monoma and Ibara had their hands over their faces to try and keep their laughter in, Momo had her phone out recording the whole thing, and Tsuyu… wait.

“Tsuyu, stop stealing everybody else’s lunch!”

“Kero.”

* * * * *

“Today,” Aizawa-sensei addressed us as we stood in our gym uniforms, not our costumes, “we will be doing one-on-one close quarters combat training.” The class all leaned in, waiting for the other shoe to drop. “Without Quirks.”

And drop it did.

“Sensei!” Mina waved her raised arm back and forth. “Why no Quirks? I thought we’d be training to get better with those!”

“It’s simple.” Aizawa-sensei looked over the lot of us. “At some point in your careers as heroes, you will encounter somebody with a Quirk like mine. Somebody who can render you no better than Quirkless. Of course,” he began to add before any interjections could be made, “some of you will not have this problem. Ojiro, Hagakure, Asui, and to a slightly lesser extent Shouta, Kouda and Yaseiki will have fewer issues with being rendered Quirkless. The latter three are more heavily dependent on preparation, but even still, all six I mentioned are going to have some measure of advantage over somebody unable to use their Quirk. To prepare you for the inevitable, we will be practicing your capabilities in hand to hand, Quirkless combat.

“Now: raise your hand if you have had formal martial arts training.”

I raised my hand. Ojiro, Shouji, Tenya, Todoroki, and Momo all raised theirs as well.

“The seven of you. Come stand over here,” Aizawa-sensei motioned next to himself. “Next: anybody who considers themselves a capable brawler, or able to hold their own in a fight without needing their Quirk, raise your hand.” I saw two hands that I’d expected right off the bat: Kirishima and Mina. The one I didn’t expect, though, was Kaminari. “You three, with the others.” Kirishima, Mina, and Kaminari joined us, and that made the class split evenly down the middle: ten and ten.

“Each of you will be paired with a partner for the rest of the afternoon. Feel free to do this however you feel would best suit your pair, but do try to learn from each other. And again.” Aizawa-sensei’s eyes burned deep crimson, and his hair stood on end. “No. Quirks.”

Aizawa-sensei split us into pairs, seemingly to match our needs. Midoriya was sent off with Ojiro, presumably to help with his absolutely terrible form. Shouji got Tsuyu, Kaminari wound up helping Jirou, Todoroki got Tohru, Momo was paired with Tokoyami… and then Aizawa-sensei got to me.
“Yaseiki, you’re with Bakugou.” I turned to the temperamental teen to see a manic grin light up his face, and he punched his fist, a small burst of light and heat coming from the impact. “No Quirk, Bakugou. Don’t make me repeat it.”

This time it was *my* turn to smirk.

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“Alright.” I set myself at a distance of five paces from Bakugou, with plenty of grass field around us, and slipped into a ready stance. “You know how to throw a punch, you know how to fall, you know how to properly take a hit. Now let’s see if you can do it without your Quirk to help you.” Bakugou scowled, and set his right foot in front of his left, somewhat turned to the side. “When you’re ready.”

No sooner were the words out of my mouth that he rushed forward, lunging with his full weight behind a right-hand haymaker. He was aiming for center mass, hoping to get a good hit on my solar plexus. Just one problem? That approach only works if it’s on an opponent in a right-handed ready stance.

And I’m *left-handed*.

I dodged to my left and lashed out with my right leg, sweeping Bakugou’s own right leg out from under him. Given how far forward he was, he ate grass almost immediately, and I stepped backwards a couple paces to let him get up.

“Lesson number one: don’t lead with a great, big hit like that, not without your Quirk. Anyone with even the slightest bit of training could see that a mile away; hell, I know Midoriya did.”

“Shut up!” Bakugou lunged for me again, this time keeping low to the ground and striking out with a quick, straight punch. I pushed his punch out of the way, skipped to the side, and jabbed him hard in the side with my elbow. He stumbled again, but this time managed to catch himself, and came right back at me. I dodged a couple of his punches and batted a few more aside, just waiting for him to try something different. But no, he was exclusively using his fists, and not even very well. Bakugou may have known how to throw a punch, but there’s a difference between knowing how to *throw* a punch, and knowing how to *punch*. Eventually he went for that right haymaker again, and I dodged it, then responded with a swift kick to his side, throwing him to the grass again.

“Stop.” I walked over and offered Bakugou a hand to help himself up; he just batted my hand aside and pushed himself up off the ground.

“Again!” He snarled, grit his teeth, and put his fists back up.

“Not yet.” I stepped closer to him and brushed my ponytail back over my shoulder. “First thing’s first, and just a yes or no: can you use your Quirk with a punch?” I saw him think for a moment, then shake his head. “Alright. Stand up straight, and tighten your abs.”

“The fuck you want me to—”

“*Do it*, Bakugou.” He scowled at me, but did as he was told, pulling his shoulders back and firming up his stance. “Alright. I’m going to hit you two times. I want you to tell me which one you feel more. Number one.” I hit him with a straight punch to his abdomen, and he grunted a bit, but stood firm. “Number two.” This time, I drove a palm strike into his abdomen.

He staggered, and had to take a step back.

“There is absolutely *zero reason* for you to be throwing punches when your Quirk relies so heavily...
on an open hand,” I explained, pointing out the heel of my palm. “This right here is going to give you a stronger hit than a punch, on the condition you actually manage to land it properly and don’t wreck your wrist.” I demonstrated the proper form for an open-hand strike, and much to my surprise, Bakugou actually watched, seemed to play it over in his head, and copied the motion. “Alright, let’s go again. Smaller, cleaner motions, try to use palm strikes instead of a straight punch, and also?” I took a ready stance. “Don’t forget you have legs too. Ready… go.”

Bakugou came for me again, but this time he was more measured, controlled. He made a quick jab with one hand, which I pushed out of the way with my own hand before ducking low to try and sweep his legs again. Bakugou dipped back out of the way in time, then managed to rush me down before I could fully get back up, making me roll away from him to avoid the fist flying around towards my jaw. He was onto me before I could get myself back to standing, and actually managed to land his first hit on me: a palm strike just above my sternum. I staggered back and absorbed the blow, and he seemed to understand this bout was over.

We both panted hard… then he looked at exactly where his hand was. Namely, just above my chest. He pulled back as if stung, and opened his mouth to say something.

“Don’t apologize,” I cut him off. “In an all-out fight, you can’t think of your opponent as a man or woman. Knee a guy in the balls! Punch a girl in the boob! The only person fighting ‘fair’ is either absolutely sure he’s going to win, or an utter fool.” Bakugou frowned.

“And if I punch you in the…”

“Breasts, Bakugou,” I supplied. “Breasts, boobs, tits, whatever. If you punch me there, it’s going to hurt, I’ll probably lose my breath, and you can win right then.” I settled back into a ready stance. “Come on. Again.”

By the end of the day, Bakugou actually did manage to punch me in the tit, which had me staggering back, bringing my arms protectively to my chest, and gasping for breath. Needless to say he won that bout. I did manage to return the favor before the afternoon was up. His litany of curses was music to my ears.

Even in just the span of a single afternoon, Bakugou managed to improve immensely. Cocky, arrogant, hot-headed… say what you will, but Bakugou actually does have the skill to back it up.

“Hey.” I pulled up next to him as we followed Aizawa-sensei back to campus, and gave him a friendly punch in the arm. “Nice job.”

“Tch.” He gave me a nudge with his elbow, since he refused to remove his hands from his jacket pockets. “… thanks.”

I beamed.
[Two Days Later]

“Now, for today’s basic hero training…”

Aizawa-sensei adjusted his stance at the podium, and seemed to sigh.

“Initially, All Might was supposed to join me and one other to supervise. However, with the ‘incident’ from last week, we’ve had to make last-minute changes to preserve security.” He looked squarely at me. “We know what our infiltrator was after. We aren’t sure what he’s willing to do to get it.” Or her, I finished for him. “Instead, All Might is working with Class 1-B today; we will be having another teacher join us shortly.”

I shrunk down in my seat, and tried to make myself as small as possible. I could feel multiple pairs of eyes on me.

I didn’t want their pity.

“So uh, what’re we doing exactly?” Sero asked. Hey, it wasn’t Kirishima this time. How about that.

“Preparing you for disaster relief, from fires to floods and more.” Aizawa-sensei picked up another of those rectangular cards from behind the podium. Once again, it had an English word in all capitalized letters: RESCUE.

“It’s Rescue Training.”

“Rescue huh… sounds like another rough day.” “Right!” “Come on, this is what being a hero’s all about! I’m pumped!” “I’ll be right at home in a flood, kero.” No points for guessing who that last one was.

“I’m not done.” All of us felt a chill crawl down our spines at Aizawa-sensei’s glare, and we sat still as statues in our seats, facing front and at attention. “As I was saying…” He picked up his remote of a thousand uses and pressed a button, whereupon the sliding panels on the left side of the room unfolded to reveal our costume cases. “It’s up to each of you whether or not to wear your costumes, as some of them are going to be ill-suited to this sort of activity. Additionally, since the training site is a bit remote, we’ll be going by bus. And lastly.” Aizawa-sensei turned towards the door. “How long were you planning on waiting, Nagami.”

“Not much longer,” a new voice said, slightly muffled by the door to Class 1-A. The door slid open, and the voice’s owner walked in. “Just wanted to see if anybody noticed me.”

He looked to be about the same height as Bakugou, and his complexion was noticeably darker, or possibly just more tan, than your average Japanese person, though now that I looked at him, he may not even be Japanese at all. He had short, dark hair, a smile that looked more than a little bit smug, and was wearing something that look for all the world like a combination of a gi top and hakama pants. His ‘gi’ had silver and blue stripes running across it, and I wasn’t sure where his hands were in those sleeves, or where his legs were in those pants, since I could only see the bottom of what had to be sturdy boots.

“W-whoa!” I looked over to see Midoriya standing up in his seat. “That’s Euler, the Untouchable Hero! I didn’t know he taught here at UA!”
“Normally you wouldn’t so much as see Nagami-sensei until you were at least a second year,” Aizawa-sensei said. “It’s too dangerous for him to be set loose on untrained students.”

As one, the entire class seemed to find a way to ask some variation on ‘what’, ‘huh’, ‘eh’, or the like. I myself just canted my head to the left. Tsuyu tilted hers to the right.

“I have a standing offer to all my students,” Euler, or Nagami-sensei I suppose, said. His tone was light, as if discussing the weather. “If they can land a good, clean hit on me, they pass all their classes for the year. There’s really only two conditions: they can’t also hit their classmates in the process, and they can’t damage the classroom. But aside from that, anything goes!”

Bakugou leapt out of his seat, off of his desk, and to the front of the room, propelling himself with one palm’s explosion and with the other outstretched and primed. It took him less than half a second to get from the middle of the room to the front.

By the time he got there, Nagami-sensei had already gotten out of the way, and from the air above Bakugou, a sectioned staff flew down, slamming Bakugou into the floor.

“Nagami Issei,” Aizawa-sensei intoned, voice grave. “Pro Hero Euler. Quirk: Panopticon. He has absolute awareness of everything within a one-hundred meter sphere around his person, and even further where his line of sight allows. To go with that, he has reflexes bordering on precognitive.” Aizawa-sensei picked Bakugou up, and surprise of surprises, Bakugou didn’t refuse the help. “He is also the first, and so far only, UA alumnus to have started in the Business and Management course and be transferred to the Hero program.”

Nagami-sensei’s staff broke apart into three sections, connected by chains, and slid back up one of his voluminous sleeves.

“Those of you who are going to, get changed.” Aizawa-sensei and Nagami-sensei both walked to the door. “We’ll be at the bus out front.”

* * * * *

When we got out to the bus, Tenya tried to arrange everybody to board in a nice, organized fashion, assuming it was a standard bus layout with two seats on either side of a row, separated by an aisle in the middle.

It wasn’t.

“Darn. It was this type of bus!” He lamented.

“All that for nothing,” Mina joked.

Instead of the classic bus style, we instead had only a few rows of two-and-two, and the center of the bus was dominated by a large section in the middle, five seats on either side, facing the middle. Only four of those were taken, though, because Satou is a big guy, and Tenya’s costume is so angular nobody wanted to get too close to him for fear of being stabbed, jabbed, poked, prodded, and bruised by the darn thing.

I sat in the normal rows, in the aisle seat next to Todoroki, just behind Jirou and Bakugou. It was nice and quiet, and I had the aisle to stretch… but darn it, these seats were not made with tails in mind. I turned around to see Ojiro, who’d taken the back row all to himself, seated sideways to try and keep his own, much longer tail comfortable.

“Midoriya.” The boy in question turned to look at Tsuyu, who’d started talking to him.
“H-huh? What is it, Asui?”

“Call me Tsuyu,” she said, “or Tsu-chan.”


“I generally say what’s on my mind.” I saw Tsuyu lean into Midoriya. “Your Quirk resembles All Might’s.”

“W-wha—” I saw Midoriya pale a bit, but he recovered an instant later. “R-really? N-no way! Uh, I mean, I—”

“Hold up Tsuyu!” Kirishima interjected, and I saw Midoriya give a sigh of relief. “All Might doesn’t get hurt, though. They’re already different like that.” Aaaand there went the relief, right back around to embarrassment. “But that sort of simple, strength-enhancing Quirk is awesome! You can do so much cool stuff with it!” Kirishima was practically gushing now, and Midoriya’s blush had gone luminescent. “It’s not like my Hardening.” Kirishima raised his arm, and as we watched, the texture on it went from skin to something more like a craggy boulder. “I’m good in a fight, but it’s pretty boring.”

“I think it’s neat though!” Midoriya said, eyes bright. “Your Quirk’s more than enough if you wanna go pro!”

“Heh, pro!” Kirishima rubbed the back of his head with one hand, and now it was his turn to blush. “Don’t forget heroes have to worry about popular appeal too, though!”

“My Navel Laser is both strong and cool.” We all turned to Aoyama, who had a self-satisfied smile on his face. I was actually a bit surprised; Aoyama… doesn’t really talk much. At all. He may be flamboyant, and incredibly demonstrative with his actions… but he’s quiet as a dormouse most of the time.

Come to think of it… I’d never seen him spending time with anyone outside of class, had I?

“As long as you don’t blow up your own stomach!” Mina joked, nudging Aoyama with her elbow. Aoyama seemed to slump, and his ever-present smile seemed to go from satisfied to self-deprecating, even without any other motion on his part. “You wanna talk strong and cool?” Mina continued. “That’d be Todoroki and Bakugou.”

“Tch,” I heard Bakugou mutter. Todoroki just shifted next to me, looking out the window.

“But Bakugou’s so unhinged, he’d never be popular,” Tsuyu interjected.

“What’d you say, frog-face!”?

“There goes Mount Bakugou,” I muttered. “Most active volcano in the world…”

“The fuck you say!” He rounded on me, leaning over Jirou to get to my seatback.

“You heard me!” I stood up and stared Bakugou straight in the face. “I don’t know what blows up more, your temper or your Quirk!”

“You know Yaseiki, you’re kinda just as bad as he is,” Mina said. “You’re just more snide and sarcastic than angry.”

“Was that all you were going to say Ashido, or do you actually have a point here?”
“See?” She waved at me. “Right to the insult.”

“She’s much nicer with her friends,” Tsuyu came to my defense. “That said, if she offers to cook for you, it may be best to consider that a death threat, kero.”

“Damn it Tsuyu, not you too!”

* * * *

“Is this Universal Studios Japan!?”

I don’t know whether it was Kirishima, Sero, or somebody else who said that, but the result was the same. I pinched the bridge of my nose between two fingers, closed my eyes, and counted to three. Must resist urge to snark… must… resist.

“There’s the flood zone,” a new, airy voice said. “Over there, the landslide zone. There, the conflagration zone, etcetera. Every disaster and accident you can imagine.” The voice’s owner walked out in front of us, and gave a small bow of greeting. “I built this facility myself. I call it…”

With a sweep of his… her… I… I don’t actually know. That voice was so androgynous, and the space suit doesn’t give me anything to go off of… fuck it. With a sweep of his arms, our new host showed off the splendor of the facility… and his all-encompassing spacesuit.

“The ‘Unforeseen Simulation Joint’!”

Huh. Same initials as Universal Studios Japan… alright, fine, USJ it is.

“It’s the Space Hero, Thirteen!” Midoriya gushed. I swear, you can always count on that guy to give you a who’s who of everyone we meet. “He’s a gentleman hero who does his best work in rescue scenarios!”

And confirmation that Thirteen is… well, probably a male! Until I see what’s inside that space suit, it’s a safe enough assumption, right?

“Ooh, I love Thirteen!” Uraraka bounced up and down, completely unable to contain her excitement. “He’s so cool!”

“Thirteen.” Aizawa-sensei and Nagami-sensei both stepped forward to greet their compatriot. “Have you…” I saw Thirteen nod, tap at his wrist like he were wearing a watch, and point over his shoulder. Aizawa-sensei nodded, and gestured to Nagami-sensei, who pulled a phone out of one sleeve, tapped something on its screen, and replaced it. “Then let’s get started.”

“Ah! Before we do, I have one or two points.” Thirteen raised two fingers… then seemed to think better of it. “Or three… wait, no, four points… hm, maybe more…”

“That’s a lot of points,” I heard one of my classmates mutter. Was that Tohru this time? Maybe?

“As I’m sure many of you are aware,” Thirteen began, “My Quirk is called Black Hole. It can suck in and tear apart anything.”

“And you’ve used it to save people in all sorts of disasters!” Midoriya added, to which Uraraka nodded her head so fast that I wanted to look for the guitar solo.

“However!” Thirteen’s voice was grave. “My power could easily kill. I’ve no doubt that there are some among you with similarly dangerous abilities.” Behind Thirteen, I saw Aizawa-sensei glance at...
Todoroki, Midoriya, Bakugou, Aoyama, Mina, Momo, and me, at the very least. He may even have looked to most of the rest of the class; hell, every single one of us, in the right situation, could easily kill somebody, whether accidentally or otherwise. “In our super-powered society, the use of Quirks is heavily restricted and monitored. It may seem that this system is a stable one, but we must never forget that all it takes is one wrong move with an uncontrollable Quirk,” here Midoriya stiffened up, “for people to die.”

I could feel a sense of unease around us, and looked down at my hands. When I’d changed them into a bear’s claws during our combat training last week… Aizawa-sensei was right. One wrong move would’ve been all it took, and Kaminari’s and Jirou’s guts would have been spilling onto the floor. The thought made me feel a little sick.

Given that I could see Todoroki, Midoriya, and Bakugou all looking at their own hands, I could tell I wasn’t alone. The four of us probably had the lowest threshold of lethality for anyone in our class. It was a sobering thought.

“During Aizawa’s physical fitness test, you came to learn of your own hidden potential. And through All Might’s battle training, you experienced the danger that your respective Quirks can pose to others.” Thirteen stood up tall, and stepped closer. “This class will show you a new perspective! You will learn how to utilize your Quirks to save lives.” He turned and gestured at the massive, expansive facility behind him. “Your powers are not meant to inflict harm, and I hope that you leave here today with the understanding that you, and your Quirks, are meant to help people.”

He bowed.

“That is all! Thank you for listening to me.”

“Wow!” “He’s awesome!” “Bravo, bravo!” I give three guesses as to who was clapping along with that last bit. And no, Tenya, the first two don’t count.

“Great.” Aizawa-sensei took his place back at the front. “First off—”

“Aizawa!” Nagami-sensei—no, Euler interrupted. He’d retrieved the staff from his sleeves, and its segments locked into place. He was pointing at something out in the middle of USJ… a mote of dark something that seemed to grow bigger by the instant. I saw a hand come out, and grab the edge.

And then it practically exploded in size, and… and…

And dozens upon dozens of villains poured out of the blackness.

That’s… but, no… what?
I… I don’t—

“Everybody back!” Aizawa-sensei stood in front of us, pulling his goggles down and loosening up the scarf-like weapon around his neck. “Thirteen, protect the students! Euler, with me!”

“Sensei, what the heck are those!?!”

“Don’t move.” He took a step forward. “Those are villains.”

That, but… I… how?

“Sensei, aren’t there intruder sensors!?” Momo asked.
“Yes, of course there are!” Thirteen responded, taking up position in front of us, hands at the ready. “Are they only here, or at the main UA building as well?… Doesn’t matter. If the sensors aren’t working, then it’s one of their Quirks that’s jamming them.”

“USJ is far from the normal campus,” Euler put in, “and there’s not many of us here. If they’d done this yesterday or Monday, they’d be against second- or third-years. This isn’t random… they have an objective.”

“Thirteen!” The Space Hero immediately jumped to attention. “Begin evacuation! Try to contact the school! Kaminari!”

“Y-yes!” He jumped.

“One of these villains must have an electric-type Quirk to jam the sensors. Try to use yours, see if you can get a message out.”

“Got it!”

“Euler.” The other Pro Hero stepped up to join Aizawa-sensei—no, to join Eraserhead. “Let’s go.”

And the two leapt into the fray.

Eraserhead handled the first group. They set themselves into a firing line, but whatever their Quirks were, they didn’t work. Eraserhead’s capture scarf lashed out and grabbed the lot of them, dragging them all to strike each other in midair before impacting the ground, carving a furrow into the dirt and grass beneath them. Another villain, this one four-armed and seemingly made of rocks and crystal, stepped up to try and catch Eraserhead while he recovered.

He didn’t get the chance. In a second, Euler was there, practically caving his face in with his staff, and with a twist of his wrist, the top segment of his staff disconnected and let the chain inside out. He wrapped the villain’s arms with it, and with a mighty wrench, threw the four-armed villain into a pair of other foes trying to approach him from behind, then reached out into the air with one hand. In between his fingers seemed to sprout what could only be a knife, and with a flick of his wrist he sent it flying towards the first villain to come through the portal, the one with the hands all over his body.

The great, muscle-bound behemoth next to him stopped the knife with one finger.

“Whoa,” Midoriya marveled. “They’re holding their own against that entire mob—”

“This is no time for analysis!” Tenya admonished, snapping me out of my reverie. “We need to evacuate!” We turned to run towards the entrance, Thirteen leading our way.

“I won’t allow that.”

And then a great, black something, the same that had let the villains inside, barred our path. It spread along the floor, growing into a wall, with two points of gleaming light somewhere close to the top and center.

“Greetings.” The wall of shadow shrunk, resolving into the vague shape of a man. “We are the League of Villains. Forgive our audacity, but today, we’ve come here to UA High School—this bastion of heroism—to end the life of All Might, the Symbol of Peace.”

They… what? No, that’s ridiculous. They’re here to kill All Might?

Here?
“We were under the impression,” the living shadow continued, “that All Might would be here today. But it would seem the schedule was… revised? Well, no matter.” The arms of the shadow spread, enveloping us. I staggered back a step, bumping into Tsuyu. My hands were shaking, and I felt like my knees would give out on me any moment now.

“My role remains unchanged.”

Bakugou and Kirishima leapt.

“Wait!” Somebody yelled. The two struck out with their Quirks, Kirishima’s knife-hand dispersing large swaths of the shadow, and Bakugou’s explosion sending the vaguely-defined figure at the center flitting away, the motes of light that I figured were its eyes blinking out of existence briefly.

“Not if we end you first,” Bakugou snarled.

“Betcha didn’t see that coming!!” Kirishima taunted.

“Aah… that was close.” The shadow gathered back up, and this time we could clearly see the figure of a man. He had on a button-up shirt and vest, with a tie only barely visible beneath it. Surrounding his collar was a metal… thing, and inside of that metal bit and above it, I saw what could only be a neck and head. “Yes… students though you may be, you are the best of the best.”

“Get back!” Thirteen yelled, stepping forward. “Both of you! I’ll—”

“BEGONE.”

The shadows exploded from the villain’s body, and everything around us grew dark. Some of us tried to jump away. Others hunkered together. Tsuyu and I both stepped back, pressed close to each other, and I tried to reach in front of me for Tenya—

“Writhe in torment… until you breathe your last.”

The floor fell away from beneath me. It was dark. I couldn’t see my hands in front of me. I don’t know which way was up, or which way was down. For that brief instant, there was no light, no sound, no nothing.

Just as my panic reached its crescendo, the world came back into focus.

And I fell towards the water below.
Even as I fell towards the water, I could practically feel my thoughts running through my brain at a mile a minute. There are villains attacking us. That shadowy guy is a mass teleporter. There are villains attacking us. I could smell the faintest whiff of alcohol. There are villains attacking us. That must have been the teleporter the Wendigo had get him out of UA after vandalizing our gym lockers. There are villains attacking us. They want to kill All Might, and seem to think they can do it.

There are villains attacking us.

I have to grow gills right fucking now—

Hitting the water felt like slamming into a concrete wall. My arms hurt. My legs hurt. My tail hurt. My body hurt. My neck burned, and I could feel the gills growing, filtering air from the water. I opened my eyes, and slammed them shut almost immediately. They burned for a moment, and when I opened my eyes back up, I could see.

I have to get out of the water.

There are villains attacking us.

I let some of the air still in my lungs out, and felt it work its way around the side of my face before going behind me. The water was cold, so, so cold. It tasted like salt. I don’t have to worry about breathing.

That doesn’t mean I’m safe.

There are villains attacking us.

Up was currently behind me. I spun and turned, using my tail to right myself and angle so that the surface of the water actually was above me. The water was murky, but bright; there was something in the water making it darker. Probably something Thirteen added to more realistically simulate the darkness of the open ocean. Something flickered out of the corner of my eye; I spun to look. Something—no, someone else was in the water with me. I don’t know if I’m the only one who got sent here; I’m practically fighting blind right now.

I need to… what? I need to what?

The skin on my hands changed, growing grey, pallid, and yet somehow smooth, cutting through the water better than it had before. I spread my fingers, and I could feel it: something was moving in the water. Something shifted off to my left; another two somethings flitted away from it, towards the surface.

Something else rose up from below me. It was coming closer, quickly.

And it was big.

There are villains attacking us.

I didn’t have time to think. I don’t know what that is. Maybe it’s Todoroki, with water frozen beneath him to lift him up to the surface. Maybe it’s Tenya, rocketing himself upwards. Maybe it’s Shouji, using his webbed multi-arms to propel himself through the water. Maybe it’s Ojiro, or Kouda, or Satou, because they’re the only other ones large enough for me to be sensing that
much stuff.

If it’s them… I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

One of my lungs shifted and changed, disconnecting itself from my respiratory system. One of my kidneys morphed and changed, separating out from my body’s filtration. My gallbladder and appendix shifted in my gut. My reproductive organs shifted and changed, and as those did, so too did the skin across my body, growing slick, smooth, and pitted.

The shape coming up underneath me grew closer. I focused, and the new, changed organs in my body thrummed. I felt a hand grasp the tip of my tail. I closed my eyes, and whispered a silent prayer.

In the next instant, the water around me lit up, a bright blue that I could see through my eyelids. The hand clenched around my tail tightened up, then spasmed and shook, and then I could slip my tail from the now-loose fingers.

The electric eel can deliver shocks powerful enough to paralyze its prey, and it does this with three electric organs, capable of giving off low- or high-voltage shocks. It uses low voltage bursts partly to track its prey, but also as a warning to potential predators. I hadn’t bothered with the low-voltage. Whatever had grabbed my tail was in direct contact with my body as I unloaded all of the built-up electric potential my changed organs could output. Whatever, or whoever, had grabbed me?

Unless it had redundant organs, or regenerative abilities, or it was resistant to electrical shocks, or it had actually been an exoskeletal hand grabbing me, or… or…

I threw up into the water.

I’d let loose with enough voltage to stop a grown man’s heart. It was in self-defense. There was nothing else I could have done. I was dazed, disoriented, in an unfamiliar, unknown situation, and—

With the ampullae of Lorenzini I’d borrowed from sharks and placed along my hands, I could sense whatever had risen up to grab me spasm once, twice… and go still.

—and I’d just killed somebody.

I looked up through the water to try and spot the boat I’d seen in this area earlier. There: it was at my two o’clock, both horizontally and vertically. I swam for it with as much speed as I could, letting my tail do most of the work. I gave one last sweep with my hands’ transformed electrosensitive pits before changing my internal organs back to human, and swam up to the side of the ship.

“Kanna-chan!” Kero—

Tsuyu’s tongue wrapped tightly around my body, and with a great lurch I felt myself lift from the water, cold and wet and shivering. I grabbed the railing and helped her pull me the rest of the way over. My hands changed back to having normal skin, and the gills on my neck closed up. I took a deep breath and lurched forward, pulling Tsuyu into a hug and holding on to her for dear life.

“Y-Yaseiki-san…”

“I’m okay,” I sputtered, sliding down one of the walls on the boat’s deck. Tsuyu crouched down with me, not pulling my arms away. “I… I’ll be… I—”

“Pull yourself together Kanna-chan, kero.” Tsuyu held me by my shoulders. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe deep. “We’re still in trouble here.”
“I know,” I gasped out. “It’s... villains. They—”

“They know our schedule,” Midoriya interjected. I looked up, only now taking notice of him. “The simplest explanation is that Wendigo villain Aizawa-sensei told us about,” I froze at the name, “got the intel before anything else. It’s like Todoroki said…” Midoriya clenched his fists, and the pressure squeezed some of the water out of his gloves and onto the boat’s deck. “They’ve been waiting for this chance… and they prepared for it well.”

“We all thought it’d be Mason,” I said, trying to stand. My hooves slipped on the slick deck, and Tsuyu caught me, helping me stand. “That’s why Euler joined us. The Wen…” I gulped. “The last time I saw h-him, he could use his bones like underground spears.”

“And nobody has ever managed to sneak up on Euler,” Midoriya muttered, putting a hand to his mouth. “It’s why he’s called the Untouchable Hero; since the start of his career, no villain has ever managed to land a direct hit onto him. Glancing blows, some scrapes, gashes... but nothing major.”

“But these villains are here for All Might,” Tsuyu said. “Aizawa-sensei said All Might was scheduled to join us today beforehand. For the villains to be here... they must’ve figured out a way to kill him. Otherwise, why come here just to get beaten?” I looked at Tsuyu. My hands started to shake, and it wasn’t from the cold. “I wouldn’t put it past them, kero. That one guy promised to kill us too, after all. Who says we can even hold out until All Might gets here? And even if he shows up, who’s to say he won’t be killed?”

“Tsuyu—”

I heard something from the water around us.

“Get down!” Midoriya lunged forward and pulled both Tsuyu and me down to the deck. Not a moment later, what could only be a jet of pressurized water punched through the deck of the boat, passing straight through the cabin wall. I looked through the cabin window, and saw the jet of water had passed straight through to the other side, possibly all the way through the boat.

“Whatever the reason they’re here,” Midoriya said, pulling both of us around to a position with more cover, “if there’s even a chance that they have a way to beat All Might...”

He looked up at us. Midoriya’s expression... every time I’d seen him before, he’d always been happy, upbeat. Even when he’d been fighting Bakugou in the combat training, there’d been a light to his eyes, some spark there that just said he’d be fine.

That light wasn’t there. In its place, there was a cool, calculating certainty. His eyes were hard, and when he looked at Tsuyu and me, he wasn’t looking at his classmates. He wasn’t looking at the surroundings like a situation to escape from.

Midoriya saw the area around him as a warzone, and we’d become his comrades.

I understood now.

“Look down there.” He gestured off the sides of the boat. “Those guys down there are clearly suited for aquatic combat, right?” Both Tsuyu and I nodded.

“So you’re saying the ringleaders must have recruited for their team with USJ’s environments in mind.”

“Exactly!” Midoriya said. “Their intel told them that much, at least. But even with all that, something odd sticks out.”
He pointed at the both of us.

“They zapped you, Asu—err, Tsuyu, and you, Yaseiki, into the flood zone.”

“Kanna.” I looked him in the eyes. “If you can call her Tsuyu, call me Kanna. And what you’re saying… you think they only have information about their side, don’t they?”

“Right, Yas—Kanna-san!” He caught himself. “If they put you two into the flood zone, then they can’t possibly know about our Quirks!”

“If they’d known about me having frog powers,” Tsuyu put in, “they’d have dropped me in the fire zone, kero.”

“And they’d have dropped me in the urban one,” I murmured. “Anywhere that I have to watch for friendly fire or collateral damage means I can’t cut loose. If they don’t know that—”

“Then they tried to stack the deck in their favor,” Midoriya finished. “That means we have one way to win: we have to exploit what our Quirks can do for all they’re worth! Look!” We hazarded a glance out of cover to see the various villains approaching the ship. “They’re not trying to get on board! That supports my theory: they’re all adapted towards aquatic combat!”

“If we want to get out of this…” I looked to Midoriya—no, Izuku, and then to Tsuyu. “All right. We need to know each others’ capabilities. In depth. Leave nothing out.”

“I can jump really high,” Tsuyu offered, “and stick to walls. My tongue can stretch to a maximum of twenty meters.” Holy crap… “Also, I can spit up my stomach to clean it, and secrete a poisonous fluid… I say ‘poisonous’, but it really only stings a little. Those last two aren’t very useful, so forget about them, kero.”

“You’re strong,” Midoriya murmured, seeming to see Tsuyu in a new light. “I underestimated you.” He glanced to his own hand, and clenched his fist. “I… I have super strength, but immediately after using it…” He grimaced. “It messes me up. My Quirk… it’s a double-edged sword.”

“You’re the last resort.” I held out my hand, and the skin on it turned grey, almost spiky. “I’m… odd. It’s like two Quirks in one, but they’re complementary. I can manifest animal ‘totem’ spirits around my body, in whole or in part, and augment my abilities with theirs, but only ever half of what the actual animal would be capable of, either scaled up to human or scaling my abilities to match theirs.”

I waved my hand. “I can also transform parts of my body into animals. I… I’ve not quite figured that one out in its entirety. My mother can do any animal, but I’m stuck with mammals, with three exceptions: sharks, rays, and electric eels. I… I…”

“Are you okay, kero?”

“I used the electric eel in the water just now,” I admitted, smiling bitterly. “I think… I think I killed one of them.”

Midoriya hissed.

“Kanna-san.” He put a hand on my still-transformed arm, and looked me in the eyes. “Can… can you keep fighting?”

“…”

A massive blast of something ran through the boat, powerful enough we could feel the shockwave pass through the deck under our feet. Something had sheared the boat in half, and one of the villains
surrounding us looked up on the deck with an expression of satisfaction.

“That boat’ll go under in less than a minute!” He yelled up at us. “Once you’re in the water, you’re chum.”

We were running out of time. Soon enough, unless one of us did something, we’d be in the water, where the enemy would swarm us, going in straight for the… the kill.

“We’re out of time!” I yelled, getting to my hooves. “No time to think, we have to… to—”

A light went on in my head.

“That’s it.”

“Kanna-chan?” Tsuyu asked. I was staring down at my hands now. It was… it was so simple. It was so damn simple.

“You’re over-thinking it,” my mother had told me last week. “You can do sharks, you can do rays. They’re not mammals, but you can do them, and you’ve been doing it since the first time I took you into the water.” She’d sat down next to me with a bowl of cookie dough ice cream, keeping me company while Pony was at school and he was possibly still somewhere in Musutafu, waiting. “You keep trying to tell your Quirk how to do it. It’s not about the how; your Quirk will handle that. Just think about what you want to do, and do it.”

“I’m so stupid.” I smiled. It wasn’t a happy smile, or a relieved smile. It was sardonic. Like there was a massive joke, and I only just realized I’d been the butt of it. But at the same time… there was an option. A risky, hilariously dangerous option… but something that we could do. I had an idea.

We had a way out of this mess.

“There’s no more time. Tsuyu-chan, Izuku-san. I have a plan. You’re not going to like it.”

“Tell us.” Izuku’s expression was grim, eyes on the water around us.

“Izuku-san. Your Quirk is probably the strongest one in 1-A aside from Todoroki’s,” I began, looking at Izuku. “We cannot let you use your Quirk unless we have no other option.” I looked to Tsuyu. “Grab Izuku-san. We’re going to jump together. Once we’re at the apex of the jump, I want you to push off of me, get yourself and Izuku to shore.”

“But—! Kanna-san, you—”

“I know!” I yelled. I pulled my costume’s hood up, and moved the sliding earmuffs to just above my ears. “They are all going to come for me, and right now I don’t care.” I focused, and the skin on my torso and legs turned black and grey, rubbery and smooth. A grand dorsal fin sprouted from my back, and my tail grew in size and length, its tip spreading out into a fluke. “Whatever you do, do not let your ears go below the water.”

“What are you going to do?” Tsuyu asked. I slid the protective cups onto my ears, and pressed the outside button. Sturdy, sound-baffling foam expanded into every available space, and the world went quiet. With one more effort of will, I reached for my Quirk… and instead of trying to direct the transformation, I just straightened my arms, relaxed my hands, and let go.

My arms and hands grew stiff, rigid. The elbow vanished, and a hard covering replaced my skin. My arms from what had been the elbow expanded massively, growing to two or three times its size, resolving into what was unmistakably a claw, fixed into place but for a smaller portion on the
bottom that was probably analogous to my thumb. They were heavy; I could only rotate my arms at the shoulder, and even then, it was weird. I felt like I had a pair of wooden planks attached at my biceps.

The comparison couldn’t have been further from the truth.

I saw Izuku’s and then Tsuyu’s mouths move, but I couldn’t hear them.

“Tsuyu, grab Izuku.” I couldn’t even hear myself talk. I called to myself the flea’s spirit, and the glow enshrouded my legs. “On three, we jump.” She tapped me on the dorsal fin, and I looked to her and Izuku. They both gave me concerned looks. I just smiled. I’m glad I couldn’t hear them. If I could, I might have second guessed myself, and then I might have lost my nerve, because I don’t know how many of these villains I might be about to kill. I didn’t have the time to think of a non-lethal option, and when it comes to underwater combat, the bar of lethality is simply too easy to reach. But I couldn’t think about that right now.

I’d already died once. If it was the bad guys’ turn, then so be it.

“One.” I crouched down. “Two.” Tsuyu wrapped one arm around me, and held Izuku by both her tongue and her other arm. “Three!”

We exploded upwards. If I’d just been jumping by myself, I probably could have made it out of the flood zone. I could’ve used the flea to jump up, and transformed my arms into a bat’s wings up there, and glided to safety. But I wasn’t the only one here.

We reached the top of our jump halfway from the edge of the flood zone’s pool.

“Now!”

Tsuyu kicked off my back. I angled myself towards the water, body as straight as I could, and closed my eyes, changing their shape again. When I hit the water, this time, it didn’t hurt. It was still a shock. The water was still cold, and it was heavy, and I could taste the salinity. The gills opened back up on my neck, and I rode my momentum down, down as far as I could go. The inside and outside of my throat shifted, and I slowly began to exhale the air from my lungs, producing a sound I couldn’t hear, but could still sense. With a flick of my tail, I turned, and felt my hooves impact the bottom of the flood zone’s water tank.

Looking around, I could only see the faintest glimmer of light from the surface. Through the shallows, I could see the shapes gathering and massing, diving down through the water to catch me. They didn’t know that this was more than just an act of self-sacrifice, losing one to save two. I raised my transformed arms, and felt my bottom claws click into place. I exhaled a tiny bit more air, and parsed the ultrasound bouncing back towards me. Closer and closer they swam, all taking the shortest distance to their target, picking up speed as they went.

The first one was just about there. Thirty meters away. Twenty meters. Ten. I closed my eyes.

My left claw snapped shut.

Even through my almost perfect soundproofing, I could still hear the burst, and feel it deep in my chest. The pressure slammed me down into the bottom of the flood zone, and I bent my legs, absorbing the shock as best I could. Even though my eyes were closed, the flash was still blinding, and the burst of heat accompanying it washed away the cold of the artificial seafloor, if only for a moment.

My left claw snapped back open, and my right claw slammed shut. The villain that had been closing
on me drifted, possibly dead in the water. Through the orca’s sonar I borrowed, the rest of them were sent rocketing back, hands, fins, whatever covering their eyes and ears. Some of them had blood drifting out and into the water.

The survivors stopped short or swam away.

The snapping shrimp is a tiny crustacean, with the largest specimens measuring only up to two inches in length. It has one normal claw, and one large, massively oversized in comparison to the other. When the snapping shrimp slams its oversized claw shut, it forces water away from the claw at such a speed that it causes the pressure of the water in that area to decrease rapidly enough to vaporize underwater, producing a bubble through an effect known as cavitation. When this bubble collapses, it produces heat rivaling that of the sun’s surface, a flash of light, and one of the single loudest sounds in the ocean. A gunshot is usually in the range of 140 to 195 decibels.

The snapping shrimp, alternatively known as the pistol shrimp, produces a sound that reaches two hundred and fifteen decibels.

Sound propagates more efficiently through water than it does through air. The medium has more ‘stuff’ to it, more matter to vibrate. Sound is really just vibrations traveling through a medium. The shockwave from an explosion is effectively the same as sound, just on a magnitude higher than anything a speaker can produce.

But underwater, and at human size, the pistol shrimp’s sonic gun is a weapon of mass destruction.

I pushed up off the floor, angled my claws down, and fired again, and again, and again, riding the shockwave towards shore. The villains in front of me rocketed back, the ones furthest away swimming to the surface as quickly as they could, ears still covered where possible. Many of them didn’t move, possibly dead, possibly knocked unconscious from the agony.

I didn’t care.

They had chosen to attack us. They chose to attack students, children, with the intent to injure, maim, even kill. If they died, then that was just what they deserved. I don’t care about them anymore. They had come expecting weak prey.

It was only fair that they met a bigger fish.

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“Kanna-chan.”

“Kanna-san!”

I’d transformed most of the way back before reaching the shore, and now that I could get my hooves solidly into the silt beneath me, I changed my tail back to its normal state. It had been starting to irritate me something awful, and having that fluke at the end felt weird. I kept flexing my hands, trying to get the stiffness out from when they’d been hard, rigid, unmoving exoskeleton.

“What now?” I asked.

“Right.” Midoriya waded towards the edge of the water, staying low so that the drop between the ground and the water’s surface could cloak him. Tsuyu and I followed his example, and I changed some of my skin back into a shark’s, which could possibly reduce any drag if I had to leap out quickly. “For now, calling for help is our top priority. If possible, let’s follow the shoreline,” he pointed towards where Aizawa-sensei and Nagami-sensei fought back to back, “and avoid the plaza.
altogether.”

“Right,” Tsuyu nodded. “Looks like they’re trying to draw them towards the center, kero.” I looked to where our teachers fought back to back, Aizawa-sensei canceling out Quirks before they could do harm, and Nagami-sensei removing threats that he couldn’t see. The two complemented each other well, but…

“There’s too many of them,” I murmured.

“It’s only a matter of time until they slip up. I…” Midoriya looked at us, and frowned. “I’m not saying we should just… dive in. But if we see an opening, any chance to lighten their load, then we should take it.”

“Kero…”

I didn’t say anything. We crept along the shoreline, getting closer and closer to the stairs leading out of the plaza. As we neared the stairs, Aizawa-sensei made his move.

Nagami-sensei positioned his staff for Aizawa-sensei to jump on, and with a mighty swing, he propelled our homeroom teacher towards the villain covered in hands. Aizawa-sensei lashed out with his scarf-weapon, and the villain caught it. He tugged, and our teacher rocketed towards him, burying a fist in the villain’s elbow. He staggered back… and then placed his hands on Aizawa-sensei’s other elbow.

Which started to come apart.

“What the…”

Aizawa-sensei leapt away, and Nagami-sensei knocked another pair of villains away. Aizawa-sensei cradled his wounded arm to his chest, but got back into a ready position.

“Your Quirk…” We were close enough to hear the lead villain now. “It’s not good in long, group battles, huh? His is, but this isn’t either of your specialty… you both prefer sneak attacks. Yet you both jumped right in. Hoping to make the kids feel safe? So cool, so cool. By the way, Hero…”

I saw Nagami-sensei leap to the side and lash out with his staff. An instant later, he seemed to jerk forward, pulled by some unseen force, which resolved itself into a great black shape an instant later.

It flung Nagami-sensei by his now-loose chain staff, sending him rocketing back into the hillside next to the plaza stairs hard enough to crater it, sending clouds of dirt billowing into the air.

I couldn’t see if he was okay.

“I’m not the boss mob here.”

The great, dark thing grabbed Aizawa-sensei by his wounded arm, and tugged. At this short of a distance, we could hear the bone’s sickening snap, and Aizawa-sensei’s screams of agony. The thing forced him to the ground, and his skull made a harsh, rough sound as it impacted the concrete plaza floor.

“Meet the Anti-Symbol of Peace.” The villain ringleader walked forward, barely able to contain his mirth. “The bio-engineered villain…”

The thing tilted its head back, and roared.

“Noumu.”
The man… creature… beast… no. None of those words applied to the monstrosity in front of us. Even when he was most savage, the Wendigo had at least been recognizably human. This, this thing, this… Noumu. There was no trace of humanity left in that monster. The pitch-black skin, ripped and torn where the muscles had grown too large to be contained, its oversized bones pressed against its too-tight flesh, and the brain…

All Might, for all that he was larger than life, was always, always recognizable as a man. This so-called anti-All Might, this Noumu—

The air cracked and split, and a swirl of blackness cold no get it away it’s too dark let me out swirled into existence, the very air seeming to protest its appearance.

“Shigaraki Tomura.” I had to slap a hand over my mouth to keep from hissing; we were so close, so close that they would hear us if we made any noise, see us if they looked just a little bit to their left. That wasn’t why I’d hissed; no, it was something else, something that implied far, far worse.

The cloud of smoke had spoken what I could only assume was the hand-villain’s name. Not a code name, like Eraserhead, or Euler, or All Might. He’d spoken an actual, recognizable name.

They never had any intentions of letting us leave here alive in the first place, did they?

“Kurogiri.” Shigaraki replied in kind, this time with a name I was certain served as a pseudonym. Black mist…it fit all too well. “Is Thirteen dead?”

“He’s incapacitated and gravely wounded.” Tsuyu and Izuku gasped, and for just the barest instant, I saw the shadow’s glowing ‘eye’ dart our way. “But there were some students I couldn’t warp away… and one of them escaped.”

“And then, in an instant, he stopped scratching at his neck. His hands fell limp at his sides, and he slumped, his entire posture stinking of disappointment, defeat. “We won’t stand a chance against dozens of pros. It’s game over… yeah, it’s game over for now.” He turned away from Kurogiri, looking past where the misshapen thing still held Aizawa-sensei’s shattered arm, hanging limply like so much gristle and meat.

I felt the bile rise up in my throat, and had to swallow it back down. It burned.

“We’re leaving.”

Tsuyu, Izuku and I all turned to look at one another.

“Did he just say they’re leaving?” Tsuyu whispered.

“I think so,” Izuku replied.

“I’ve got a bad feeling, Midoriya, kero.”
“Yeah…” His voice turned low, quiet. “To do all this, and then just leave on a whim?”

“It’s not how villains act.” I cut in, pitching my voice as quietly as I could without actually whispering. Beneath the water, my arms shifted, growing large, furred, and clawed. Something didn’t feel right. A year and some change ago, when the Wen… when Mason attacked us, and saw that he’d lost, he didn’t just leave. It was a sunk cost already; you may as well take what you could get. Mason had turned to attack myself, my father, and the crowd, damn whatever principles he claimed to have.

“But before that.” Shigaraki Tomura, the hand villain, turned… pointing right at us.

“Let’s wound All Might’s pride a little. Yeah… let’s leave a few dead kids.”

One moment, he’d been twenty feet away. The next, he was in front of us, hand extending towards Tsuyu’s face… the same hand that had disintegrated Aizawa-sensei’s elbow…

I—I had to—

I couldn’t make it. I failed, and now my friend was about to pay the ultimate price. Shigaraki’s hand clasped Tsuyu’s face.

… but nothing happened.

“Hm… you really are pretty cool.” He pulled his fingers back just the tiniest bit, and turned to look. “Eraserhead.”

Straining against the Noumu’s grip, Aizawa-sensei had lifted his head, and though I could hardly see, there it was: the faintest glimmer of crimson, deep in the shadow of his brow. Then the Noumu slammed his head back into the concrete plaza, and it was gone.

I leapt up out of the water, throwing Tsuyu back with one bear paw. On her other side, Izuku leapt out of the water, his arm aglow with power.

“Get off of her!”

He struck with his punch, and the aftershock was enough to completely obscure all vision. I dug in with my hooves and brought my claws down, meeting flesh and, with a wet, rending sound, tearing with no small amount of resistance. I dug in, weathering the aftermath of Izuku’s punch as it blew my hair and hood around.

When the wind faded and I could see again, I looked up. But it wasn’t the hand-covered villain filling my sight. It wasn’t his arm my claws had gouged. Because while we’d been so quick to act, we’d completely missed it.

We hadn’t heard the instant Shigaraki called for the Noumu.

“Quite a move you two pulled off.” The Noumu’s split shoulder bubbled and writhed, but where I’d expected blood, there was none. Where I’d expected bone, there were none. It pulsed, and spasmed, and then new flesh filled the gap between arm and shoulder back in. “So you’re the girl he wants, huh? Guess we’ll leave you alive, then…” The Noumu grabbed my bear arm with its healed one. “And you… a ‘Smash’ too, huh. You a fan of All Might?” The thing took a hold of Midoriya by the arm.

I brought my claws to bear, and carved through the thing’s tendons, loosening its grip and freeing myself. Tsuyu shot her tongue out to grab Midoriya. Shigaraki’s outstretched hand reached for
Tsuyu again. I swiped at the villain’s arm, but even at that moment, I knew: *I wasn’t going to make it.*

That was when the doors at the top of the plaza stairs *exploded* inward. It hadn’t been a bomb. There was no light, no heat, no shockwave. The sound alone brought *all* of us to a stop, and Shigaraki, the Noumu, Kurogiri, and all the rest of the villains milling about in the plaza and watching their leaders… we *all* turned to look.

His footsteps echoed. Beneath them, I could hear the tile cracking, shattering from the weight and force of his steps. Even from here, we could see. We could *all* see.

**“Fear not.”**

All Might loosened the tie from round his neck, and tore both it and his collar to shreds, letting the useless cloth fall to the floor.

**“I have arrived.”**

The first time I’d seen All Might in person, he hadn’t been smiling, so heinous were the acts and situation. And now, once again, All Might had shown up to save the day.

*He wasn’t smiling.*

“Ah…” Shigaraki chuckled, the sheer *elation* in his tone and the way his hands came to his face… I stumbled back. I caught myself with my claws, and shuffled away from him in case he brought his hands or the Noumu to bear. But he didn’t. He just stood there, laughing. “Kurogiri… we have a *continue!*”

All Might stepped to the stairs, and when his foot came down, he *blurred* out of existence. He moved too fast for the eye to track, but what we *could* see was the aftereffects of his movements. A villain fell to the side, followed by another, and then a third, a fourth, a fifth!—

He reappeared beside Aizawa-sensei, setting Nagami-sensei down beside All Might, holding himself up with his staff. All Might picked Aizawa-sensei up and held him close, cradled in one arm like a baby. The once-mighty Eraserhead hung limp, bloody and broken. Beaten.

All Might looked up, and for the barest instant, I saw a deep, brilliant blue *glow* in the shadows of his brows. Then the world blurred out of existence, and I was suddenly between Tsuyu on one side, and Izuku and Nagami-sensei on the left.

“All of you, evacuate. Nagami-sensei, can you stand?”

“All, I can,” he confirmed. “Give me Aizawa. Midoriya, give me a hand.” All Might draped Aizawa’s body over Nagami-sensei’s shoulders, and the man held onto our homeroom teacher with one hand, using his staff to offset the limp in his opposite leg. Midoriya took position to help keep Aizawa-sensei off the ground, but then called out to the Top Hero.

“All Might, it’s no use! That brain villain, one for—I mean, my attack wasn’t strong enough to break my arm this time, but he didn’t even flinch!”

“A-and he’s a regenerator!” I burst in. “It’s fast, I don’t know if—”

“Midoriya-shounen.” All Might turned to us. “Yaseiki-shoujo.”

And he smiled.
“Everything will be alright.” He turned back towards the villains, and set his stance. “Now go.”

Tsuyu led us away from the plaza, and once we were far enough away, I heard All Might push off the ground, and felt the tremors his advance caused, even through my hooves.

“Carolina SMASH!”

I could hear the impact of All Might’s fists on the Noumu’s rubbery skin, and its toneless, emotionless roar as I imagined its counterattack. The two traded blow after blow, slowly growing softer and softer as we got further from the fight and closer to the stairs. The villains All Might had laid out on his initial advance were still conscious, but none of them were moving, groaning with pain and some even vomiting from the force he’d used to lay them low.

We had just made it to the stairs when a burst of air pressure nearly sent Tsuyu and Nagami-sensei to the ground, and had both me and Tsuyu need to take a step forward to retain our balance.

“Ah,” Nagami-sensei spoke. “That would be a suplex.”

“A…” I floundered. “That was an explosion, sensei.”

“He may be a rookie teacher who can’t say anything without looking at his notes, but he’s on a whole other level as a hero!” Tsuyu exclaimed. “Were we overthinking it? All Might’s amazing!”

Midoriya looked back, an expression on his face I couldn’t place. Concern? Worry? It wasn’t anything positive, and—

Nagami-sensei stopped walking.

“The warp gate—!” He stopped. “Asui-san, come take Aizawa-sensei.” He transferred our teacher’s arm over, but only managed to run a couple of steps back before he stumbled and fell. “D-damn it! All Might, he…” Something passed over Nagami-sensei, possibly a wave of nausea, and he cut off, buckling over. He couldn’t say anything, though, possibly trying to push back whatever had taken the wind out of his sails. A concussion?

Then the dust faded, and we got to see what it was he’d noticed through his Panopticon.

“K-ker…”

The portal villain, Kurogiri, had created a doorway beneath where All Might had intended to slam the Noumu into the ground, emerging back underneath All Might’s midsection. The Noumu reached through the portal, grasping All Might with its hands, and digging its fingers into All Might’s side. Where the creature’s fingers dug in on his left, All Might—

All Might bled.

“Were you trying to keep him from moving by sticking him deep in the concrete?” We could hear Shigaraki gloat, even at this distance. “You won’t be able to stop him like that… because Noumu is just as strong as you are.” All Might grimaced, and the villain could only laugh. “This is good, isn’t it Kurogiri? What an unexpected opportunity.”

The portals beneath All Might began to shrink, going from one great shadow into two separate portals, growing smaller by the instant. All Might released the Noumu’s lower half and grabbed at the hand digging into his left side, but even though we could practically see the muscles rippling beneath his shirt, the Noumu held him fast.
“So this is your first strike? Impress, but you’d best prepare yourselves!”

Shigaraki looked at All Might… and brought a hand up to scratch at his neck. The tic again… he was anxious, but—

“Kurogiri.”

“I do not want blood and guts overflowing within me, but I would be happy to take in someone as great as you.” My eyes widened. “You are too fast to see with the human eye; Noumu’s job was simply to restrain you. And then, once your body is halfway in… to close the gate and tear you apart.” The shadow flared. “That is my task.”

No… they had All Might exactly where they wanted him. Even with all his prodigious strength, the precarious position he was in meant that he couldn’t actually produce any leverage. All Might could have all the power in the world, but right now, none of that mattered. The villains were about to accomplish their objective, they… they—

“Asui-san.”

“W-what is it, Midoriya?”

“Trade places with me carrying Aizawa-sensei.”

“K-ker?” Tsuyu obliged, stepping forward. “Okay, but… why?”

He didn’t answer. When he’d been relieved of his burden, he turned to face where All Might fought… and broke into a sprint.

“Kero!”

“Izu—Midoriya!” I turned to Tsuyu. “I’m sorry!”

I ran after him. Midoriya’s Quirk… he had the same strength to bring to bear that All Might did; having seen them in the same place, fighting at more or less the same time, I saw that now. But where All Might could keep going, once Midoriya had struck, he was a sitting duck.

And these villains had already shown that they were willing to kill us.

“Midoriya, wait!—”

I tried as best I could to catch up to him, but he had too much of a lead on me. My arms were still in bear form, and slowing me down; I changed back to normal, and started to pick up speed, but he was already within spitting distance. He lunged, arm outstretched, screaming inarticulately.

The shadow rose up in front of him.

“How foolish.” I saw something deepen and somehow grow darker within the shadow. No… he was just going to—

The movement came from the corner of my left eye. One instant, nothing, and the next?

“Move, Deku! Get out the damn way!”

Bakugou.

He burst in and dispersed the shadow with a detonation from his palm, then grabbed on tightly to the
metal collar *thing* that seemed to house the living shadow in the first place, throwing it to the floor.

“*Oraaa!*”

Something else came in from behind us, this time the sound of crackling, freezing, and breaking. A sheet of ice spread along the ground, enveloping the half of the Noumu that applied the pressure to keep All Might’s hurt side speared on the Noumu’s fingers, leaving All Might completely untouched by the substance.

“Todoroki-shounen!?***”

“All I heard was that you were here to kill All Might,” he groused out, tone as lacking in affect as ever… but his eyes told a different story. He was *furious*. His rage burned as hot as the winter long, and by the stiffness of his jaw and the tension of his shoulders, he was just *aching* to let that ice of his skewer something. “But scum like you could *never* manage to kill him.”

All Might leapt free of the Noumu’s grasp. I could hear someone else coming up from behind us, but the Noumu was immobilized, frozen solid.

… the Noumu was *immobilized*. I grit my teeth, and focused. The Noumu could heal itself, and its regeneration was *powerful*. But to this day, there hadn’t been a single regeneration Quirk that had been able to overcome the venom of the box jelly. Regeneration could undo the damage the venom caused… but it couldn’t actually *purge the venom in the first place*. It was the same reason regenerators were some of the worst transmission vectors for contagious disease: their Quirk may heal away the damage, but it can’t erase the cause.

I rushed forward, and my arm morphed again, back to my standby bear. But as my claws formed, I told my Quirk what I wanted. I needed something like a snake’s fangs. Something to inject the venom. And a *very specific venom* to actually inject. Something in my transformed paws shifted and warped, in a way I couldn't recognize.

My claws encountered resistance, but once they bit into the Noumu’s flesh, I tensed strange muscles I’d never had before, and felt the venom flow from my claws and into the *creature*. When I pulled away and jumped back, I could see the venom had already gone to work: the furrows my claws had gouged stayed open. Tiny bits of blood seemed to pool around the opening, but it just beaded and congealed immediately, not actually flowing.

Looking up, I saw Kirishima hit the ground, and the hand villain, Shigaraki, flitting away from him.

“Damn it! I didn’t get to show off!”

“Kirishima, get back!” I yelled. “Don’t let him touch you!”

“Wha—shit!” He leapt back, and I grabbed and pulled him back with me as I retreated towards where Midoriya and Todoroki stood, with Bakugou holding the fog-villain’s metal part to the ground.

“Stop acting so cocky, ya foggy fuck!”

“K-Kacchan!—”

“You fucked up, you bastard!” Bakugou kept yelling at the downed villain held in his grasp. “Just like I thought. You’re *not* all gas and smoke!” Kurogiri gave off some sound, and the shadow portals still open writhed, and shrunk… until Bakugou released a warning shot from his palm. “Heh!” He leaned in, sneering. “You just covered the solid parts of your body with that mist, didn’t ya? If
your whole body was untouchable, you wouldn’t have said ‘that was close’! Tch, fucking amateur!”
Kurogiri tried to move again, but a bigger blast from Bakugou elicited an actual groan of pain. “Ah, ah! I think you’re doin’ anything fishy, I’ll blow you to bits!”

“Aah…” I looked up at Shigaraki, who, despite the sudden change in fortune, hadn’t resumed scratching at his neck. He’d clasped his hands in front of him, thumbs very specifically kept away and off. “You’ve taken away our exit strategy. And what’s more…” He looked at us, and I saw his hands tighten, the bones and tendons standing out. “You’re all at full health. Kids these days… you’re making our League of Villains look bad. Hm… let’s get our exit back, shall we?” He spread his hands. “Noumu.”

Its mouth didn’t move. Its throat didn’t move. But even so, we could hear the Noumu’s cries, and the ice crackle and break as it pulled itself upright through the portal. In doing so, its arm and leg cracked, shattered, and fell away, along with much of the right half of its body. But still the creature moved. Still it managed to partly stand, its one remaining knee and arm holding it upright. The arms in its head rolled around separately from each other, and as the Noumu moved, the remaining ice broke off from its body.

“His body’s falling apart, but he’s still moving!!”

“Get back, everyone!” All Might stepped forward, pushing Midoriya behind him. “Strength, shock absorption, and—”

“That’s right,” Shigaraki gloated. “This is his hyper regeneration.”

But even as he said that, and the ice fell off of the creature’s body, nothing else happened. The Noumu propped itself up on an arm and a leg, and the stumps… remained stumps.

“Noumu—”

“It won’t work.” I saw everyone turn towards me, and I raised my claws, flexing to drop beads of venom from each of their tips. “Its regeneration is a little tied up. Please leave a message at the tone.” Shigaraki took a step back at that. His hand came up to his neck, and his scratching reopened the scabs and scrapes he’d already carved into the side of his neck.

“It is over, villains!” All Might stepped forward, and cratered the ground with a mighty stomp, sending Shigaraki stumbling back. But the motion seemed to shake Shigaraki out of whatever funk he’d fallen into.

“Over?” He canted his head, and shrugged his shoulders. “I suppose I’ll just have to call my Summon, then, huh Noumu?”

“Wha—!?!”

All of us turned, but we couldn’t react in time. Despite its injury, despite being crippled, the Noumu still managed to push off the ground, fly through the air—

“Guh!”

—and struck Bakugou straight in the sternum, sending him flying back, skipping along the ground before coming to a stop. I could see him choke and curl in on himself.

“Bakugou!” “Bakugou-shounen!” “Kacchan!”

“That little trick of yours won’t work anymore, girl.” I whirled, and saw that the fog villain, Kurogiri,
had procured something from one of his portals. It was jabbed deep into the open wound I’d left on the Noumu, and when he pulled it back, the wounds closed up, and the stumps of the Noumu’s arm and leg writhed, growing back out into full limbs as we watched. “An unexpected tactic… but not one we hadn’t prepared for. Box jelly venom is the gold standard for stopping regeneration.” The syringe clattered to the floor, where the Noumu stepped on it, and roared.

“It was only natural that we would have its countermeasure. Shigaraki Tomura?”

“Noumu.”

The thing moved, and the world blurred out again. The next thing I knew, Kirishima and I were on the ground beside Todoroki. I hadn’t even felt something hit me; one moment I was closer to where Bakugou had been, and the next, I was over here. We heard a coughing behind us, and I turned to see Bakugou.

“Kacchan!” Midoriya went to pick him up, and Bakugou didn’t swat him away.

“T-that thing…” He turned to look at Kirishima and me. “All Might took the hit? I didn’t even see them move…”

“None of us did,” Kirishima said. “Did All Might…?” He pointed, and we followed his finger. There, visible through a hole in the concrete wall that separated USJ’s zones from one another, was All Might, coughing from an impact he hadn’t quite been able to parry with his own arm.

“Do you not have any concept of holding back?” He asked, more rhetorically than anything I thought.

“Noumu is made to survive anything you can dish out, and give the exact same punishment right back. He hits you just as hard as you can hit him. And he’ll do anything to save a comrade. Isn’t that what you’d say, hero?” Shigaraki’s finger came up to point our way. “Just like earlier, when that plain boy came at me with everything he had, and the girl tried to maul me. They came at me with everything they had.” He stepped forward, and I could see his shoulders tense. “But violence in the name of saving others is admirable, isn’t it, hero?” He growled, burying his hands—again without the thumbs, I saw—into his hair, then scratching at his neck, and then throwing them wide in a frenzy. “You know what, All Might? That pisses me off! Heroes and villains thrive on violence, and still we’re categorized. You’re good, they say. You’re evil, they say. That’s how it is! And you.” He pointed. “Symbol of Peace? Hah! In the end, you’re just a tool of repression, meant to keep us down! Your violence only breeds more violence. And I’ll show the world by killing you.”

“Heh!” All Might laughed. “What a lie. Idealistic criminals have a real fire in their eyes, a true passion. But you? You’re just here to enjoy yourself.”

I didn’t hear the response. I did hear Todoroki step forward.

“We outnumber them two to one,” he said. “We have the advantage.”

“Kacchan already exposed the fog guy’s weakness,” Midoriya nodded, adding on.

“These guys are crazy, but if we back All Might up…” Kirishima bared his hands, and hardened them into blades. “We can push them back!”

“NO!” All Might stepped in front of the five of us, and put an arm out. “Run away. Get out of here.”

“You would’ve been in trouble if I hadn’t done anything earlier,” Todoroki fired back.
“That was a different story, Todoroki-shounen!” All Might balled his hand into a fist, the force alone causing enough sound to make us all jump. “Thank you for that. But it’s fine now.” He turned back to smile at us. “Now, just watch as a pro gives it his all.”

“All Might, you’re bleeding!” Midoriya yelled out. He didn’t respond.

All Might just gave us a thumbs up and turned to face his opponent.

“I must do this,” he murmured. “Why?…"

“Noumu. Kurogiri. Get him.” The Noumu stood up, and Kurogiri’s shadow flared. “I’ll handle the children.” Shigaraki sprinted towards us, hands at the ready. I shifted my other arm into a gorilla’s, and held it open and at the ready. Ice crackled at Todoroki’s feet. Midoriya stepped back with Bakugou over one arm, and the explosive boy leveled his free arm, bracing himself against Midoriya. Kirishima kneeled low, body hardening.

“Because I am…”

A wave of pure seismic force tore through the ground, sending all five of us flying back towards the plaza. Shigaraki lost his footing and stumbled, and the ground melted and fell away beneath his hands.

And at the center of it all?

“THE SYMBOL OF PEACE!!”

All Might’s fist slammed into the Noumu’s, and the pressure wave from their impact blew us even further away. I righted myself as best my could and slammed my claws into the ground just as Kirishima did with his hardened hands, and Todoroki grew a wall of ice behind us to arrest our movement.

“Oi, you talked about his shock absorption yourself earlier, didn’t you!?” Shigaraki yelled out.

“So I did!” All Might roared back. He punched again, and again, and again, meeting the Noumu blow for blow. Their fists and arms began to move faster and faster, until I couldn’t even see them as more than the occasional large, flesh-colored blur next to them. And even through the din and the wind, we could still hear All Might over the fight, so far did his voice carry. “If your Quirk isn’t shock nullification, but shock absorption, then there’s an upper limit to it!” The Noumu landed a solid hit onto All Might’s already bloodied left side, and though he staggered for a moment, he very quickly returned to the offensive.

“No way…” Midoriya gasped.

“You see it too?” I asked. “Every single hit… it’s not random. He’s not just throwing punches to hit it.”

“Every single hit.” Bakugou coughed, and spat something out. “The same spot. Over, and over, and over.”

Every time All Might landed a punch on the Noumu, its flesh rippled, shuddered, and bounced, eventually bouncing right back to where it had been before, like a great big ball of jello. But right as that wave was just about to complete its trip and leave the Noumu’s body, All Might sent another hit, at exactly the same spot, and the force kept bouncing around and around the Noumu’s body. And even with its shock absorption, and its regeneration making sure it could keep going despite the damage to its muscles that it incurred absorbing All Might’s impacts, it was losing. Its skin tore open,
and stayed torn open. Its punches were wider, less focused. It couldn’t move forward, only stepping back as All Might advanced upon it, and every step was less coordinated, less steady and balanced than the one before it.

“Made to fight me!?” All Might pushed forward, the ground cracking beneath his feet as he pushed off and further into the Noumu. “If you can face me at one hundred percent, then I'll just force you to surrender from beyond that!”

All Might struck the Noumu, and it seemed to be recoiling from every single blow now. With a roar, he landed a mighty blow that broke through the creature’s own flurry of punches and sent it careening back, until the divot its legs carved in the concrete was too much and it was sent flying upwards.

“A hero!…” All Might leapt for the Noumu, and it righted itself, ran along on all fours, and then launched into the air to meet All Might. It landed a hit and reversed their positions, pushing All Might’s back to the ground, but a light tap with his leg brought All Might back up, whereupon he grabbed the Noumu’s clenched hands in their hammer blow, spun, and stomped the Noumu into the ground. “… can always break out of a tough spot!” The impact shattered more concrete, and with a powerful knee strike, All Might sent the Noumu flying. He leapt to meet the Noumu above the ground, and transferred all his momentum into the Noumu. He spun the thing around and sent it crashing down to earth, where it left an impact crater more reminiscent of a meteor than a man.

“Holy shit,” one of us murmured. I couldn’t tell you which. Maybe it was me, maybe it was Bakugou, or even Midoriya. But one thing was clear: this… was the man who had become the Top Hero.

With a skyward punch, All Might rocketed back down to the ground, right as the Noumu’s shock absorption made it bounce back into the air.

“Hey villain…” All Might landed with a mighty slam, rubble flying away from his landing zone. “Have you ever heard these words?” All Might seemed to grow just then. It wasn’t a physical thing. Something about his presence shifted, and where there had once been a man, there was now simply raw force, pressing and straining the boundaries of its human vessel.

“GO BEYOND!”

He pulled his fist back, and when he moved, his entire body followed with it.

All Might’s fist struck the Noumu, and we could quite literally see the creature’s shock absorption fail. Its body glowed with energy, bulging grotesquely as it tried and failed to contain the force All Might poured into its body.

“PLUS… ULTRA AA AAAAAA!!!!!!”

All Might’s blow sent the Noumu flying up, up, into the boundary wall of USJ. Noumu met the wall, and the wall lost. It broke through, and the electronics, machinery, security devices and lights catastrophically failed from the force. A shudder ran through the entire facility, and through the hole in its domed housing we could see the Noumu part clouds as it passed.

And as the darkness passed, the sun shone through. The villains’ secret weapon had been defeated.

All Might had won.

“I really have gotten weaker,” he said, voice light and almost humorous in tone. “In my prime, five
hits would have been *more* than enough for that!” He stood upright and brought his fist to his chest, pounding just above his heart, smiling all the while. “But shit! That took more than three hundred hits!”

He turned away from us now, towards where Shigaraki and Kurogiri still stood, stock-still and staid, still staring and tracking the Noumu’s flight path.

“Now, villains… I’m sure we’d all like this to end as quickly as possible. So, shall we *finish* this?”

Shigaraki’s hands came up to his neck. They scratched, and they scratched, and he *bled*. Crimson streams trickled down his hands, disappearing beneath the cuffs of his sleeves as he grew more and more visibly agitated.

“You cheated!… They, they said he’d gotten weaker, but he’s not weak at all!” He staggered, falling towards Kurogiri. “They *lied* to me?”

“Well!?” All Might stepped forward, his stomp sending small pieces of broken concrete jumping into the air. Shigaraki scampered back, a high-pitched whimpering sound coming from him. “I thought you were here to ‘clear the game’. If you think you can take me…” He spread his arms wide. “Then *give me everything you have*!” But still, the villains stayed put. All Might slowly began to walk over, his steps heavy, pace languid. “Well? *Are you coming*?”

“Noumu… if only we still had *Noumu*!”

“Shigaraki Tomura. Calm yourself. It’s apparent that Noumu did manage to deal some real damage to All Might.” And he was right, I saw. All Might was bleeding, not just from where the Noumu had dug its fingers into his side, but also from the corner of his mouth, from his knuckles, his knees, scrapes all across his body from the sharp concrete shards that had been flying around…

“Reinforcements are due to arrive in a few minutes at most, yes, but if we double team him, we may still have a chance!”

“Ah…” Shigaraki’s hands left his throat, his fingertips dyed red with blood. “Right, right… we can still do this. The final boss is *right there*.” And yet he turned away from All Might, and to *us*.

“Kurogiri.”

Shigaraki fell into the ground. We looked to find him, and there he was, behind us. Hands outstretched.

Reaching for Midoriya and Bakugou, who still hadn’t managed to fully turn around.

Of course, some grim part of my mind realized. If All Might wanted to defend us, he would have to put himself into the firing line, whether it be for Shigaraki’s apparently deadly touch, or for one of Kurogiri’s portals, ones that could apparently open and close within the blink of an eye. Fast as All Might was, in his wounded and tired state, not even he would be able to stop himself, especially if Kurogiri’s portal opened in such a way that he had no purchase, or directly into Shigaraki’s outstretched hand, or—!

I saw it before I heard it. Shigaraki’s hands snapped to the side, a new stream of blood beyond that of his self-inflicted wounds falling to the concrete. A moment later, the sound reached us.

Two gunshots.

“Sorry everyone!” A familiar voice rang out through USJ, sent over the speakers embedded in the facility’s domed roof. “We’re a little late! Everyone we could gather, they’re all here!” Nedzu was
here, and there I saw him, riding on Sekijirou Kan’s—Vlad King’s—shoulders.

“President of Class 1-A, Iida Tenya!” Tenya roared, standing tall and proud before the assembled Pro Heroes of UA. “We have returned!”

All Might rushed in and scooped the five of us up in his arms, bounding to the top of the plaza stairs. He dropped us behind the assembled teachers and fell to a knee coughing, whereupon Recovery Girl, who had been hidden behind the other teachers, emerged, checking us all over.

Snipe’s gun continued to go off, and Present Mic and Ectoplasm took care of the villains trying to rush up the plaza stairs. Power Loader carried Midnight off in one direction, and Cementoss and Vlad King rushed off to the other, all of them going to dispatch villains in the various disaster zones. Three more UA Heroes I didn’t recognize also joined them, and the villains soon realized they’d lost.

The cavalry had arrived.

“All of you…” All Might looked to all of us: we five who had squared off against the Noumu, Shigaraki, and Kurogiri, and the others at the top of the plaza, who had assisted Thirteen and Euler in their wounded states. He gave us all that grand smile of his, and offered a thumbs up.

“Fear not. For help has arrived.”

We were saved.
Chapter Twenty-Three

People don’t tend to think of the logistics involved with mass arrests and incarcerations. Sure, intellectually you can understand that literally hundreds of people all managed to do some seriously bad stuff, and all of them need to be cuffed, catalogued, carted away, and thrown in a cell somewhere. When all was said and done, the amount of villains at USJ numbered at one-hundred and thirty-two villains, not counting Shigaraki and Kurogiri, who had somehow managed to escape in the chaos. And for each of those villains, there had to be transport, guards, and a fallback plan. By the time everything was accounted for, almost the entirety of Musutafu’s police department was out here at USJ: all their strike teams, all of their personnel carriers, all of their transport vehicles, cruisers, officers, detectives… the only thing missing was the Police Chief himself!

The Noumu had been found quickly, and while it had been sent skyward on a literal ballistic trajectory, it still landed right back down outside of USJ. I’m not sure which of the two competing explanations for this phenomenon was scarier: that the thing had somehow tried to adjust its flight trajectory to get back before falling into its completely docile, passive, braindead state… or that All Might had punched the thing so high up that the Coriolis Effect came into play.

I’m going to stick with the latter. I’d much rather think that our greatest hero is just that strong, rather than the monster he’d overcome.

“"All of you have no idea just how lucky you are!”

Recovery Girl stood in front of us, both hands on her hypodermic-shaped cane… which I was growing increasingly certain was an actual hypodermic needle filled with God only know what.

“I want you all to understand this,” she continued. “That none of you suffered permanent, debilitating, career-ending injuries today is nothing more than pure dumb luck!” She pointed her cane at Kaminari. “Your ankle should have been so shattered that I’d be picking bone fragments out of you for the next week if you hadn’t overloaded and been more or less limp. You!” She swung around to Bakugou. “You still have a sternum because that thing,” she pointed to where the police officers had the Noumu held much like a vicious animal, a syringe filled with more box jelly venom going into its neck, “was wounded! And you!” Hagakure flinched back, though we could only tell from the way her gloves, and the jacket someone had wrapped around her, moved. “Luck! Pure dumb luck that you appeared behind Todoroki instead of in front of him, or I’d be amputating instead of treating hypothermia!” She jabbed her cane back into the ground, and glared at us all. “Kaminari! Bakugou! Ojiro! Hagakure! Kirishima! Over here; you will be joining me in the infirmary. Yaoyorozu, Aoyama, Shouji, rest up, and stay home tomorrow.” The named students all walked over. I looked at Momo and saw that she was shaky, unsteady, and dragging her feet. She’d probably had to use up large swathes of her body’s stores to produce whatever she, Kaminari, and Jirou needed to survive.

Jirou carried Kaminari over, helping him hop along on one leg. The other was swollen, and I saw him wince every time he jostled it. Bakugou was still clutching his chest where the Noumu had hit him, but now that I was watching carefully, Kirishima was moving slowly too. Bruises stood out in stark relief across his back and torso, and he was slightly hunched over, his breathing shallow.

“Are you okay, Kirishima-kun?” I heard Mina ask. He tried to pull himself up, winced midway, and instead just went with a thumbs-up.
“Heh, this is nothing. You should see the other guys!”

Recovery Girl cleared her throat, and Kirishima started before turning back towards her.

Ojiro’s breath was also shallow, punctuated by wet, hacking coughs every so often. He had been in the fire zone for almost the entire time we’d been fighting, and given the tactics he’d had to use, some smoke had certainly gotten into his lungs. Tohru came up and draped an arm over her shoulder, to which Ojiro looked at her… or rather tried to look at her, and flinched back a little, realizing that she was probably naked.

“Is that all of the wounded, Suzenji-sensei?”

Someone new walked up next to Recovery Girl. He was… wow. Alright, if this guy turns out to be anything other than a detective, I will go out, buy a hat, and eat it. Nobody wears a long brown duster with that kind of hat unless they’re trying to get at a very specific aesthetic.

“Indeed. They’re all yours, Detective Tsukauchi.” Nailed it! The newly-identified detective waved Recovery Girl and our five injured classmates farewell, with Bakugou and Kirishima taking Kaminari off of Jirou, who bustled back over to us.

“Well, besides the five injured and the three exhausted, everyone looks to be totally unharmed.” He smiled at us. “Well, we’re gonna get you kids back to the classroom for now. This is no time to take your statements.”


“Ah…” He reached into a pocket and withdrew his cell phone, tapped on the screen, and held it up to his ear. I heard something I couldn’t make out from his phone before Detective Tsukauchi began to talk to us. “I’m afraid both of his arms were smashed to splinters, and his facial bones were badly fractured. Thankfully, his brain is undamaged… but his orbital sockets were badly damaged. There’s a chance he may suffer from some long-term damage to his eyes, vision, or both. That’s what the doctors are saying, anyway.” He was about to put the phone away before some other noise came from the phone. “Hm? Ah. Thirteen has great lacerations across their back and upper arms, but their wounds aren’t life-threatening in the slightest. They’ll make a full recovery soon. Euler is concussed, and has a few torn muscles in his upper body, but Recovery Girl should have him on his feet in a day or two at most.”

“And what about the villains?” I asked.

“Hm?” He ended the call on his phone and put it away. “What about them? They’ve all been apprehended, and any injuries will be—”

“Stop bullshitting us!” I shrieked. The others near me all backed away, and I could see them looking at me, but I didn’t care. “How many of them did we hurt?”

“Kanna-chan…” Tsuyu tried to reach out to me, but I shook her away.

“How many of them did I kill? Just… just tell me, damn it!”

“None.”

… what?

“H-huh?” I think my knees gave out at some point from the surprise. I fell back on my butt, and only barely missed landing on my tail. “What? But… but I… and… none!?”
“Well… you’re Yaseiki Kanna-san, yes? You were in the flood zone?” I nodded, and he reached into his pocket, procuring a small notepad. “To be fair, you did inflict some rather serious and permanent injuries: too many ruptured eardrums to count, some nerve and organ damage from whatever it was you did, and multiple ruptured swim bladders in some of the more marine-adapted villains… but no deaths.” He flipped the booklet closed and scanned the lot of us. “The same goes for the rest of you. Several of these villains were rather grievously wounded, and while nothing will come of it this time, I cannot stress enough that today was an exception. None of you were expected to face villains of any kind for some time yet, and not in an otherwise ‘safe’ setting. The proper conduct and appropriate levels of force aren’t something you’ve been taught, and even then the standard rules of engagement generally cease to apply when so vastly outnumbered.”

“So what you’re saying,” Todoroki added, “is ‘good job, don’t do it again’, then.”

What?

“Exactly. Now, I should be going; Sansa?”

“Sir.” A cop with a… cat… head? Huh. A cop with a cat head came forward and saluted.

“I’ll leave you to escort the students back to campus. Once you’ve arrived, coordinate the collection of statements, will you?”

“You can count on meow.”

… SERIOUSLY!?

“Hey, guys?” We all turned to see Uraraka looking around, and Midoriya doing his best to… not be noticed. Huh. “Where’d All Might go?”

Wait. Did she mean to say he’d completely and utterly disappeared while we—?

Sure enough, he had. By the other teachers? Nope. Over with the police? Nope. Watching over the captured Noumu, who was currently being loaded into an armored personnel carrier? Again… nope.

All Might, one of the largest men I’d ever seen, and such a bombastic personality that you couldn’t help but notice him… had completely and utterly disappeared.

“Damn, that’s… actually impressive,” I murmured. Meanwhile, there was Midoriya, muttering again under his breath, words going a mile a minute. I didn’t know him very well, he was more Tenya’s friend, but if I had to guess, he was saying something rather—

Wait.

Back when All Might had first shown up, Midoriya was about to say something, saw me and Tsuyu, and cut himself off. What had he said?

“That brain villain, one for—”

And then he’d stopped himself. That… something was tickling at my memory, and I couldn’t place it. Damn it, there’s something about that, something incredibly important that I’m forgetting, but what?

What?
“Hey Uraraka-san, Tenya.” I walked over to the two of them, who currently flanked Midoriya and were in the process of asking him a barrage of questions about our fight with the Noumu. “Mind if I borrow Midoriya for a minute?”

“Huh? Oh, s-sure!” Midoriya perked up and came over to me, silently mouthing a ‘thank you’ at not having to recount the fight for what had to be the third time by now. It was exciting as hell, I know, I’d been there, but it had also been absolutely terrifying to behold. “What’s the matter, Yaseiki-san?”

“Not here,” I whispered, pulling him over to the side. We went around a corner, still in the teachers’ line of sight, but hopefully out of earshot of everyone else in the class. “You’re hiding something.” I came right out and told him. To Midoriya’s credit, he didn’t flinch; to his discredit, he seemed to quail and flail a little, somehow shrinking a little.

“W-what?”

“When we spoke to All Might,” I raised a finger on one hand, and rested it against the other, “you were about to say something, and cut yourself off. ‘One for’, you said, and stopped.” This time, he couldn’t hide his flinch. “Then, even before Euler said something about the warp gate, you were worried. Tsuyu and I were confident, he’s All Might, but you?”

“W-well, you see, uh, I was scared! Those villains, and that Noumu thing, they—”

“Don’t!” I hissed. “Don’t lie, Midoriya, not after what we just went through. If it’s a secret, then just tell me it’s a secret. I won’t pry, Lord knows I have my own; but don’t think you can stand there and lie to me after we nearly died back there!”

“I… Y-Yaseiki-san…”

I wilted.

“I… I’m sorry, Mido—Izuku.” I sighed. “That wasn’t fair to you. I—”

“It’s okay.” I looked up. Midoriya was smiling now, even despite the first traces of tears in the corner of each eye. “I’m sorry I can’t tell you; it’s not just my secret to keep.”

“Yeah… okay.” I smiled, and laid a hand on his arm. “Just, if you ever feel like you need to say something to someone, anyone… you’re not the only one with secrets, Izuku.”

“I’ll be fine, Kanna-san.” He brushed my hand off, and jogged back over to Uraraka and Tenya. I rejoined Momo, who sat cross-legged on the ground as she slowly nursed a sports drink and one of the calorie-dense energy bars she carried in her utility belt, and Tsuyu, who gave me a froggy smile and a soft “kero” as I rejoined them.

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When we got back to UA Campus, Class 1-B was outside to meet us. Pony, Ibara, and Monoma all rushed forward to greet Momo, Tsuyu and me, and Pony pulled me into the tightest hug she knew I could stand without hurting my ribs.

“Are you okay!?” She asked, refusing to let me pull even the slightest bit away. I didn’t want to, and murmured in the affirmative, wrapping my arms around Pony as tightly as I could, knowing I couldn’t hurt her.

“We were in the middle of hero/villain battle sims with All Might,” Monoma explained, “when he just canceled it and vanished. He just raised a finger to an earpiece, then he stopped smiling.” The
copycat shuddered. “Then he disappeared.”

“He moved so fast that he created a pressure wave in his wake,” Ibara added. “When we were going back to our classroom, Kan-sensei had Principal Nedzu on one shoulder and Recovery Girl on the other, and the building itself went into lockdown!”

Momo, Tsuyu and I explained to the three of them what all had happened, and while we cut more than a few corners due to being pulled away by the police to await our turns to offer our statements, they did extract promises that we would tell them the rest. All of us in Class 1-A relocated to our classroom, where we waited to be called away, two, three at a time to offer statement. It seemed they were going in alphabetical order, because Momo and I were the last two remaining in the classroom, sitting there quietly. Both of us were on our phones; I had worried messages from both my mother and father, each one demanding to know if I was okay. Mom asked if she wanted me to come by again, while Dad simply stated he would be over that evening.

I told the both of them that I needed the night to rest and decompress. I still hadn’t given my statement to the officers, and I was so incredibly exhausted I doubted I’d be able to stay awake for even a couple of hours once I got home. It was fortunate that Principal Nedzu canceled classes tomorrow; I don’t think I’ll be awake until well after morning.

The police came and took our initial statements, a process that took several hours, but asked us to return to campus the next day so they could collect larger, more complete statements, with a couple of exceptions.

“We want you all to sleep on it,” Officer Sansa stated firmly. “Right now, most of you are still in a state of shock, and we have Euler’s statement to go off of already. Ashido Mina, Uraraka Ochako, Sero Hanta, Satou Rikidou, Shouji Mezou. If you five could stay behind, we would like to gather your full statements now as well; the rest of you, please rest well, and we will see you tomorrow.”

With that, we bid our compatriots goodbye, and filed out of the room. I bade farewell to Tsuyu at the entrance, gave her a surprise hug (which elicited a slightly shocked “K-kero!” before she returned it), and made my way home.

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When I arrived, I found Pony had cooked simple, American comfort food for dinner: cheeseburgers. We ate in silence; she didn’t pry, and for that I was glad, but every time I tried to speak I simply couldn’t find the words. I knew what I wanted to say, but I didn’t know how to say it.

I was just about to begin washing up for bed when Pony came up and hugged me tightly from behind, resting her head on my shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” she said. “Please don’t scare me like that again? Please?”

I turned around to hug her.

“I can’t promise that Pony,” I whispered, feeling the tears prick at my own eyes.

“I k-know.” She sniffled, and I felt her pull me tighter. “Just try, okay? For me?”

“I will.” I put my hands on Pony’s shoulders and pulled away, looking her in the eyes. “I promise.” We shared a wan smile.

I’m sorry Pony, I thought to myself. I don’t think that’s a promise I’ll ever be able to keep.
Chapter Twenty-Four

I slept in fits that night, and woke up well before my alarm the next morning. I don’t think I slept two straight hours; every time I closed my eyes, I saw the Noumu there, its massive hands wrapped around my body. Or Shigaraki’s hands, inching closer and closer towards Tsuyu’s face, until she began to dissolve into nothingness right in front of me. Or Aizawa-sensei’s broken body, his bones snapping and crunching as he tried to drag himself over towards us.

Or All Might, sliced in half by one of Kurogiri’s portals, his two halves lying apart from each other on the plaza.

I laid there in bed, replaying the whole thing in my head, over, and over, and over. I know I’d fucked up by gloating about poisoning the Noumu… but they’d still known exactly what I’d used, and had the specific antidote—one of my mother’s antidotes, by the syringe—ready and primed to go. And then there was what Shigaraki had said about leaving me alive.

That I was the one he wanted.

I rolled over and buried my head in the pillow. I know it wouldn’t do anything to protect me from the ravages of my own thoughts, the monsters lurking behind closed eyes.

I still wanted to hold onto the illusion that it would.

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When we arrived at UA’s campus around nine in the morning, the officers had us all sit in our classroom. Two or three of them were working together to gather our statements in alphabetical order, and I noticed that several took a fair bit longer than others so far; Tsuyu and Bakugou hadn’t come back until they were calling Jirou, and Izuku only returned to gather his things after the officer returned to get Tokoyami. Once our classmates were finished with their statements, they were let go.

I slumped down in my seat, and so did Momo. If you went down the list in alphabetical order, her name was second to last, and mine came right after.

We were there for a fair bit. Noon came and went, with Lunch Rush coming upstairs to pass out bento boxes to the six of us still remaining. I opened mine and was delighted to see tuna, mackerel, and barracuda sushi; this was exactly what I’d told him my favorites were, during the second session he had me as slave laborer. Alongside that was sweet potato tempura, carrots, and broccoli.

I resolved to thank Lunch Rush tomorrow, when I inevitably got sent out from English class to help him again.

“Yaoyorozu-san, Yaseiki-san?” Two officers appeared at the door, one with a fairly gruff, classically ‘hard-boiled’ appearance, and the other was Officer Sansa from earlier, the one with the cat head. “Yaoyorozu-san, if you’ll go with Officer Iwada? Yaseiki-san, if you could follow me?” Momo and I shared a look, and nodded at one another before following our respective officers. I ended up following Officer Sansa to the teachers’ lounge, and he sat on the chaise opposite me. He pulled what looked to be a tape recorder from within a pocket of his vest, though closer inspection showed that there was a slot on the side for a memory card. He set it upright on the table and pressed record; once he saw the red light, he began to talk.

“This is Officer Nekome Sansa, interviewing Yaseiki Kanna of UA Class 1-A, Hero Program student, regarding yesterday’s incident at the Unforeseen Simulation Joint, henceforth referred to as
USJ.” He rattled off the date and time, along with his badge ID number and my student ID number, and then turned to me.

“Yaseiki-san. We are using these statements to compile a complete record of yesterday’s incident, such that we may create a full timeline of events and give our investigators the best possible grounds to commence an investigation. Know that any actions you undertook today, any unlicensed Quirk usage, and any violence you perpetrated, has been preemptively excused as being an act of self-defense in a life-or-death situation. With that said, I ask that you answer my questions honestly and in full. Please do not omit any information, even if you might consider it self-deprecating or incriminating. You are not on trial here. Do you understand this?”

“I do,” I confirmed.

“Good.” He flipped open his notepad and clicked his pen once. “Now then.”

He asked me to describe the events that happened in their entirety, from start to finish. I began with Euler’s noticing the appearance of the villains, followed by how our teachers leapt into battle, and then Kurogiri’s menacing appearance before us. When I described the clothing I’d seen Kurogiri wearing in that brief instant, the combination of tie, button-up shirt, and vest, he had to flip back in his notes for a moment. It’s entirely possible none of the others had remarked on the villain’s clothes, or that few enough had to make its every appearance noteworthy.

Then we got to my dip in the flood zone. I told him how I fell into the water, transformed myself so that I could see, breathe, and sense my surroundings, and how, using a shark’s electrorceptors, I’d sensed something large coming beneath me, and quickly.

That was where I faltered.

“IT’s okay, Yaseiki-san,” Officer Sansa tried to reassure me. “You’re not in trouble. But I need to know exactly what happened.”

“I…” I swallowed. “I changed some of my internal organs into an electric eel’s. A lung, a kidney, my appendix, spleen, and gallbladder. I had enough electric potential with all of those to stop a grown man’s heart, I thought.” I couldn’t look him in the eye. “When whatever it was touched my tail, I let it all loose. It shook, spasmed, and then just… fell.” My hands were fisted in the fabric of the couch. “I didn’t know whether whoever it was would survive or not. I just let loose.”

“I see.” He wrote something down on his notepad, but other than that… nothing. “And then?”

“What, that’s it?” I asked, bewildered. “I, I just admitted to willingly using what I thought was lethal force. I mean, it wasn’t actually lethal, but I didn’t know that, and you, you’re just—”

“Yaseiki-san.” He held up a hand to interrupt me. “Instead of seeing this as something reprehensible, take this as a lesson. I’ve had to arrest or otherwise reprimand too many rookie heroes on their first debut showings for excessive use of force. I would much rather you learn this lesson now, and have an outcome where there weren’t any actual fatalities, than see your hero career end as quickly as it began. Now…” He gestured at the recorder on the table. “If you could continue?”

I did. I mentioned how I swam to the surface, and Tsuyu got me onto the boat, where she had already retrieved Midoriya from the water. I walked him through how Midoriya pieced together just how much information the villains were working off of; namely, the fact that their information didn’t let them scatter us in any effective manner.

“We were never the actual target,” I muttered, looking down. “Just some obstacle they had to
account for. It’s really just blind luck that Tsuyu and I were two of the ones sent to the flood zone.”

“Tsuyu… that would be Asui-san, yes?” I nodded. “She said as much in her statement. Then what came next… let’s see; the boat was hit?”

I nodded.

“A villain sheared the boat in half, and it started to sink. That’s…” I sighed. “I came up with a plan. As far as I knew at that point, the villain that had grabbed me was… dead, or dying. They didn’t know I could be just as good in the water as they were.” I went into the plan that the three of us had gone with: a combined leap from me and Tsuyu, followed by her pushing off of me to get out of the dangerous areas, and my diving deep to draw attention.

And I demonstrated what I’d used by transforming my right arm, from the elbow down, into most of a giant claw.

“The pistol shrimp,” I gestured, “uses its claw to make an air bubble in the water. When that collapses, it releases light, sound, and heat, and is strong enough that it lets a two inch shrimp completely incapacitate prey double its size, or outright kill anything its own size. The sound is louder than any gunshot I’ve ever heard of, and underwater, sound carries.” I changed my arm back to normal. “I thought it would kill most of them, and resigned myself to it. I didn’t see any other way to get all three of us out of there, not if I didn’t want to risk getting Midoriya and Tsuyu hurt in the process.”

“What matters is that you know what you did.” Officer Sansa looked me in the eyes. “We cops hardly ever draw our guns. If we do, it means that the Pro Heroes haven’t been able to defuse the situation, and so we need to escalate. It’s the opposite of what we want. And thanks to this, you know just what it means to accept that.”

“Yeah…”

“So.” He leaned forward. “After you managed to get past most of the flood zone. What happened then?”

I told him about the last parts of the fighting we saw, where Eraserhead and Euler fought back-to-back, each covering the other’s weaknesses. The two had been moving like a well-oiled machine, completely unharmed and seemingly invulnerable. That was when the Noumu had appeared, and completely dashed our hopes.

“Then the villain with all the hands on him turned towards us,” I continued. “He reached to use his Quirk on Tsuyu, but Aizawa-sensei had managed to push against the Noumu thing and use his Quirk to stop him. Midoriya and I both leapt up to try and stop him, but…” I couldn’t help but laugh. Not with humor, but disbelief. “We didn’t even see the damn thing move. It intercepted Midoriya’s punch, and tanked my claws like it was nothing.” I demonstrated, and Officer Sansa had to lean back as my arm grew to completely cover the space between us. “Kodiak brown bear. One swipe of these is strong enough to at least break a moose’s neck, and it barely carved into that thing at all.”

“That reminds me.” Officer Sansa flipped back in his book. “I have Midoriya-san’s statement here, and he mentions that the villain replied to you. Do you remember what he said, more or less?”

“I don’t think I could forget if I tried.” I shuddered. “The fog villain, Kurogiri? He gave the hand man’s full name: Shigaraki Tomura. It may be a false name, I don’t know… but you don’t say a full name, one that people could search for in databases, unless you don’t intend to leave any of the people who heard it alive. And then there’s what Shigaraki said to me, specifically.”
“Yes?”

I shifted.

“Do you have the police report from last week, by chance? Wednesday?”

“I do,” he replied. “That has something to do with what Shigaraki said to you, I take it?”

“Mhmm.” I nodded. “He said: ‘So you’re the girl he wants? Guess we’ll leave you alive, then.’” I shuddered. “Then after All Might showed up, and Todoroki froze the Noumu, I injected it with venom.”

“Skipping ahead a little?” He asked.

“It’s directly related to this,” I said. “Please, let me just finish.” He nodded, so I continued. “I used box jelly venom. My mother, Yaseiki Kimiko—”

“The woman who provides tailored doses of various medicines, chemicals, and toxins on request, yes?” I nodded. “Our station has five different concentrations of venom to neutralize varying strengths of regeneration; I’m fairly certain your mother provided at least three of them.”

“And the neutralizing agents?” I asked. He nodded. “That’s… have all the stations checked their supplies? Because I know what the syringes my mother provides look like, and that’s what the warp gate villain brought out of a portal to use on that Noumu thing.”

“The exact countermeasure,” he murmured. “You mentioned this was directly related to what the villain with the hands, Shigaraki Tomura, said to you?”

“He said that I’m the one he wanted,” I said again. “There’s only one other him that I can think of here, and it’s the same ‘him’ from last week’s incident here at UA.”

“The Wendigo.” It wasn’t a question. Officer Sansa knew exactly what, and who, I was talking about.

“He may be a madman, but he’s not stupid. Of course he’d do some research on his targets and their family. With help like a damn warp gate, of course he could figure out what my family has such easy access to, and have something ready to handle just that. Sure, it took them by surprise, but only at first.” I scowled. “An ounce of preparation is worth a pound of cure, and they were perfectly prepared for that possibility. It’s only thanks to All Might that we survived at all.”

Officer Sansa didn’t say anything to reassure me. What was he supposed to do, lie? I was right, and he knew it.

The interview continued apace, and I finished with him about fifteen minutes later. He bid me a good day, we bowed, and I grabbed my belongings from the classroom as quickly as I possibly could.

When I exited school grounds, my mother was there, waiting for me. I raced over and hugged her for dear life, and she held me close, resting my head on her shoulder. I felt one of her arms move, and heard the crinkling of a plastic bag behind me.

“I brought Thai food,” she offered. I held her tighter.

“Love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, Kanna-chan. Mama’s here for you.” She ran the fingers of her free hand through my
hair, and I closed my eyes, just letting myself fall into her embrace.

“Mama’s here.”
Chapter Twenty-Five

By the time I gave up on hitting the snooze button, we had less than an hour until school started. I heard the shower running, and that, combined with the time, made me realize I probably wouldn’t be able to wash my hair this morning. It was a little disappointing, to be sure. I know I’d washed my hair yesterday, but after the terrible treatment at… at…

Well, suffice to say my hair was in serious need of some quality TLC. In fact, I’d probably have to get Ibara, Tsuyu, or Momo to let me know what salon or hairdresser they go to; they did live nearby, so they definitely had local people. I wasn’t going to be able to wash it today, not enough time, so I slipped into the bathroom to grab some waterless conditioner, just to keep my hair from feeling as rough as it had been after its saltwater bath. I hopped in, grabbed the bottle, frowned, and flipped on the bathroom fan that Pony had, as usual, forgotten about. I swear, it doesn’t matter how many times we try to get her to turn on the fan, she steams up the bathroom instead. Personally, I think she just likes the steam.

It would explain the faint outlines of smiley-faces and other shapes I keep seeing in the corner of the mirror.

I sprayed the conditioner onto my hair and combed it through, letting it rest while I went out to the kitchen to cook breakfast. We’d run out of milk last night, Pony can’t handle the spiciness of Thai food and needed to douse the heat, so that meant it was eggs. I grabbed them out of the fridge, along with bacon, and got a skillet ready. I cracked the eggs, whisked together, and got the bacon cooking first. I’m going to admit: I’m not great at making bacon. Either it ends up like alien fingers, a little too loose, or you can taste the burnt. I haven’t gotten the trick to it quite right, and the bacon this time turned out to be a little floppy. That was fine; I took it out of the pan, patted it off, chopped it fine, and set that aside to stir into the eggs.

I poured the beaten eggs into the skillet; screw using butter, rendered bacon fat should work just fine, right?

The liquid egg sizzled when it hit the pan. There was some popping, little sharp snaps where the liquid met the heat. It popped and it snapped.

Even through all my ear protection, I could still hear the snapping of my claws. I still heard the phantom sound when it was quiet. I don’t know how many times I’d let loose with the snapping shrimp’s water pistol. A dozen times? Two?

I could still hear the snapping.

I sharp, acrid smell brought me back to my senses, and I looked at the skillet to see that my eggs were burning.

Shit.

* * * * *

“Bright and early!”

We’d sat down in Class 1-A for morning classes, and the mood could best be described as… well, actually, it was a toss up. Somber, sedate, unsteady, resolute; really, it depended on who you were looking at. The atmosphere did shift to a more unified concern when the bell rang, because by now
we would have heard Aizawa-sensei rolling out from under the desk and unzipping his sleeping bag. But he was still in the hospital.

Instead?

“I have arrived!”

All Might came through the door, ever-present smile gleaming as it always did, and garbed in his modern costume as opposed to the Silver Age outfit he’d worn on our first Hero class.

“All Might!” Midoriya exclaimed. Of course he’d be excited to see the hero. Never mind that it wasn’t the afternoon, and All Might only teaches during the hero side of things.

“Is something happening?” Todoroki asked.

“Ah, Todoroki-shounen! Perceptive as ever! Yes, indeed, things are going to be a touch different today.” All Might’s smile dipped ever so slightly. It wasn’t obvious unless you were really looking for it, or had seen him during one of the few times he wasn’t smiling.

Every single one of us noticed.

“Classes 1-A and 1-B are going to be performing a joint exercise this morning.” He held up his hand to preempt any of the usual clamor an announcement like this would have produced, taking particular care to glance at Mina, Kirishima, Kaminari, and Sero, the class’s usual sources of interruption. “This exercise falls under Foundational Heroism Studies, but is unlike anything you would have been expected to do until many months from now.”

“Get to the damn point,” Bakugou growled.

“Ah, the point!” All Might raised his hand and pointed a finger at Bakugou. “1-A and 1-B are about to undergo an after-action analysis. What went right, what went wrong, and what we can learn from this. Just as 1-B will benefit from hearing of and seeing your experience, so too will you all be able to grow from an outside view, Bakugou-shounen.”

“But All Might!” Midoriya stood up from his seat, and I couldn’t help but notice that, once again, he’d eschewed the use of the honorific. Midoriya didn’t talk like Pony and I did; he always used honorifics. For him to not use them with All Might… Curiouser and curiouser. “The sensors and security systems were jammed at USJ!”

“It is no worry, Yaoyorozu-shoujo! Your observation is indeed correct!” He gave Momo a thumbs up, and she blushed and sat slightly taller in her seat at the praise. “While communications weren’t operational, the surveillance equipment was. We have full audiovisual recordings from every area of USJ!” He planted his fists on his waist, and stood tall. “Today, you learn an important lesson all great Pro Heroes must eventually understand: seeing your mistakes, and learning from them!”

Full, complete recordings of USJ. Which meant that everybody would see what everyone else did.

There was really only one way I could sum this up… and Bakugou beat me to it.
“Well, fuck.”

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We met Class 1-B in the basement, which had a surprisingly large multimedia room, complete with lecture hall-style seating, desks, and small monitors attached to each seat. From what I could gather, each of these monitors could probably be controlled to show a different feed, just like the myriad screens down in the basement command center when we’d performed our cityscape combat. Class 1-B was already seated, and I looked to see that Pony had saved a seat next to her for me. I made a beeline for her, and only after sitting down noticed that Monoma was sitting next to her, with Ibara in the seat just behind Pony. Tsuyu and Momo both sat on either side of Ibara, and off to the side, I could see their homeroom teacher, Sekijirou Kan-sensei… well, actually, I’m not sure what it was. Maybe a grin? Or possibly a grimace? Maybe he was trying for the former, caught himself, and had to twist it into the latter at the last minute to keep up his ‘stern teacher’ persona?

Didn’t matter. Once we all filed in, All Might stepped up to the front of the lecture hall, pulled out a remote, and pressed a button.

“Hello everybody!”

From behind the podium, Principal Nedzu appeared; apparently the button All Might pressed was for a platform to raise up, letting Nedzu use the podium properly.

“Now that we’re all here, let’s begin, shall we?” The principal reached out and pressed a button behind the podium. Light and color bloomed on the giant screen in front of us, and the smaller screen attached to each of our desks all lit up in a similar fashion. “Now, before we begin, a few ground rules. First.”

Nedzu’s tone turned dark. He tilted his head, and suddenly all of us were keenly aware of his scarred eye.

“None of you are in any position to judge each others’ actions. This was an unprecedented event on many levels. No crop of first years has ever faced true, undeniable danger this early in their careers until now. Did somebody make a foolish error, and worsen the situation? So be it. The important fact is that all of 1-A survived.” He glared. A few people around me flinched. “Do not assume that you could have done better in the same situation, with the same tools at your disposal, because you were not there. This applies to both classes.” Nedzu turned his head again and looked at us down his snout, and the mood in the room lightened once more.

“Second. Do not feel like you have to justify your actions, and do not try and ask others why they took the course of action they did. And for the members of Class 1-A, a third: you are going to be receiving considerable criticism. This is not without purpose: what you went through, while horrible, is still a valuable teaching tool. Take this criticism to heart. 1-B, make sure you understand why this criticism is being leveled; you can learn just as much from seeing how others could improve, and trying to analyze the hows and whys for yourselves.

“Now, with all of that out of the way… let us begin.”

Nedzu pressed a button on the podium, and footage began to play. We saw the villains appear, Aizawa-sensei and Nagami-sensei charge into the fray, Thirteen escort us out, Kurogiri appear before us, and Bakugou and Kirishima charge into the fray.

“Pause!” All Might yelled out. The footage froze on screen, with Bakugou and Kirishima airborne. “This is the first point we must address. Bakugou-shounen, Kirishima-shounen.” The two were
sitting somewhere behind me, and I heard Bakugou grumble to signify his attention; nothing from Kirishima though. “While the both of you showed considerable bravery in being willing to confront this new threat immediately…” Deep within the shadows of All Might’s brow, something glowed a bright, piercing blue. “This!” He pointed to the screen. “Was foolishness!” All Might composed himself. “Would anybody like to hazard a guess as to why? Ah, Monoma-shounen!”

On the opposite side of Pony, Monoma stood.

“Two reasons,” he began. “One: you could already see from how the villains entered, and the same glowing eyes atop the gate they walked through as that villain’s, that the two were related.” I could see his hand moving on his personal screen, and the massive one at the front of the hall split in half, showing the time stamps Monoma was talking about. He drew a pair of circles with his fingers, and the same circles appeared around Kurogiri’s onscreen eyes, highlighted on-screen.

“The second reason is that Thirteen told them to stay back. They didn’t.”

“Yes, well done Monoma-shounen!” All Might turned towards the three students sitting front and center, and the middle one seemed to falter at the attention. “Midoriya-shounen, your own analytical skills have met their match, it would seem!”

Down in the front row, poor Midoriya was now rubbing the back of his head all embarrassed, and next to me Monoma just quirked a brow and seemed to file things away for later.

“Now, this being said, their assault did reveal crucial information that was very useful later on! Remember: even a mistake can bear positive fruit! Many a villain has been brought to justice due to information that only came to light because a Pro Hero made an error, or acted on reflex, which caused the villain to need to do the same.”

“Well then, shall we carry on?”

Nobody voiced any disagreement. With that, we carried on.

The first group to come up was the six who hadn’t been teleported anywhere. We got to see their continuing battle against Kurogiri, along with just how he managed to wound Thirteen in the first place.

And after that, I swear my heart swelled three sizes due to just how proud I felt of Tenya.

“He deserves a great big hug for that one,” Pony whispered to me. “Whether he wants it or not!” I agreed, then shushed her as we went back to listening. Tenya got some notable critique: he was a little too dead-set on being present at all times just by virtue of being class president, and needed to understand that a tactical retreat is not running away.

Ojiro came next, and was more or less complimented on his overall approach, with a slight admonishment that smoke inhalation is a major hazard, and not something he could forget next time. Kouda was on the receiving end of a reprimand from Principal Nedzu not to use himself as bait again, no matter how much he trusted Tokoyami to be there when needed. Also, we all were more than a bit taken aback by just how big Dark Shadow was. Just the hand alone was far larger than the entirety of Tokoyami’s Quirk had been before.

We went through Kirishima and Bakugou, along with Momo and Jirou, but there was a particularly notable glossing over of Kaminari. No, wait, that’s actually an understatement: Kaminari was skipped over entirely. And when the flood zone came up, I was skipped over as well.

“Sensei,” Kaminari stood up. “I think you forgot a couple of us.”
“Much as I wish that were the case, Kaminari-shounen, that is not the case.” All Might crossed his arms, and bowed his head slightly, as if to hide his expression. “Yours and Yaseiki-shoujo’s situations are… delicate. We will be leaving those for last. Instead, let us skip forward to the ‘main event’, as it were!” The footage skipped forward, all the way to All Might’s arrival. “Now pay attention: *I made a crucial error here that nearly got me killed.*” The footage continued, showing Midoriya’s and my warnings to All Might about the Noumu, followed by him interrupting us and offering reassurance.

He paused right after his video double dashed forward to try and assault Shigaraki.

“There.” He pointed at his on-screen self. “Did you catch it?”

I saw Pony’s hand go up out of the corner of my eye. All Might called on her, and she stood.

“You interrupted… uh, what was his name again?”

“Midoriya-shounen!” All Might provided.

“T-thank you! Right, uh…” Pony shuffled on her hooves a little, and I nudged her in the side. “Uh, you interrupted Midoriya and Kanna when they tried to tell you about the big villain’s powers, and didn’t ask about the other two either.”

“Correct!” All Might let the footage play again, and paused right as the dust cleared from his attempted suplex. “Had I taken the briefest instant to ask about my foes, I would have known that they possessed a Warp Gate, and changed my strategy accordingly. It is by chance alone that Todoroki-shounen, Bakugou-shounen, and Kirishima-shounen were nearby in order to join the other two and render aid!” He fast-forwarded to the part where Bakugou, Kirishima, and Todoroki all joined the fray, and specifically paused where Bakugou and I taunted our downed foes. “And here we have something that was not quite an error, but more something to keep in mind and address.” A hand went up, and All Might called on them. “Yes, Kodai-shoujo!”

Kodai Yui, one of the girls from Class 1-B that I didn’t know, stood up.

“The two of them talked to the villains. Is that what you were mentioning?”

“Indeed!” Principal Nedzu piped up. “I can also tell you that the two of them used their words as weapons, but for different end purposes. Bakugou-kun taunts and insults his foes in an aggressive manner. He may not realize it himself, but his words are just as explosive as his Quirk, and meant to set them off balance just as much as being struck with one of his detonations does; any benefit he receives from hyping himself up is. Yaseiki-chan is the opposite: she uses wit, snark, and sarcasm to calm herself down, and center herself. If this sets her foe off-balance, all the better. Unfortunately, in this situation, both uses backfired.”

“Indeed!” All Might took over. “Knowledge is power! At the same time, *hiding* that knowledge is just as important; if a villain fails to realize that you know how their Quirk works, or that they tend to lead off with a straight, left jab every time they attack, then you can exploit this knowledge gap.” He waved at the screen. “Bakugou-shounen and Yaseiki-shoujo, despite their best intentions and habits, gave away their knowledge base. Something to keep apprised of in the future. But now… we must return to the most important topic of the day.”

Behind All Might, the screen split to show two feeds simultaneously. One was Kaminari releasing an absolutely massive burst of electricity. The other was murky, as I was still underwater at the time, but it was clearly obvious what was being shown.
“The use of lethal force.”

Murmurs broke out amongst the gathered students. I looked down at my lap. Pony reached over and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, but I didn’t find any comfort from her gesture.

“Fortunately, neither Kaminari-shounen nor Yaseiki-shoujo actually killed anyone, both for different reasons.”

“Kaminari-kun,” Nedzu took over, “the amount of current your Quirk can output has increased over time, with a rather dramatic jump between now and your Entrance Exam.” He played the clip of Kaminari’s audio, along with his announcement. “This was not two million volts. It was stronger. This was closer to two point eight million, nearly half again as strong. You are fortunate that the villains you, Jirou-chan, and Yaoyorozu-chan faced in that area all had a measure of durability or regeneration to keep from suffering damage. In the future, you need to more completely understand your output. Some time in the next week, I would like you to go see Power Loader-sensei and have a high-capacity volt meter added to your costume; additionally, he has offered to spend additional time with you after school to practice reaching specific output levels.”

Somewhere in the front rows, Kaminari nodded. He said something or other, but I didn’t hear it. I knew what came next.

“Yaseiki-chan.” Nedzu looked to me, and I couldn’t bring myself to lock eyes with him. “Again, you are lucky that these villains all seemed to be chosen partly for their durability. Nearly every single criminal that this so-called ‘Villain Alliance’ recruited was either durable, or had some regenerative abilities, or both. What is more concerning is that you realized your intended course of action had the potential to kill, and you simply accepted the risk. It was not instinct, it was not reflex. It was an active, thought-out decision.”

I opened my mouth to say something, defense myself… but I couldn’t find anything to say. Nothing came out. No words formed… because he was right. That’s exactly what I’d done.

“The circumstances, your particular background, and your lack of experience does much to absolve you, but the fact remains that your first instinct was to use what you assumed to be lethal force. This is something you will need to be conscious of in the future. In fact, this holds true for many of the students here. Your Quirks are inherently dangerous, and all it can take is one wrong move for things to go horribly, horribly wrong.”

“This is the lesson that Thirteen meant to impart at USJ!” All Might boomed, voice grave. “Your Quirks are dangerous. They do not necessarily have to be, but it will require discipline, training, and control to reach the same point as us. For now, simply understand that the possibility exists.”

“On that note.”

Nedzu hopped down from his podium, and shut off the video monitor.

“It is time for lunch! Class 1-B, after lunch, you will be joining Kan-sensei to finish the battle training you began yesterday. Class 1-A, please meet me in your classroom proper. Enjoy the hour, and I will see you all back soon.”

“I’ll see you there,” I whispered to Pony, and left the hall as quickly as I could.

I retreated to the restroom, locked myself into a stall, and just… sat there. Nedzu was right. God help me, but he was right. I’d taken stock of the situation, and my first answer was ‘lethal force’. Not the method of last resort, not the forbidden trump card. It was my immediate response. I’d been forced to
look into a metaphorical mirror, and I really, really didn’t like what I’d found. Damn it, when is Aizawa-sensei back? I need to talk to a psychologist… or maybe I should go talk to Ibara.

See if those Catholics were actually onto something with their whole ‘confession’ business.
Chapter Twenty-Six

Lunch was… tense. The six of us sat together, as usual, but nobody could think of anything substantial to say. Momo picked at her food in a way that was uncharacteristic of her, and didn’t even manage to finish one of her servings. Pony still had half an apple left when the lunch bell rang, which never happens, and Monoma went to Lunch Rush to get some plastic wrap for Pony so she could finish it later. My appetite wasn’t all there either, but the biggest outlier was Tsuyu. She’d gotten yakitori skewers from Lunch Rush, and quite literally only ate a single bite. She didn’t use her tongue to steal food from anyone else, which was something she’d done pretty much every day so far.

She wasn’t even making any of her characteristic ribbits. She was dead silent… and combined with how neutral her default expression is, I was genuinely feeling worried. But at the same time, I didn’t know what I could say. I didn’t want to say anything, because it felt like all it would take is one word and then… I don’t know. I know I need to talk about this, that it won’t do me any good to bottle this up, I’ve learned that the hard way, but it’s just not that simple. How do you work through the fact that you’d resigned yourself to killing a man, be it in self-defense or not?

And what are my friends supposed to say, that it’s okay? That they understand fully, that it was the only choice and that we could just accept it and move past it and that was all? Because no, that’s not how it works. The decision to take a life, whether your own or somebody else’s, whether through active effort or simply passive malice… it changes you. And it’s almost funny, really, in a sick and twisted sort of way. Twenty years later, a lifetime apart…

…and I made a different facet of the same damn choice.

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“The fuck?”

Bakugou was the first one of us to open the door to 1-A, and he stopped almost as soon as he did. Kirishima and Kaminari peered over a shoulder each, and the both of them murmured something similarly baffled. Bakugou walked in, though his steps were slow, measured. Wary, almost. Kirishima had a little bit of the same wariness, but Kaminari’s stance was purely confusion. The rest of us drifted in behind them and got to see what had quite nearly struck Bakugou dumb.

Our desks were all stacked up in the back of the room, and I do mean stacked up, in five stacks of four desks apiece. Our chairs had been rearranged into a circle, and we could only tell which chair belonged to who by notes with our names on them, placed upon the seats. They weren’t in the same order that we normally sat in, and whoever set it up did their homework: Midoriya sat between Tenya and Uraraka, and I was on Tenya’s left. On my left sat Tsuyu, and next to her was Momo. Friends were being sat next to friends it would seem, and when I sat down, I ended up directly opposite an already slouching Bakugou, flanked by Kirishima and Sero.

I took my seat and threaded my tail through the opening in the back, sharing a brief smile with Ojiro, halfway across the circle, who’d done the same with his. Tenya sat on my right, back stiff and expression blank, and Tsuyu on my left, eyes downcast and one finger on her chin, like she always did when thinking. Her fingertip traced circles along the side of her chin, and when she glanced over
and caught my eyes, she instantly glanced away, hunching over slightly.

“Well then!”

We all turned towards the door to see Principal Nedzu walking in, carrying what was either just a random stick, or a particularly small quarterstaff, sized for somebody of the Principal’s stature, alongside an absolutely massive box of tissues. He slipped underneath Bakugou’s chair and into the middle of the circle, then stood before us and tapped his staff on the ground to get everybody’s attention.

“Glad to see all of you fed and watered. Now, I’m sure you are all quite curious about what I have here!” He put the tissues down and held the little staff with both hands. “This morning, we went over the facts of this past Wednesday. It was objective, it was factual, and it was clinical. But in situations such as these, after-action evaluations are two fold. Analyzing our past successes and failings is only half of it.” He put a paw on the tissue box, and pulled one out. “The other aspect of an event such as this is trauma. Every single Pro Hero has gone through a situation that they were not physically, mentally, or emotionally prepared for. These leave long-lasting scars.” He brought the tissue to his scarred right eye. “Not all of them can be seen, but they exist nonetheless.”

Uh-oh. The chairs in a circle, the tissues, what could only be a talking stick… I have a bad idea about where this is going.

“At some point in the next couple of weeks, you each will have individual sessions with either myself, Midnight-sensei, or Aizawa-sensei once he returns. But while this will help you work through some of your more personal issues, it will not solve everything. Some of you have regrets. Some of you have frustrations. Some of you are angry, or ashamed, or worried. And some of you have negative feelings either directed towards each other, or imagine that your classmates may have those towards you. So this afternoon, we will be having a group discussion session to bring any hidden stresses out into the open, and prevent them from festering and causing greater problems down the line.”

I was right. It’s group therapy. But unlike any other form of group therapy I’d ever been in, all of us here knew each other, and had experienced the traumatic event with each other. This was… I don’t know if I have a frame of reference for this.

“The rules are simple.” Nedzu held aloft the stick. “Whosoever wishes can come to the middle and take the stick from me. While they are talking, I expect all of you to remain quiet and listen. Should you choose to take the stick, do not be afraid to speak your mind. Our country has problems with people being willing to express themselves, and if you are to be heroes, you have to move past that. You have to be ready and willing to stand up, to set yourself apart from the crowd, and say what you want to say, or what you think and feel needs to be said.”

The words hung in the air. Nobody moved to take the stick.

“With that said, I would like to begin.” Nedzu’s expression shifted to something that seemed to resemble a smile. “I do not believe I can truly put into words just how proud I am of all of you in Class 1-A. Never before has any incoming class of students at UA had to face villains so soon in their careers, and yet the lot of you managed to comport yourself with greater poise and purpose than a good number of the students who have already left this academy. Talking to the twenty of you here is a great pride… and also a great sorrow, for it was our failing that forced you to have to go through this.” He gave a rueful chuckle, and dabbed at an eye with the tissue he still held. “We had a full week to prepare ourselves. We knew that the villains had some way to spoof, evade, or bypass our
sensors, and we may as well have done nothing. It was our—no, my inaction that was at fault. As Principal of UA, the blame for this falls squarely upon my shoulders. I failed you, all of you, and I must accept that if I am to make amends.”

Somebody in our classroom sniffled. Tohru popped out of her seat to take some tissues.

“So!” Nedzu’s mood seemed to take a complete one-eighty, and the lot of us jumped in our seats. “Would anybody like to go next?"

“I will.”

The chair next to me scraped back, and Tenya stood up. He walked forward and took the offered stick from Nedzu, holding it so tightly his knuckles went white almost immediately. He stood there, shoulders tense and practically shaking, eyes closed, brow furrowed, and teeth grit.

Then he bowed deeply at the waist, stood, turned to another side of the circle, and bowed again.

“I am sorry!” He stood up. “Thirteen-sensei told me to flee and get help. And I… I didn’t! I said I was the class president, and couldn’t abandon my class. But I still…” He reached for the tissues, and grabbed one. “It took seeing Thirteen-sensei be torn apart by that Warp Gate villain before I could get myself to do anything. I keep playing it over. Maybe if I hadn’t hesitated, Thirteen-sensei would not have been hurt! Maybe help would have arrived sooner, maybe this, maybe that…”

He slumped.

“There’s no room here for maybes. I misunderstood what my greatest contribution in this situation would have been, and in doing so, people were hurt. You all chose me as your leader.” He looked around the circle at us. “I nearly let you all down this time. I cannot guarantee I will not do so again… but I will try.”

He looked to Nedzu, who I only just now noticed had taken Tenya’s vacated seat, and held the stick out.

“Thank you, Iida-kun.” Nedzu pushed off of the seat with a paw on Midoriya’s chair and a paw on mine. When I looked closely, I saw a scrap of paper that hadn’t been there partly slid into Midoriya’s pocket. I checked the side pocket of my uniform blazer, and found a piece of paper had been slipped into it as well. “Now, would anybody like to go next?”

“My turn.” Todoroki stood and walked to the middle, and Nedzu passed the stick from Tenya to Todoroki. Tenya sat back down next to me; I scooted over a tiny bit so I could press my arm against his. He gave me a surprised look, but then we exchanged a small smile. This wasn’t the venue for a smile, but Tenya had done something brave. It’s not easy to go first, or even at all in this situation. And on that note… I took a quick peek at the paper Nedzu slipped into my pocket.

*If you choose to tell them, I will support you. But don’t feel like you have to say anything.*

I looked along the outside of the circle to Nedzu, who simply gave me a smile, and pointed towards Todoroki.

“When I was young,” he began, voice quiet, “I swore I would be nothing like my father. I’m sure most of you already know this, but for those who don’t, he is the Number Two Pro Hero, Endeavor.” Todoroki looked to his left, free hand, and clenched a fist. “A great hero… a terrible
man. I never wanted to be anything like him. And yet… maybe I have been.”

He raised his right hand, the one holding the stick.

“When the Warp Gate scattered us, I immediately froze every single villain around me. In the process, I made it impossible for Hagakure-san to exit the area safely, and she hurt herself trying to leave.” He turned towards Tohru. “I acted with the same ruthlessness, the same force my father always does. And in doing so, I hurt you.” He bowed to her. “Please forgive me.”

Tohru hopped out of her seat and gave Todoroki a hug. He stumbled back and took a step, an utterly flabbergasted expression on his face. The stick seemed to float out of his hand and in front of her empty sleeve, so I guessed Tohru took it from him.

“Don’t beat yourself up over it, Todoroki-kun.” She pressed the stick back into his hand. “You didn’t know.” She walked back to her seat and sat down, and Todoroki’s free hand started to drift upwards.

Nedzu hopped out of Todoroki’s seat and pushed its original occupant back into place, then hold the stick aloft. Mina came forward and took the stick.

“I didn’t get sent anywhere by the Warp Gate,” she started. “Uraraka-chan, Satou-kun, Sero-kun, Iida-kun, Shouji-kun, and I were all there with Thirteen. And when everyone helped Iida-kun get out of USJ and get help, I, I…” She sniffled, and reached for a tissue. “I didn’t do anything. I just s-stood there, a-and I didn’t know what to do! I didn’t know what I could do, not without hurting one of you too!” She hiccuped. “I d-don’t want to feel that helpless a-and useless again! I want to help everyone too!”

We had to pause for a bit to let Mina get herself back under control, and visit the bathroom to freshen up. Tohru and Uraraka went with her, and when the three got back five minutes later, their eyes were a little red, but expressions noticeably lighter.

“Well!” Nedzu presented the stick. “Who would like to go next?”

We settled into a rhythm for a bit. Kaminari came up and talked about his frustration with himself, how he felt like he was either mostly ineffectual but could keep going, or was a one-trick pony who then became a liability. He didn’t seem to be at all torn up about what could have happened when he overloaded himself, and I think the shiny new doodad on his left wrist, and his conspicuous absence from the cafeteria for the first half of lunch, had a lot to do with that. He also repeatedly traced the outline of something he had in his pants pocket, which I only cottoned on to after he’d passed the stick back and sat down, but now I couldn’t help but watch every time he brought his fingers up.

Jirou and Momo went up one after another, and both vented at the seemingly no-win situation they’d placed themselves into with their laxness, and the danger this relaxation had put Kaminari into. Aoyama took the stick after them, but even though I could tell he wanted to say something, he couldn’t put it into words. After two minutes, he gave up and sat back down, and Mina ended up looping an arm around his shoulders and giving him a half-hug, which he leaned into gladly.

Bakugou went next, but aside from slight disbelief at seeing just how far the position of Number One Hero was from where he stood, he didn’t really have anything to add. If there was anything else, it wasn’t going to come out here, and I think Nedzu realized that. He gave Bakugou a slight tap on his arm with a paw, and the two shared a knowing look before Bakugou nodded and sat back down.
“I can’t control my Quirk.” He gulped and looked around the room, opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it again. Opposite my seat, Bakugou leaned forward. “It’s… if I could have controlled my Quirk, things at USJ would have turned out differently, I know it! I could have stopped that Warp Gate villain! I would have been safe in the flood zone, or any other zone he warped me to! I could have protected Asu—Tsuyu-chan from that hand villain and the Noumu!… but I can’t control it.”

He looked down.

“I want to be a hero, somebody who saves others with a smile on his face, like All Might. But right now I can’t do that. I can’t even use my Quirk without hurting myself, and then somebody else needs to save me. I’ve been thinking about it, and how can I save others if I can’t save myself right now?” He looked up, and clenched his fist. “When I punched the villain, that was the first time I’d used my Quirk without hurting myself. I don’t know how I did it, but I need to figure it out. I will become a great hero.” He walked towards Nedzu, but stopped before handing the stick over. “Until then, I hope I can count on all of you!”

Nedzu took the stick back. Before he could get to the center and ask, though, Tsuyu stood up. She took the stick, and stood there.

Facing me.

“I say whatever’s on my mind,” she began. “I do this because it’s hard for most people to read my expression, and so they don’t know what I’m thinking. I find it’s better to just tell them what I’m thinking, so that they don’t assume I’m looking at them badly. But then there are times when I don’t know what to say, or how to say it. O-or it takes some time, but when I finally do, it’s too late.” She looked me in the eye now. “On the boat, I told you that it wasn’t the time to talk about bad things, that we had to act, kero. But then you had a plan, Kanna-chan, and even though I tried not to show it, I was scared, kero. I didn’t know what to do, and then you told us a plan. You told me to jump off of you to get myself and Midoriya-kun to safety, to leave you behind. Y-you…” She teared up.

“I thought you were telling me to leave you to die.”

I rushed out of my chair and hugged Tsuyu. The tears flowed now, and I could hear her sobs interspersed with little ‘kero’ noises.

“Y-you were ready, a-and I didn’t know what I could say, and w-when I did, it was too late, and we were jumping. And then you hit the water…” She sobbed. “I d-didn’t know if I’d see you again, kero.”

I was crying too now. We slid down to the floor, and I hugged her, and she hugged me, and this time I didn’t want to let go.

“Please don’t make do that again, Kanna-chan. I d-don’t think I could.”

“I’m sorry!” I cried. “I… I’m sorry Tsuyu, I’m so sorry…” 

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When we finally came back to ourselves, Tsuyu and I noticed that either Nedzu had vacated the classroom to give us privacy, or that time had ended. The two of us had gone through large swathes of the tissue box, and I could still feel my eyes burning and nose running. It’s amazing how you can feel after a good cry, but it’s more than a little embarrassing that we both fell so completely apart in front of everyone else.

“… I was scared for you, kero.” Tsuyu pulled back, and the two of us were sitting on the floor, facing each other. “I saw you go under, and then felt things in the water. Midoriya-kun stopped me from going back for you, Kanna-chan.”

“I’m glad he did. You could’ve been hurt,” I said. “Badly.”

“Kero.” She stood up, and I joined her, looking down to meet her eyes. “Did class let out?”

“I think so?” I looked to the back of the room, and sure enough, only two school bags were left. “I guess we should head home then…”

“Kero!” Tsuyu gave me another hug, surprising me. “It’s funny. You were born Japanese, but just like Pony-chan you barely use honorifics, speak very freely and casually, and are much more loose with close contact, but still have wide personal space.”

“H-huh,” I stammered. “I, uh, hadn’t noticed!”

“She rubbed off on you, didn’t she?”

“Y-yeah,” I replied, taking the easy out. “Can’t be friends with somebody for that long without a little bit of something like that, can you? H-hehe…”

“You’ll have to tell me how you two met sometime.”

“I will!” I promised Tsuyu. “C’mon, let’s go freshen up. Also, uh, I think I rubbed my eyeliner all over your blazer… uh. Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. We’re not supposed to wear makeup to school, Kanna-chan.”

“You try telling Pony that…”

“Kero.”
The Symbol of Peace. *Heiwa no Shouchou*. There were many days where Yagi Toshinori pondered just what that meant, not just for himself, but for the country. Even at his prime, not a day went by where he did not lament over his inability to save everyone, improve everything. It was a constant struggle, trying to balance his own ability to live his life with being the hero he felt the people of Japan—no, the world—deserved.

“You can’t save everyone, Toshinori,” his mentor had told him, nearly three decades ago. “At some point, you will come to the understanding that for every person you save, every criminal you stop, every disaster averted, there’s always another one that you couldn’t. You may be fast. You may be strong. But even you can’t be everywhere at once.”

Deep down, Toshinori understood. But at the same time, *All Might* gleaned a very different lesson from Gran Torino, wise beyond his years. It was true that Yagi Toshinori, the man, could only be one place at a time, could only solve the world’s woes bit by bit. But All Might was more than a man. All Might was more than a hero, more than any had ever been before him.

All Might was an idea.

Ideas aren’t constrained by silly things like being in one place at a time, or having to choose between rescuing this civilian or letting that villain go free. An idea was something so much greater than any one man, any lone hero. For nearly three decades, All Might had stood as an unflinching bastion, a bulwark against the forces of evil, vanguard against the darkness lurking in the dredges of society. Society flourished. The people rejoiced, comforted by the safety his very presence offered.

Yagi Toshinori was not a dumb man. Despite how boisterous, outspoken, and emphatic he was, All Might was anything but dumb muscle. He knew very well just what kind of effects his protection would have on society, how his very existence had shaped the world for the past few decades. Everyone under the age of thirty-three had been born into a world with All Might already there, standing watch. Everybody twenty-eight and younger had lived their entire lives with the Symbol of Peace, as he had been named. For twenty-eight years, he had stood as the Top Hero in Japan, and for twenty years, the entire world’s Top Hero. For twenty-six years, he had put his all into being the greatest hero the world had ever known, and if he ever thought about what might happen without him, he banished those dark whispers to the furthest recesses of his mind.

That is, until five years ago, when everything came crashing down. Until five years ago, when All for One crippled All Might, at what Toshinori had believed to be the cost of his own life.

Before that day, the line between Yagi Toshinori and All Might hadn’t existed. There had been no separate entity, no definitive difference between the two. But afterward, as he slowly withered away, as his condition deteriorated, the line grew sharper. When the amount of time All Might could actively use his Quirk to perform his characteristic heroics shrunk, the line grew sharper. When he had to separate his withered self from his muscle form, the line between Yagi Toshinori and All Might set itself in stone. A boundary existed between the two.

And as his health declined, and the time he could maintain what he’d come to know as his ‘true’ self with it, the dividing line slid further and further in Toshinori’s favor, shrinking All Might’s very existence.
It was after that day, five years ago, that he had to look at his country… and he realized that for he’d done, All Might had performed just as great a disservice. For nearly three decades now, Japan had relied on All Might, on what he represented and symbolized, in order to keep crime at bay, to maintain order and stability. Toshinori knew that this was an error, that the day would come when All Might must hang up his cape and fade away, leaving behind only his legacy. That day was coming sooner than he’d ever expected it to.

And deep in his heart of hearts, Yagi Toshinori—All Might knew that his country was not ready.

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Yagi Toshinori could just barely not count the number of people alive who knew about One For All’s true nature on one hand: All For One. Gran Torino. Sir Nighteye. Detective Tsukauchi Naomasa. Principal Nedzu. And most recently, Midoriya Izuku. Just before the second to last on that list left his office to oversee Class 1-A, Toshinori handed Nedzu a slip of paper to give to the last person on that short list.

Midoriya-shounen;

*Please do not reveal anything major about your Quirk! Also, perhaps you could come and meet me in the teachers’ lounge afterwards? I eagerly await your arrival!*

*Plus Ultra!*

He handed the note to Nedzu to deliver, settled down in the teachers’ lounge, and waited. All Might was not known to be a patient man. Yagi Toshinori, however, *was*. When your time is limited, patience is the greatest of virtues. Waiting for the exact moment to leap in had helped him maintain his ability to remain active over the years, but every time he settled in, it rankled. Six years ago, he wouldn’t have needed to bide his time.

Time passed. And eventually, the door slid open. Yagi Toshinori looked to the door, and an instant later, All Might smiled.

“Midoriya-shounen!” He bustled over to the entryway and showed his young protege inside, closing the door behind them. “Would you like some tea? Snacks?” He looked to his successor, and his smile dipped slightly. “I see you are troubled. Come, let us discuss, shall we?”

“All Might…”

Midoriya sat down on the sofa, and All Might acquired a pair of tea cups, the heated water kettle, and some matcha. He spooned a small amount into each cup, poured in the water, and stirred. Moments later it was ready enough, and All Might took his cup in hand, needing to use only two fingers due to its relative smallness.

“I didn’t talk about it.” All Might looked up at his successor, who set his cup down, slightly flustered. “A-ah, One For All, I mean! I… ah.” He stared down at his clasped hands, expression somewhat downcast. “Back at USJ, I told you I’d managed to hit that Noumu villain with One For All and didn’t hurt myself. I…” He sighed. “I didn’t actually manage to control it, I don’t think.”

“Oh?” All Might leaned forward in his seat. “What makes you say that, Midoriya-shounen?”

“Its Shock Absorption Quirk,” Midoriya explained. “When I hit the Noumu, it had give to it. It’s like, ah!” He reached next to him and picked up one of the couch’s large, possibly over-stuffed cushions. “It’s like if I punched this, versus punching the wall! If I punch the wall, it’s hard, there’s no give to it. Even punching the air like I did against Kacchan, that still hurt me because I was using my own
muscles to stop myself. But when I hit the Noumu?” Midoriya put the cushion against the wall, and punched it. Repeatedly. “I don’t even feel any impact against my knuckles doing this. It was the same thing: it’s not that I was able to control the punch, it’s that if I was only hitting the Noumu, I probably could have used One For All as much as I wanted.” He put the cushion back down, and slumped. “Which means I’m still no closer to controlling it than I was before.”

“I see, I see.” All Might rubbed his chin with a hand. “Even visualizing the egg didn’t help, then.”

“It might not be enough,” Midoriya conceded. “All Might. How did you learn to control One For All?”

“Me? Ah…” All Might rubbed the back of his head, slightly sheepish. “I, ah, didn’t actually have the same issues you are, Midoriya-shounen. I grew into my full size fairly early, and building muscle was easy at that point. I had more time than you did to prepare myself, as well, and more time to acclimate myself to the Quirk.”

“I… so that’s how it is.” Midoriya’s glum expression said it all.

“There is still hope!” All Might boomed, making Midoriya jump. “Perhaps your classmates could be a good resource to ask? Yaoyorozu-shoujo’s Quirk is particularly difficult to control, and Kaminari-shounen and his own output regulation could possibly help you. If you need to ask somebody about dangers inherent in their Quirks, then Tokoyami-shounen and Yaseiki-shoujo would also be worth asking.”

“What about in Class 1-B?” Midoriya asked. “Wasn’t there that one boy with that Quirk, the one that lets him copy—”

“NO!”

Midoriya leapt, tears prickling at the corners of his eyes, and pressed himself against the back of the sofa. All Might took a deep breath to calm himself, righted the chair he’d knocked over in his haste, and sat back down.

“I apologize, Midoriya-shounen. I myself have had to be incredibly careful around Monoma-shounen, lest he either acquire the remaining embers of One For All I still possess, or somehow not manage to duplicate anything at all when he touches me. While the latter would be disastrous, allowing any form of One For All into his hands would be far worse, Midoriya-shounen. Think about what happened when you used One For All for the first time.” Midoriya shuddered. “You are a prepared vessel. A hastily readied one, and nowhere near your full potential yet, but you were still prepared. If Monoma-shounen were to copy your Quirk, and then try to use it, unprepared as he is?”

“He would maim himself, worse than I did.” Midoriya finished his thought.

“Indeed. In fact, he may even kill himself.” Midoriya gasped, but All Might pressed on. “You at least understood, on some basic level, what One For All was. Monoma-shounen only gets a basic understanding of how to use a Quirk he copies. He doesn’t know the mechanics behind its function, or even its level of power. If he copied One For All and tried to use it as a generic strengthening Quirk, he—”

All Might wanted to hit himself upside the head. Aizawa-kun was right. He was a horrible teacher.

“All Might?” Midoriya asked.

“Midoriya-shounen. When you see me fight, and call out, say, my Detroit Smash, what do you think I am doing?”
“Eh? Well…” Midoriya’s hand came up to partly cover his mouth, and he muttered. As per usual, All Might thought to himself. “Detroit Smash is generally a downward strike, one meant to either throw the opponent into the ground and incapacitate them that way, or if done with sufficient force, rebound them off of the ground and into the air, where they can then be struck by a follow-up blow like the Canaveral Smash, which uses a single blow to generate air pressure and send an opponent flying, so—”

“No no, that’s not quite it,” All Might interrupted. “You are speaking of my technique. What am I doing, Midoriya-shounen? How am I using One For All?”

“Oh!” He brought a fist down on his open hand. “That’s what you meant! Well, you’re concentrating your power into—”

“Wrong!” He interrupted again. “Midoriya-shounen… it’s entirely possible that much of your issues are the result of a misunderstanding, or a difference in circumstances, or perhaps even imitation. I do not use One For All, Midoriya-shounen. One For All simply is.”

“H-huh?”

“Hm…” All Might snapped his fingers, clapped his hands, and pointed at Midoriya. “I mentioned a microwave as my example, but perhaps that was an incorrect example! After all, a microwave has programmable power levels, which means it can impart different levels of power, but it also has something I believe you have been making particular use of: an on/off switch! Instead of a microwave, perhaps try to imagine One For All as a window!”

“E-eh?”

“When you open a window, Midoriya-shounen, what happens?”

“Well,” he stammered, “it depends which is warmer or colder, outside or in, and—”

“Whichever way has the air come in,” All Might interrupted.

“I-if it’s cold outside, and warm inside, then the air outside is denser than the air inside,” Midoriya began, picking up steam as he spoke. “When you open the window, the colder, denser air outside tries to flow into the room to equalize the pressure, and since air is a fluid, it spreads out to fill the… entire… space.”

All Might leaned forward; perhaps he’d come to some realization?

“All Might.” Midoriya turned towards the Top Hero. “Are you saying One For All functions like a dam?”

“Huh?”

“A dam!” Midoriya perked up. “A dam holds back a reservoir of water, and in this case that would be the power it holds! Technically you can release a dam’s reservoir, but that would result in flooding the river valley, possibly causing massive damage downriver, and it’s more efficient to slowly ramp up how much water can pass through as you need it to generate power anyway! I’ve been using One For All like a dam with only one turbine running at a time, but uncapping the entire dam just for that brief instant!” He clenched and unclenched his fists, concentrating. “So instead of running just one turbine, let it fill my entire body, and crack the window just a tiny bit at first… feel for where I can go to, and—”

“Midoriya-shounen!” All Might waved to get his pupil’s attention. “Please, I know you’re excited,
but wait until Aizawa-kun is back. If you’re about to hurt yourself, he will be able to stop you from going too far.”

“But Aizawa-sensei—”

“Don’t let anyone know I told you,” All Might brought a finger up in front of his mouth in the universal gesture for ‘quiet’, “but Aizawa-sensei is coming back tomorrow.” He stood up, walked across to Midoriya, and gave him a proud pat on the shoulder. “You have sixteen more days to prepare, Midoriya-shounen! Put them to good use.”

“Sixteen d—what? All Might, what for?”

“Ah!” Halfway to the door, All Might turned, and gave Midoriya a thumbs-up. “The UA Sports Festival, of course! This will be your first chance, Midoriya-shounen, to face the world and tell them —”

He stood proudly, hands on his hips.

“—that you have arrived!”

“All Might!”

“Have a good evening, Midoriya-shounen!”

With that, All Might left the lounge, door open, and retreated to the teachers’ offices. He was about to drop his muscle form and return to simply being Toshinori when he heard a commotion, and turned to see another pair of students enter the office space, lock eyes on his massive form, and begin heading over.

“Ah! Asui-shoujo! Yaseiki-shoujo! What can I do for the two of you?”

“Kanna-chan has a question, kero.” Asui Tsuyu pointed at her friend, who seemed to be blushing slightly, and worried at the floor with her hoof.

“U-um, it’s a little silly to ask, but Pony’s birthday is coming up a week from Sunday, and she’s got a really rare figurine of you that she keeps on her shelf, still in its box,” she explained.

“Ah, Tsunotori-shoujo?” All Might asked.

“Uh-huh,” Yaseiki Kanna answered, growing more confident. “I know it may be a bit much to ask, but I don’t know if I can sneak the figurine out without her noticing it’s gone—it’s like the centerpiece of her collection—”

“Which figure is it, if I may ask?”

“Oh! It’s the XXXX All Might figure, the one that only got a limited run in the States!”

“I see, I see!” All Might felt a small flutter of excitement. That was a sixteen inch tall, 1:4 scale figure, with a manufacturing run numbering at only ten-thousand units. For one of Class 1-B’s students to have it…

All Might knew what he would be giving Midoriya-shounen for his next birthday! But in the meantime?

“I would be delighted!” All Might planted his fists on his hips, standing tall for his students. “You live just two blocks off campus, yes, Yaseiki-shoujo? When would you like me to come by and sign
it? Will there be any time that you expect Tsunotori-shoujo to not be present?”

“A week from today actually,” she explained. “I told her that I get her birthday proper, so she’s spending Friday night and the whole day before with her dad.”

“Excellent!” He withdrew a pen from a holder and wrote a memo on his poor, hardly-touched desk calendar. “I shall see you then!”

“Thank you so much, All Might!” She bowed emphatically, smiling despite the lingering redness in her eyes.

“When were you going to tell us Pony-chan’s birthday was coming up, Kanna-chan?” Asui asked.

“U-uh…”

“Perhaps that is a discussion best taken outside?” All Might suggested gently. “I am afraid I have some work that needs doing, Asui-shoujo, Yaseiki-shoujo.”

“S-sorry!” Yaseiki reached for her friend, who let loose a small ‘kero’ at the contact, but allowed herself to be dragged from the room. He could hear the two talking as the door to the teachers’ offices closed, and All Might sighed before releasing his grip on his form, and in a puff of steam, Yagi Toshinori emerged once more.

“Two and a half hours now, huh…” He flexed a hand experimentally, and clenched a fist. His final strike against the Noumu had taken a lot more out of him than he’d expected, and burned through a fairly sizable portion of the remnant embers of One For All, still burning dimly within him. And yet, he thought to himself as his eyes turned towards the door, if he’d had to do it over again, he would make the same decision every time.

Yaseiki Kanna. He’d met the girl just over a year prior. Paralyzed by fear she may have been, but her first instinct at the Wendigo’s appearance had not been to flee. She readied herself and stood her ground. In that situation, unprepared for the danger she may face, she was not able to act. This time, she had acted, almost too strongly. Yet Toshinori remained fully confident in his initial assessment: within that girl lay the burning heart of a hero. In fact… he couldn’t help but draw a distinct parallel between his successor and his charge.


Once the two managed to attain self-control… he could see them becoming heroes to truly be reckoned with. Yaseiki, to step out from the shadow cast by her father’s actions and the Wendigo’s presence, and emerge as a great heroine who stood tall, unbowed and unbroken by the hardships of her past.

And Midoriya, to surpass him as Symbol of Peace: a new, different beacon for society, one that brought everybody up to match himself, as opposed to the umbrella All Might had been. To help guide Japan into a new era, one of hope, brightness… and peace.

All Might looked at his hand again.

“Two and a half hours…” He looked to the door, and smiled. His time as the Symbol of Peace was swiftly coming to a close. And yet, while the idea had filled him with trepidation only a few months before, he felt lighter.

“It’ll have to do.”
“Already he is growing anxious,” the voice explained over the phone. “His wounds are severe, but despite that, Shigaraki Tomura only seems to display a renewed fervor. I do not know how long I can keep it at bay.”

“I will talk to him,” the man responded, occasional puffs of his respirator punctuating his speech. “He is still impetuous, inexperienced. This first foray was never meant to actually succeed; after all, we learn far more from our failures than we do our successes. Isn’t that right, Kurogiri?”

“Yes, Sensei,” the speaker replied hastily. “What shall we do in the meantime?”

“The beginning of Golden Week. That is when your most recent foes will display their might. Watch them, Kurogiri. Make sure Shigaraki is paying attention, and taking notes. You should watch several of those children carefully.”

“I understand; thank you Sensei. I will contact you if anything more comes up.”

“Be safe, Kurogiri,” he intoned. “Do not take any unnecessary risks.”

“Until next time.” The line went dead. He leaned in closer to the computer screens in front of him. He had long since lost his eyes, but he had ‘acquired’ other Quirks to make up for that deficit. He looked through his various communications, and found one that intrigued him. Once the line was secure, he dialed.

“Yes, Sensei?”

“You said you had an update on our American friend’s ‘boon’.”

“We’ve managed to isolate the chemical in his bloodstream.”

“Wunderbar…”

He removed his hands from the rubber waldoes, flicked a switch to aerate the chamber, and only after he was certain it was safe opened up the hermetically sealed glass box. He reached into the pocket of his lab coat and withdrew the holder for his test tube, and carefully extricated the vial, the formula within glowing a dim, yet lively purple.

“Stable? Fabelhaft!” He turned towards the racks of perfect, untouched laboratory mice on the side of his lab, sniffing at the corners of their reinforced, inch-thick acrylic-walled containment habitats. If only they knew what he had in store for them.

He held the vial aloft, and couldn’t help the manic grin that spread across his face as the purple glow reflected off his goggles.

“Now let us see what you can do, mein freund, hm?”

SEASON ONE | END
NEXT SEASON...

"If he wants to watch, then I’ll damn well give him a show."
“Stop fucking holding back, damn it!”
“Impressive… you fight just like your pops, injun.”
“Good, but rough, and unpolished. And then there’s… that. Yes, it’s clear to me: you
need extra guidance.”
“It was like looking into a mirror. For the first time in years, I understood what I was
seeing… and I hated it.”
“Found you, little injun… how’s daddy, hm?”
“Vhat a wunderbar opportunity… now behold! Mein greatest creation!”
“We can’t beat him, damn it!”
“There’s more than one way to succeed, and it’s all about knowing your win
condition!”
“Go Beyond! Plus Ultra!”
Chapter Twenty-Seven

There’s a long-standing rumor in the west that over here in Japan, we have school Monday through Friday, and additional half-days on Saturday. This is… well, I’m going to have to say that the internet rumor mill was partly right. See, all Japanese schools used to have Saturday. Then that decreased to most of the month’s Saturdays, then two Saturdays per month, and then it disappeared entirely. Apparently somebody actually listened when they were told it was better for students to have a full weekend for mental health reasons, and to help keep the kids from burning out partway through middle school.

Interestingly, the incidence of “chuunibyou”, which is the dumbest name for ‘stress and sleep-deprivation induced delusions, daydreaming, and other disconnects from reality’, dropped to near zero within three years of implementation.

Now, if you’re in the Hero Course at UA, things are just a touch different. Here in the Hero Course, we only have half-days of regular school. While most of us are essentially on a rapidly accelerated honors track, hero training does take priority, and occasionally regular school will be shoved off to the side, like with yesterday. What this means is that, on a week-by-week basis, we’re informed whether or not we have additional school days on Saturday. Last week, we did. This week… we also did.

Naturally, the lot of us were curious about what would happen once we got into class.

“Everyone! Morning homeroom’s about to begin. To your seats!”

Unless, of course, your name is Iida Tenya, in which case you’re busy worrying about whether everyone is properly seated and ready for homeroom. Which—

“We’re all sitting. You’re the only one up.”

—we all were. I lowered my face down to my desk to try and hide my chuckles at poor Tenya’s expense, but I highly doubt I managed to get away without anyone noticing.

“Morning.”

And then a voice I definitely hadn’t expected to hear brought my attention straight to the door.

“You’re back already, Aizawa-sensei!”

“Hn.” He shuffled into the room, practically mummified from all the bandages he wore, face almost completely hidden from view and both arms bound up in casts, suspended from his shoulders. I had to really look for it, but I think he was wearing a neck brace too; his scarf-like ‘capture weapon’ did a really good job of hiding it.

“Glad to see you doing well, sensei!” Tenya yelled, arm shooting straight up in an odd… salute? I guess?

“Not sure you can call that ‘doing well’, Iida-kun,” Uraraka murmured.

“My welfare isn’t important.” Aizawa-sensei positioned himself in front of the podium, and I saw his
shoulder move, followed by a wince. If I’m right, he was trying to reach for his ever-useful remote…but his arms are probably in such a bad shape that even a small twitch like that was enough to cause him severe pain. Wait, if his arms are in that condition, how the hell did he get dressed this morning?

… right, not important. Yaseiki Kanna, folks, asking all the world’s most important questions.

“All of you had best prepare yourselves. For the rest of the country, Golden Week is fast approaching. But for you?”

“The UA Sports Festival,” Midoriya, seated in front of me, muttered under his breath.

“Indeed.” Whispers and conversation erupted through the classroom at this announcement. Aizawa-sensei’s eyes burned a deep crimson, and the lot of us shut up almost instantly. His Quirk may be Erasure, but damn if it isn’t really good at getting us to quiet down.

“Wait, it’s still gonna happen?” Mina asked. “I mean, we just had that villain attack!”

“It’s necessary to demonstrate that UA’s crisis management protocols are sound…” Aizawa-sensei scoffed. “That’s the thinking, supposedly. Compared to past years, there’s a few changes. We’re going to have five times the police and hero presence, security is being increased across the board, and as for the media… well, that’s not important.”

“Not important, he says,” I muttered. “Boy would the media love to hear that one.”

“Quiet, Yaseiki,” he said immediately. “Your feelings on the media are well-known.”

“Microphone smash!” Somebody whispered. I just scowled, channeling my inner Bakugou.

“Anyhow.” Aizawa-sensei reined the class back in. Our sports festival… is the greatest opportunity you’ll get. It’s not an event that can be canceled for a few villains, no matter how enterprising.”

“The nation’s top heroes will all be watching, right?” Momo asked from her seat, directly behind mine. “They’ll be there as scouts!”

“They’ll be looking to hire us as sidekicks after we graduate!” Kaminari exclaimed. “That’s how it’s done.”

“And a lot of those sidekicks never manage to go solo,” Jirou bit out. “They’re sidekicks forever.” She turned towards her friend. “That’ll be you, Kaminari. You dunce!”

“Naturally,” Aizawa-sensei raised his voice to get attention back, “you’ll gain valuable experience and popularity if you’re picked up by a big-name hero. But your time is limited. Show the pros what you’re made of here, and you’ll make futures for yourselves. This happens once a year, so you’ve got three chances. If you’re hoping to become a hero, this is an event you can’t miss!”

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“I don’t know how I forgot the Sports Festival was during Golden Week!” Monoma groaned around his mouthful of soba noodles. “Me and my parents, we’ve even gone to spectate a couple of times, but I still managed to forget.” He slumped in his seat. “So much for having a few days off…”
“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Ibara said. “We first years are only going to be busy for the first two
days of Golden Week. We still have the remainder off to recover, or even watch the rest of the events
ourselves.”

“And since we go first, that means we get to set the bar!” I exclaimed, feeling pumped up. “We’ll get
to show them our Golden DRIVE!”

Tsuyu, Ibara, Monoma, and Momo all gave me a look. Then they looked to Pony for clarification.

“Twenty-first century anime, manga, video game franchise reference,” she deadpanned. “Kanna’s a
bit of a stickler for what she considers the classics.”

“A bit?” I rose to the challenge, even knowing Pony was just baiting me for our friends’
entertainment. “A bit? Pony, somewhere between Quirks showing up and All Might’s debut,
creativity may as well have died. I mean really, there’s over two thousand Pokemon, and their
designs peaked somewhere between generations one and four! I mean, there is a walking chocolate
cake! The creativity died, and now it’s just a zombie franchise, shambling along ‘cause nobody’ll say
it’s dead!”

“And aside from Pokemon?” Pony beckoned. I stood up now, and I could see a few people nearby
were leaning in.

“Oh, there’s tons of well-written, actually creative classics, and I swear nobody even knows they
exist anymore! How come nobody looks at stuff like JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure to see if their Quirk
does something even remotely similar to a Stand for ideas, or look at ye olde American comic books?
Where did all the epic fantasy and well-wrought magic systems go? What happened to stories like
Gurren Lagann, or Neon Genesis Evangelion, or Dragon Ball Z? And hell, even if the guy was an
absolutely terrible writer with no idea how video games, the entire subject matter of his writing,
actually worked, at least Reki Kawahara managed to imagine a whole damn world! What do we
have now? Nothing but more deus ex machina, solving every single problem with another Quirk
that’s just too fucking convenient! And then there’s mmph!”

Pony had gotten up and put her hand over my mouth to keep me from saying anything more while I
had the bully pulpit, and even licking her hand didn’t get her to let go.

“Alright, alright, let’s not scare the children Kanna.”

“Mmph!”

“Only if you promise to behave.”

“Mph mnhmmph.” Pony pulled her hand back and wiped it on her napkin, then on the condensation
from her water glass, then on her napkin again.

“Did you have to lick me?”

“Well if you don’t want her to, I’ll take it!” The six of us turned to see a most unwelcome little
interruption.

“Mineta-san,” Ibara groused, “what would you like in order to leave us be?”
“Well, I do believe the beautiful Kanna-chan here owes me a kiss!” My heart sank. Oh dear God no, he remembered. *Fuck.* I hadn’t figured out what I wanted to do about this yet!

“Right now?” I half-asked, half-whispered. Okay, if I hop over Mineta and make a break for it, then maybe—

Mineta brought a hand up to the top of his head.

… nevermind. I do not want to risk being stuck in place for however long his Quirk manages to keep me there. I sighed, and just looked at Mineta. I wasn’t getting out of this. Well, time to… wait, no, that phrase didn’t apply anymore. Alright, time to grow a pair (hey, that applies to both sexes’ pubertal changes!… just, different half of the body… don’t judge me, damn it!) and get this over with.

“Alright.” I slid my chair back under the table, took the last bite of my yakitori, and was about to grab my tray when Pony stopped me and gestured that she’d handle it. I turned to Mineta, who was already puckering his lips. “Not here, you damn—! In *private!"* I reached down and grabbed Mineta’s shoulder, then steered us out of the cafeteria, eventually coming to a stop in front of 1-B. I gestured, and he opened the door obligingly, then beckoned for me to come inside. No, not like that, you—ugh, why does Mineta’s presence alone seem to send my thoughts spiraling down the darn gutter!?

“Alright!” Mineta closed the door, hopped up on a chair to bring him level with me, and leaned forward. “Pucker up!” He closed his eyes, leaned forward, and—

“Nope.” I put a finger on his forehead and pushed back. He opened his eyes, anger and confusion warring for dominance. “Mineta. Aren’t you curious why Pony agreed so readily to offer you my first kiss?”

“Oh… no?”

“Well.” I loomed over him, crossing my arms. “You *really* don’t want to know what I originally had planned for you.”

“O-oh yeah?” He puffed out his chest, tilted his head back, and closed his eyes. “Try me!”

I morphed my head. I head to lean over and grab hold of a desk to help support the weight, but thankfully nothing else major changed with it. I even managed to keep my hair from morphing into fur, so the pins keeping those darn locks in front out of my eyes didn’t slip back out, and I wouldn’t have to go searching for bobby pins on the floor.

I growled.

Mineta cracked open one eye, and his smile instantly slipped away, along with all color from his face. If my facial structure currently allowed for smiling, I would have. As it was, I cracked open my jaw, breathed heavily on Mineta… and gave him a great, bristly *lick.*

“That,” I said once I morphed my head back from tiger to human, “counts as a kiss. Not what you were *expecting*… but still a kiss. So, I’d say we’re even.”

“Bu-wha-you—”
“Unless!” I interrupted. “You do something for me, and we can renegotiate. No!” I held up a finger. “Kiss on the lips, not until I’ve already had my first kiss. No!” Another finger joined it. “Recording. If I see anything, and trust me, if I don’t, Pony will, your ass is grass. No!” I raised a third. He gulped. “Attempting to renegotiate after the fact. That said, do all of this for me… it’ll still be a kiss. Plus?” I smiled. “I’ll try to put in a good word with the girls. Improve your behavior, and I’ll do more!” I reached out my hand. “Do we have a deal?”

He gulped, and was about to shake my hand to seal it when he paused.

“Wait, what do you want me to do?”

“Darn, thought I had you,” I muttered. “Right! So, I need to talk to Momo, Tsuyu, Monoma—”

“Just use his first name, Pony-chan does it,” Mineta interrupted me.

“And you aren’t on first-name basis with Pony yet!” I scolded. To his credit, he didn’t flinch, even after I’d pulled the tiger thing. Bastard was definitely a bit on the meek and pervy side, but once he got his big brass ones swinging… “Right, I need to chat with Momo, Tsuyu, Neito, and Ibara… without Pony there.”

“Ha! Fat chance of that!” Mineta guffawed… then stopped. “Wait.”

“Yup!” I pointed at him and smiled like the cat that caught the canary. “That’s where you come in. Make it look like an accident, do something stupid like have your arms behind your head and sneeze or something, just… find a way to keep Pony busy. I need a fair bit of time for this, and she’d get suspicious if I tried to keep her away.”

“But after this thing, she’d just think I was trying to get a kiss from her too, or maybe try to get you to do more, eh?”

“Now you’re getting it!” I smiled. “You know, for all that you’re a massive pervert with absolutely zero social graces when interacting with the fairer sex—”

“H-hey!” Mineta exclaimed, affronted.

“—I can see why you got into UA. I can definitely see it.”

“Heh. Hehe. All right then!” Mineta gave me a bright, cheery smile and a thumbs-up. “You can count on me, Kanna-chan!”

“I didn’t give you permission to use my first name,” I fired back.

“Aww…”

“Yet.”

“Yay!”

* * * * *
“We have two weeks to prepare you,” Aizawa-sensei said, standing before us with Ectoplasm at his side. “I understand that you all performed an after-action analysis yesterday, and know what areas you need to work on. Use this afternoon to address those. This is an advantage your competition does not have. Use. It. Well.”

At the mention of competition, we all grew solemn. Despite how much of an utter bastard Bakugou could be, he was right: we may have had a new crowd of haters from the General Studies course thanks to his callousness (though support from Tetsutetsu, Monoma, Ibara, and Pony especially, was greatly appreciated), but in the end, none of them mattered. We couldn’t change anything about the competition. If we wanted to head straight for the top, as Bakugou was so insistent on doing, we had to focus solely on self-improvement. Scouting out potential opponents was meaningless if we wasted all our time on that instead of actually preparing.

Most of us dispersed immediately, though some of us did remain: Mina, Tenya, Bakugou, and Midoriya.

“Hey Kanna-chan?” Mina came up to me, expression hopeful. “Those things you said about looking at old stuff for creativity… can you think of any that could help me?”

“Uh, not offhand,” I admitted. “I mean, I can definitely look, and you could probably even come over to my place after school some day to pick through my collection, but it’d definitely help if I had some baseline info to go off of.”

“Like?”

“Well,” I brought my hands up to start counting. “How fine your control over pH balance is, the volume you can produce, where on your body you can and can’t produce your acid, if you can control other factors like viscosity, how far you can project it without any aid, how much you can augment your effective distance with movement… hm. I think I’m forgetting something.”

“Ah, that’s fine! That’s enough to start!” Mina insisted, waving her hands as if to bring me back to the situation at hand.

“I mean, you could always ask Midoriya for help too,” I ventured. “I mean, you saw how he fought Bakugou.”

“Oi, the fuck you talkin’ bout me for, ya goddamn teddy bear!?”

“See?”

“Aizawa-sensei?” The lot of us turned to see Midoriya approaching our mummified homeroom teacher.

“Hm?”

“I…” He swallowed, seeming to steel his nerves before pressing onward. I saw Tenya looking at Midoriya with a serious, expectant expression; had the two been talking just before this? “I think I might have a breakthrough on controlling my Quirk, but—”

“You want me to Erase it if things go wrong,” Aizawa-sensei finished for him.

“Y-yeah…”
“I see.” He nodded. “Go ahead, Midoriya.”

“R-right!” Midoriya set his stance, fists clenched and arms back at his side, feet shoulder width apart, closed his eyes, and focused.

Next to me, I could see Bakugou watching these events unfold with all his attention.

“Imagine the dam,” Midoriya murmured to himself. His arms began to glow, red lines standing out against his illuminated skin, green sparks arcing off of them. “All turbines, not just one… spin them all, spin them all…”

As we watched, the glow seemed to dim from his arms, and spread. The red tracery expanded across Midoriya’s entire body, his hair stood on end, and a brilliant red ‘X’ blossomed along the bridge of his nose.

“Open the dam a trickle… just a trickle… crack the door!”

Midoriya’s body darkened. He didn’t burn like a living light bulb anymore, and instead his skin was illuminated solely by a dull glow. The red, starry lines traveling across his body pulsed once, twice, three times, and faded. Green sparked along his frame, and soon all that remained as the dim light.

“Tch. Deku!” Bakugou called out. “Can you even fucking move like that, huh!?”

“I don’t know.” Bakugou stopped, taken aback by the honesty. Midoriya glanced to the side at Aizawa-sensei, who just gave Ectoplasm a nod. The pro hero, and my dreaded math teacher, opened his mouth wide, and a clone fell out of his throat, one blob at a time before it shaped itself.

“Try it.”

“Right—!”

And then, he moved. Midoriya kicked up a clod of dirt, and in an instant, he was before Ectoplasm.

“Smaaaaaaaaash!—”

He buried his fist deep into the clone’s solar plexus. It skid back five feet, its legs carving deep furrows in the ground as it went. Its form wavered for an instant before falling apart into Ectoplasm’s trademark… well, ectoplasm, dissipating harmlessly into the air. Midoriya breathed hard, the glow faded from his body, and he fell to a knee.

“Midoriya.” He looked up to see Aizawa-sensei walking towards him. “That was far from your full power. How much?”

“That?” Midoriya closed his eyes. I could see him tighten his core, then push up off the ground. His brow furrowed in concentration, and he grit his teeth. The glow spread across his body, faster this time, starting from an initial glimmer and growing to a slight luminescence instead of starting at maximum and going down.

“Four percent.” He clenched a fist, and the force behind it sent a small burst of air pressure out, blowing his hair to the side partly. “This, this is…”
Midoriya closed his mouth suddenly, face blank, before a hesitant smile spread across his face.

“Full Cowl,” he said. “Four Percent!”

My heart skipped a beat.

I had to set my face into my usual neutral, ‘bitchy’ expression, and crossed my arms. I turned on my hoof and walked off towards where Tsuyu and Momo were practicing. Outwardly, I tried to project absolutely nothing. Inside, though?

I was in a daze.

Almost sixteen years ago now, I started on an anime that had been recommended to me. It passed the three episode test with flying colors, and my curiosity being what it was, I went on a wiki-walk, because spoilers are nothing before hype. Nearly everything, aside from the fact that it was the world I now lived in, had faded to the background. Over the past few weeks, though? All those little tidbits, half-remembered pieces of information, and factoids finally found the one thing they needed to really stick out in my mind and come to the fore again. They found the necessary context to let me fit them into a greater framework.

And what Midoriya had just said? Something about it jumped out at me. The way he was about to speak, but thought better of it, and finally said a name?

It triggered a memory that had lain dormant for almost sixteen years. It was an aside I’d noticed, remarked as being a decently cowl name, evocative of superhero culture, and discarded. But now? Now I remembered. Now I had the context to well and truly know. A half-dozen random insights, observations, and bits of information all suddenly made far, far too much sense. I know what Midoriya Izuku had been about to name his technique… and now, I understood all the implications, great and terrible, that came with that knowledge.

"Are you okay Kanna-chan? You look a little bit pale, kero." Tsuyu gave me a once-over, and even put a hand to my forehead.

"I can make a thermometer if you need one," Momo offered. I waved her off.

"I'm fine," I lied. "Just a bit of a surprise from Midoriya there, that's all. Looks like he finally took the first big step on controlling his Quirk." I turned and pointed. Momo and Tsuyu both followed my finger to see Midoriya, who Aizawa-sensei was having run through the same battery of fitness tests we'd done for our initial Quirk Assessment two weeks ago. "New technique."

"He named it, didn't he?" Momo asked. I nodded. "So?"

"He's calling it Full Cowl," I answered.

*One For All: Full Cowl.*
Chapter Twenty-Eight

“You okay?” Pony asked, looking at me with what I could only call concern. “You’ve hardly said anything since we got back from school, Kanna.”

“Howm. I picked at my dinner, lemon butter chicken with broccoli and mashed potatoes, courtesy of Pony’s far superior cooking skills. Honestly, it was really good, but… damn it. Damn it, damn it, damn it. I’d grown complacent. Nearly sixteen years living in a world that was just fiction the first time around, and yet not once had I bothered to try and catalog the information I had access to. Now, obviously some of that was just by necessity; you can’t really pull out a pencil and paper and start writing fluently in a foreign language, all before you’re supposed to be capable of reading your own damn name, and expect nobody to say anything.

“Did you see your mom sent us a care package?” Pony gushed. “We’ve got sweets and dessert for weeks! There was even an apple pie in there!”

“That’s nice,” I murmured.

Then there was the other problem: by the time I was old enough to actually be capable of recording that information without overly much fuss being made over my behavior, I had other things on my mind that were far more important. Learning to control my Quirk properly, actually being a normal kid and having friends like Pony and Tenya, the increasingly more dire situation with my dad… was it any surprise that any thought of recording what ‘meta knowledge’ I may have possessed slipped my mind entirely?

“Oh! I’m going on a date with Neito tomorrow; help me pick my outfit?”

“Mhmm,” I mumbled.

And even if I’d had the thought to record my knowledge, it had faded away to the deepest recesses of my subconscious these past fifteen years. I met Midoriya Izuku, who I know now to be the damn protagonist of the original work, and hadn’t a clue who he was. I met All Might a year before that, and still hadn’t been able to bring to mind just what it was that had seemed so important. The idea that I’d forgotten something important had bothered me for weeks, in between the increasing angst and dismay over the miles-deep hole Dad had managed to dig for himself, and I never managed to work out just what it was. Now, though?

“Also, that Bakugou boy asked if you were single.”

“Hm.” Now I was certain of— “Wait, WHAT?!”

“She’s alive!” Pony cheered, throwing her hands in the air. And her fork, which bounced off her horn and into her water cup. “Aw, darn. Woops.”
“Bu-wha-you—what!!?”

“Use your words, Kanna!” Pony teased.

“Bakugou!” I slammed my hands down on the table, tipping over my own water glass into my lap. “Shit, shit, shit.” I righted the glass and shoved my napkin over the water to blot it. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten! What did you say about that bastard!!?”

“I was kidding!” Pony laughed at my expense, but provided her own napkin to help with the water. “Well, about the part with Bakugou.”

“And, what were the other parts again?”

“Jeeze, you really weren’t listening, were you?” Pony crossed her arms and shook her head. “Tsk, tsk, Kanna. Not listening when your best friend is talking to you. Why, if I didn’t know you so well, I’d almost feel insulted!”

“Sorry…”

“No, no, it’s fine, I know when something’s bugging you.” She waved me off with a smile. “Your mom sent a care package with tons of sweets and desserts, and I’m going on a date with Neito tomorrow.”

“… you what.”

“And you’re gonna help me pick my outfit!”

“… you WHAT!!?”

“I. Am going. On a date. With Neito. Tomorrow.” She drew it out, punctuating each individual part of that sentence with gestures from her hands. “Seriously Kanna, it’s not that hard to figure out. It’s not like I’m speaking German or anything.”

“Wait, since when did you know any German?”

“Ugh!” Pony threw her hands up. “That was totally not what you were supposed to get from that! No, darn it, you know what?” She got up and walked around our teensy little table, got me out of my chair, and dragged me over to the couch. I know from past experience that where Pony’s raw strength is concerned, resistance is pretty darn futile, so I didn’t even bother.

… wait, I could probably resist pretty well now. Just do a gecko or remora morph and laugh as she completely fails to dislodge me. I’ll have to try that sometime.

Pony plopped down on the couch and dragged me down with her. I’m not sure whether I was leaning on her or she was leaning on me, but frankly I didn’t care. This was comfy. This was nice. This was familiar. I closed my eyes, nestled closer into Pony’s side, and took a deep, calming breath.

“Wait, are you wearing perfume?”

“No the point, Kanna!” She gave me a light swat on the arm, then did the same. “Now, why don’t you tell your big sis Pony what’s going on, hm? How about it?”
“Pony, you may be older, but not *that* much older. If we’re any kind of sisters, it’s twins, capisce?”

“*Even better!* Now you can’t complain when we do a twinsies!” She managed to wrap an arm around me and turned it into a partial hug, until I had to tap her arm in our agreed-upon signal for ‘need air’ or ‘ribs hurt’. Hey, when one of you has super strength, and the other *can* have it at the drop of a hat, you kinda need these things! “Anyway. What’s the matter?”

“I… how do I put this.” I fumbled for the right words. “So I know you’re not in 1-A, but between our battle training, some interactions I’ve managed to see, USJ, and a couple of random comments, probably tossed out as asides, I…”

I trailed off.

“Yeah?” Pony prompted. “You what?”

“I think I just figured out a really really big secret,” I said. “You know, the kind people would pay hundreds of millions of yen for.”

“… oh.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Oh.”

“W-well!” Pony tried to keep her tone light. “Uh, should you really be telling me this? I mean, what if someone finds out you know, and they come after you, and then they—”

“Oh please!” I laughed. “Can you really see *All Might* doing that?” My mind caught up with my mouth a moment later, and I paled. “Uh, forget you heard that.”

“Wait, did you figure out All Might’s real name!?” Pony practically yelled. “Oh my God, please say yes please say yes! *Nobody* knows his real name!”

“N-no,” I tried to wave her off. “Something else. And… well.”

I fell quiet.

“Well, why don’t you talk to Principal Nedzu about it?” Pony suggested. “I mean, he obviously cares for us, given how he helped with that big thing and your class’s thing on Friday. Don’t you have his e-mail address from when he wanted to talk to you before term started?”

“… Pony, you are a genius and I love you.” I shot up off the couch to get to my computer and pen an e-mail.

“H-hey, you still need to help me pick an outfit for tomorrow!” Pony shouted after me. I looked over my shoulder to see her standing in my doorway.

“Your turquoise skirt with either long socks or leggings, one of your US city or state monogrammed tees, and that light jacket of yours.”

“Well, that would work, *if I could find that skirt!*”

“Second drawer from the top, left side.” I barely heard Pony’s hooves on the carpet, but definitely caught my dresser drawer opening.
“… huh. I thought you didn’t like skirts that much.”

“They grow on you, and they’re comfy!”

“But this is my skirt!” She stamped her hoof.

“Aaaaand what happened to my favorite All Might tank?”


* * * * *

Sunday came, and as expected, Pony agonized over her upcoming date. Her hair wasn’t laying right! I fixed it for her. She poked herself with the eyeliner pencil again! I had her sit down and close her eyes so I could get it right. Pony couldn’t find her purse! I gave her mine and shoved her out the door.

Once that was done, I got myself ready for the day. I pulled my hair back into a ponytail (not washing it until later tonight, that way it’s more or less freshly washed for Monday), grabbed the only damn jacket I could find with pockets in it, and headed out myself. I hadn’t expected to be on UA’s campus today, but when Principal Nedzu says that he’s free to speak with you at a specific time, you plan to arrive five minutes early. I headed inside and made my way for Nedzu’s office, at the convergence of the four ‘towers’ of UA’s building.

I stopped when I heard what could only be an explosion, along with some annoyed yelling.

“Damn it, Hatsume! Didn’t I say that you’re only allowed access on Sunday if you’re careful and don’t blow anything up!?”

“No! My baby! But it shouldn’t have been able to so much as ignite from a catastrophic failure, how did my baby—”

"I don't care! This is supposed to be my private lab time, and I'm doing you a huge favor by—"

NOPE.

I walked away from there as fast as I could, making my steps heavier than normal so the sound of my hooves on the floor echoed through the hallway. That girl I heard talking to Power Loader… whoever she was, her intonation, word choice, and voice were uncomfortably close to that of Tenya’s sister-in-law. Rei was a wonderful woman if you could get her away from her workbench, and devilishly smart on so many levels—hell, the only reason pre-calc didn’t have me tearing my hair out for a second time around is thanks to her—but holy crap could that woman turn scary in a heartbeat. I have no idea how Tensei lived with her eccentricities, or how the Iida family home was still intact after Tensei and Rei’s weekly visits. I do not want to count how many times Pony and I ran into Tenya hiding out at the shopping district, waiting for it all to blow over.

Too bad we weren’t old enough to grab a pint at the Winchester. And too bad there wasn’t a Winchester to grab a pint at in the first place. Oh well.
I opened the door to Principal Nedzu’s office area, and once again, there was no secretary at the desk.

“Ah, Kanna-chan! Come in, the door’s open!” Nedzu’s voice carried through the frosted glass door to his office, and I took the invitation gladly, opening the door to see him already preparing tea. From the scent, it was chai. Hey, he remembered! “The latches on the chairs are on the inside of the hollow back; just feel around the bottom inside until you find them.”

“Does the place you got these make other furniture too?” I asked. I stepped forward to the chair, felt for the tiny latches he said were there, and pressed them at the same time. Sure enough, a small panel on the back of the chair fell out towards me, and now there was a nice, comfy tail hole in it.

“Oh, I never gave you the information for them, did I? Well go on, sit, sit!” I obliged, snaking my tail through the back and settling down, once again marveling at just how comfy these chairs were.

Nedzu came up and placed a cup of tea in front of me, and a second one in front of himself. “Ah, ah,” he warned as I reached for the cup, “let it cool a minute first. Don’t want you burning your tongue!”

“Little trivial to waste Recovery Girl’s talents on burnt taste buds,” I replied, smiling. “Hey, that reminds me: is she a doctor also?”

“Ah, I’m afraid Shuzenji Chiyo is merely a registered nurse,” Nedzu revealed, shaking his head with some dismay. “I always told her that she should have forced herself through medical school, but she simply replied that if an injury was severe enough she’d need to act as a doctor, it was too severe to fix with her Quirk, and better left to somebody with more time.”

“That’s…” I couldn’t find the words. “I really don’t know what to think about that one. I mean, economy of time is definitely something she’s had to worry about, but still!”

“Mm,” Nedzu mused. “Still, her status as an RN means I can more reasonably expect to employ her here at UA, whereas if she had a fully-fledged medical doctorate, she would have been far too busy, even in her golden years, for us to have scooped her up so easily! But that is neither here nor there.”

Nedzu waved a hand, almost as if to physically clear the air. “What was it that you wanted to talk to me about, Kanna-chan? Something to do with your ‘circumstances’, you said?”

“Yeah. It’s… well, I wasn’t entirely truthful the first time around,” I admitted. “You remember how I said it was impossible for me to have been the first Quirk user, even despite the decades between my first birth and that baby’s in China?”

“I do!” Nedzu exclaimed. “What about it?”

“Well, uh. That’s because, um… well—”

“Was it because you knew of this universe as fiction?”

This time I managed to not rocket out of my chair and knock it to the ground. I mean, I expected Nedzu to figure it out and probably try to preempt me, but to immediately hit on it?

“Okay, I’m definitely repeating myself here, but how the hell?”

“Well,” Nedzu spoke, voice light and airy as though discussing the weather, “if you were to tell All
Might he was simply a fictional character, he’d regale you with a tale of the time he shared a pizza with Spider-Man.”

“… what.”

“Oh, it’s quite the fun story!” Nedzu sipped his tea, and I took that as a signal that it was safe to taste mine. Man, that was some really good chai. “About twelve years ago, one of All Might’s international heroic sojourns took him to the United States. While he was there, a villain with a rather unique Quirk managed to trap All Might inside a comic book! Not even the villain himself expected All Might to be sucked inside the universe the comic took place in, as opposed to the book itself! And more importantly?”

Nedzu leaned in close, what could only be a smile on his snout, whiskers twitching. I leaned in closer.

“While trapped in that universe, he found a series of comics… about him.”

“No fucking way,” I murmured.

“Language, Kanna-chan!” Nedzu scolded. I stifled whatever I was about to say, and it came out as a squeak. The principal laughed, and I felt my cheeks burn a bit. “But yes, he did. And more importantly? As All Might tells it, all the details were accurate. He managed to track down All Might #1, and it had all the details of his backstory, his true name, everything.”

“Wait, if All Might was stuck in there, how did he get out?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Oh, he tells me he spoke to a man who called himself Mr. Fantastic, who helped him escape back to our universe.”

“And the villain?”

“Nobody knows!” Nedzu exclaimed, arms spread wide.

“… riiiiiiiight,” I deadpanned. “Pull the other one Principal, it has bells on it.”

“Well last we heard, after All Might managed to return to our universe, that villain got curious and used his Quirk to enter that universe himself to see what he could find. As far as we know, he’d run afoul of some ‘Doctor Doom’ character.” Nedzu sniffed, and took a sip of his tea. “From what I saw in that comic book All Might brought back with him, this ‘Doctor’ did seem to me a rather unpleasant fellow.”

“Ooh,” I winced. “Ouch. Yeah, uh… nobody’s ever going to hear from that poor bastard again. You do not screw with Doctor Doom.”

“I take it you know the name?” Nedzu asked.

“Yeah…”

“Well, that tangent aside, now you know why I am completely unsurprised by this revelation. Reciprocal fictionalization in the multiverse is something we’ve understood to be true for a fair while now. Why, I would dare say that your previous self exists somewhere in some or other work of fiction we have here!”
“Well, I have probably shown up as just a random passers-by in a movie or two, given I used to live in Los Angeles,” I admitted.

“That would be more than enough for the reciprocity to kick in,” Nedzu said. “When All Might appeared in that alternate New York, he saw one of the background characters from the comic panel, and asked them where he was. The young man recognized All Might from a recent film, as a matter of fact. But I fear we’ve strayed off topic yet again,” Nedzu declared, course-correcting our conversation yet again. “From what you are telling me, you knew of this universe when it was still merely fiction to you. This would also mean you believe yourself to be in possession of possibly… sensitive information, I gather?”

“I do,” I confirmed. “I… I’ll be honest: I didn’t pay much attention to this world while it was still fiction. Three episodes and a brief stroll through the internet was all I got, and it’s been over fifteen years since then.”

“And yet, given how many works of fiction have major details early on, whether as a ‘hook’ or a visit from dear Anton Chekhov, you know yourself to possess important information.”

“All Might passed his Quirk on to Midoriya Izuku,” I blurted out. Nedzu stilled with his tea halfway to his mouth, put the cup back on the table, and looked me firmly in the eyes, any trace of mirth in those eyes replaced by a cold, analytical outlook.

“I’m listening.”

“All Might got badly hurt five years ago,” I started, “and can only maintain his ‘hero form’ for… what, three hours per day? That’s not important,” I interrupted Nedzu, plowing on while I still had this fresh in my mind. “One For All is a transferable Quirk, and All Might himself received it from someone else before passing it to Midoriya. He’s losing his powers now, and it’s only a matter of time until All Might as we know him is gone.”

“I see.” Nedzu nodded, as if to confirm everything I’d said. “Was there anything else that you recall?”

“Nothing concrete,” I admitted. “There’s really just two things that keep jumping out at me. The first one, if neither All Might nor Midoriya are the first wielders of One For All, then follow the number names. I know Midoriya’s first name, Izuku, has a homophone for ‘nine’, so All Might’s probably has ‘hachi’ or ‘ya’ in it somewhere. If we follow that chain all the way up and look for somebody with a ‘hito’, ‘ichi’, or ‘i-’ name, we may find where it came from.”

“I will mention this to All Might. And the second?”

“The Three Musketeers,” I said. Nedzu gave me a perplexed look. “Un pour tous, tous pour un. It’s the motto of the Musketeers: one for all and all for one. We know that All Might and Midoriya are each One For All—”

“But what about All For One?” Nedzu interrupted. He pushed back from his chair and got up, walked to the window, and hopped up on a step-stool so he could look out. “Kanna-chan.”

“Yes?”

“Did you see anything, anything at all, about where and how this so-called ‘villain alliance’ formed,
“or where it received its information?”

“I’m sorry,” I shook my head, then realized he wasn’t looking. “If I did, I don’t remember it. I… I only remembered this much because I suddenly had context to work with.”

“I see. Thank you for bringing this to me, Kanna-chan. If you remember anything else, come to me immediately.”

“T-thank you, Principal Nedzu.”

“No, thank you.” He reached down to his side and pulled out a drawer, then removed a small container from it. “Here is some of that chai you’ve enjoyed so much. Feel free to escort yourself out; I have much to think over, I’m afraid.”

“Ah, you didn’t have to—” Nedzu turned and gave me a look, paired with an insistent, if strained smile. I gave in and took the offered tea tin before leaving his office and heading out of the school proper posthaste.

**BOOM**

“That’s it! Hastume!”

“No, my babies! Not again!”

And not just because of my talk with Nedzu, either. I don’t know who that girl is that’s driving Power Loader up a wall, but if she’s as nutty as she seems just from this tiny bit of exposure, I want nothing to do with her. Not unless that special brand of insanity turns useful somehow.

… yeah, like that’ll ever happen.

* * * * *

“Oh my God Kanna it was amazing!~”

Pony returned from her date in high spirits, and any gloominess I had left over from my talk with Nedzu faded away before the endless font of optimism and sunshine that is Tsunotori Pony.

“I’m probably gonna regret this,” I joked, “but tell me everything.”

I did regret it, though only a little bit. Sure, some of the detail was a little painstaking, and dear lord is Monoma a hopeless romantic. I mean really, he definitely planned to have the two of them get something with whipped cream just so he could do the classic ‘wipe with finger or thumb’ thing.

“—and I think we might be boyfriend and girlfriend now!”

Whoa whoa hold the fuck up. Wasn't that going a little fast for—wait, no, this is high school, forget I said anything.

“That’s… nice?”
“I know!” Pony squealed. “I mean, I thought he was a jerk at first, but Neito’s actually a really great guy once you get to know him! And—"

I tuned her out as she continued to gush.

Pony.

Pony, you’re failing the Bechdel Test super hard right now.

Pony, stahp.

Chapter End Notes

Next up:

Interlude Nine | Perspective: Monoma Neito
“This concludes our unit on Jiraiya Gouketsu Monogatari,” Cementoss addressed 1-B from the podium. “Tomorrow, we will begin an American comic book from the late 1980s, before the time of Quirks, and uses heroes as metaphor for societal issues. There is still much to learn about both ourselves and our world from this graphic novel, though. I would like you all to read the first thirty-two pages, or the first ‘issue’ from when it was still in a serial printing.”

Monoma Neito wrote Cementoss’ assignment down in his planner, stopping only when a small, crumpled-up piece of paper landed on his desk. He looked to his right to see Pony (his new girlfriend!) smile at him (his heart started beating faster just from that!), and she pointed at the note. He opened it up to read the contents, and couldn’t help the cocky smirk that spread across his face.

_Just ask Kanna for the full lesson on this one. She likes to talk and rant and sing in the shower, and I’ve caught her raving about some or other news person needing to read Watchmen, oh, twelve times now?_

He barely managed to hold back the snort of amusement at that mental image, but yeah, he could see it. The Japanese weren’t usually known for speaking their minds all that much, but somehow 1-A had two of the most outspoken Japanese people Monoma had ever met: the foul-mouthed, surly Bakugou Katsuki, and the cynical, bitingly sarcastic Yaseiki Kanna. You could not get either of them to shut up if you tried… mainly because that usually meant they’d insult or critique your methodology, your approach, your motives, you, your family, and your life choices. Or at least two of those.

“Before you go to lunch, Kan-sensei would like a word.” Cementoss picked up his papers and headed for the door, which slid open to reveal their homeroom teacher, Sekijirou Kan. He gave them all a gruff look, which turned into a slight smile.

“For today’s hero training, we will be joined by All Might.” The class broke into raucous conversation at the revelation, all excited and happy. “Alright class, settle down, settle down! Now,” he continued once they’d all calmed themselves, “once lunch is over, put on your costumes and head to Cityscape B immediately. Oh, Tsunotori-san!” Monoma saw Pony perk up. “Power Loader-sensei wanted me to let you know he needs your input to help finalize the adjustments to your costume.”

“Okay!” She beamed. Monoma looked over to Pony, and mouthed ‘changes?’ to her. She shrugged. “New design,” she whispered back. He mouthed an ‘ah’ of understanding, and on Pony’s initial note, wrote a return message. _Can’t wait to see it; I’m sure it looks incredible._ She smiled and blushed a little bit at the note.

“All right, class dismissed!” Kan-sensei clapped his hands, and the lunch bell rang immediately after. Monoma got up from his chair and extended a hand to Pony, who happily took it. The two of them started to walk out—

“What the—Mineta!”

—until they both realized that _Pony’s skirt was stuck to the seat._

Monoma whirled on the smaller boy, glaring at him with the fury of a thousand suns, and called on his copy of Pony’s Quirk to grow a pair of horns to truly enhance his glare.

“Mineta…!”
“Ha! That’s what you get!” He crowed in triumph. “That’s what you and Kanna-san get for pranking me!”

“What?” Monoma asked, looking to Pony for clarification.

“Well, uh… before you found out I spoke normal Japanese, Mineta here kinda… found out. I said if he kept quiet Kanna would give him a kiss.” Her smile turned devious. “I never said what kind of kiss it’d be, though!~”

“She turned her head into a tiger and licked me!” Mineta yelled. By this point, Kan-sensei had managed to remove most of the class from the room, and Monoma noticed that along with himself, Pony, Kan-sensei, and Mineta, the only person left was Ibara, who just watched the whole situation with a combination bemusement and disappointment.

“Still a kiss,” Pony replied.

“Tiger tongues can strip muscle from bone!”

“You stuck her skirt to her chair,” Ibara chose to speak up. Her vines extended and grabbed hold of Mineta, at which point she turned to literally drag him out of the room. Monoma knew she could have just picked him up, her vines were strong enough… but she didn’t. “Reprehensible.”

“Detention, the rest of the week!” Kan-sensei called after Mineta, who groaned before Ibara’s stranglehold dragged him out. He turned back towards Pony and Monoma, eyed her situation… and faltered. “A-ah. Tsunotori-san, I would get your costume out of the rack, but it’s currently upstairs with the Support Department. I’ll go see if I can get it from them, and if not I’ll grab you a spare gym uniform to use instead.”

“That’s fine,” Pony answered. “Neito, go to lunch, alright? I should be there in…” She turned towards Kan-sensei. “What, five to ten minutes? Tops?”

“About,” he answered.

“Well, I’ll just see you down there! Get me some sushi for lunch, okay?” She leaned up as much as her stuck-down skirt would allow and gave Monoma a quick peck on the cheek, and he couldn’t quite suppress the blush. Kan-sensei coughed and looked away, murmuring something about teenagers and… sugar?

“If you insist,” Monoma sighed, shrugging his shoulders and giving Pony a quick kiss of his own. He turned to walk out, and caught one last bit from Pony.

“Oh right, Kanna had to help Lunch Rush again today! Make sure you heckle her!”

“Can do!”

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“… so Kan-sensei is either retrieving her costume from the support course so she can change, or a spare gym outfit,” Monoma finished explaining to Kanna, Tsuyu, and Momo, the three girls from 1-A seated across the table from himself and Ibara.

“Darn, didn’t work as well as I’d hoped. Alright, nothing for it, just need five minutes to be enough.” Monoma looked at Kanna, surprise writ large on his features. She gave him a look. “Oh come on, you don’t really think Mineta would do that on his own? And really, can you think of any other way for me to get some time to talk to everyone without Pony present that doesn’t look fishy?”
“Kanna-chan,” Tsuyu said, “I hope you have a good reason for that kind of mean prank, kero.”

“Not a prank.” She folded her arms and crossed her legs, leaning back into the chair. “I just needed even five minutes without her. After all…” She smiled now. It was wonderfully devious, but it was also a bright, happy smile. “How else are we supposed to plan Pony’s birthday surprise?”

“Birthday!?” Monoma caught himself nearly yelling. “Bu-wha-when?”

“Sunday.”

“Sixteenth?”

“Sweet sixteen!” Kanna clapped her hands to bring them back to attention. “So, normally I’d like to do some great big Sweet Sixteen bash… but we’ve got the Sports Fest coming up, and we only recently started here at UA, and I doubt Pony wants a great big ‘everyone and their grandmother’s invited’ thing anyway. That kind of thing is more for American high schools, where there aren’t any homerooms, and the students are the ones who go from classroom to classroom, and the teacher has a set room, for the most part. So, I was thinking more just a small thing for the six of us? Unless there’s someone any of you wanted to invite?”

“Before we get much further.” Momo held up a hand, and put down her chopsticks. “Do you have a suitably large location lined up? And how can we set this up without Pony-chan knowing?”

“She’s spending Friday evening and Saturday with her dad,” Kanna answered. “So we’ll have Friday after school and most of Saturday.”

“Most?”

“Kanna-chan asked All Might to sign something Pony-chan has,” Tsuyu said. “Do you know when yet?”

“Not yet,” she replied with some chagrin. “I’ll find out and let everyone know.”

“Would you like to host it at my home?” Momo asked. “And while I’m thinking about it, was there anything in particular Pony-chan has been eying, but felt was simply too expensive?”

“Momo, you don’t have to—”

“Kanna-chan. My family is wealthy. In fact, they are so wealthy that neither I, my children, nor my children’s children will ever have to work a day in our lives if we didn’t want to. If I want to spend a little bit of money on my friends, and I would lose nothing by doing so, then why should it matter?”

“Actually, while I’m thinking about it,” Monoma spoke up now, “could I possibly bother you to either use your Quirk or let me copy it at some point, Momo-chan?”

“He wants to use your Quirk to make a present for Pony,” Kanna interjected. “I swear, one date and you’re already boyfriend and girlfriend.”

Monoma stopped. Momo stopped. Ibara stopped. Tsuyu stopped. Then the three girls all turned towards him, smiles creeping up onto their faces in a way that really, really disturbed him.

“Kanna-chan… you are evil.”

“I know!” She replied, expression and voice equally elated. “Also, Monoma? If you hurt her nobody’ll ever find your body, ‘kay?” Wait, what? “Oh, there’s Pony now; I’ll add you four to a
group chat so we can plan, don’t say anything!”

Did… did she just—

“Made it!” Pony slid in next to Monoma, knocking him out of the slight stupor he was in. He saw Pony look at him, then followed her gaze towards Kanna, who sat there looking like that cat that caught the canary. “Kanna, I’m pretty sure threatening boys is my dad’s job, not yours.”

“I regret nothing!”

“Pony-chan.” Tsuyu leaned in over the table. Her expression was its usual, ever-neutral self, but her eyes… “Tell us everything.”

“Yes, I find myself quite curious!” Ibara laid an elbow on the table and cupped her face in her hand, staring at the boy in question next to her with an intrigued expression. “So Monoma-kun took you on a date, hm?”

“Somebody just kill me now,” Monoma groaned, burying his face in his hands to try and hide his blush.

“That can be arranged,” Kanna murmured. “Let me just call her dad and—”

“Please no!”

* * * * *

“Today, we shall all be performing something similar to the hero versus villain combat trials of last week!” All Might announced within the basement command room. “Today, the heroes will be defending, and the villains will be attacking. But the heroes do not have an object to defend. Instead, they will be protecting Vlad King, who is the villains’ objective!”

“All Might-sensei!” Mineta, standing up in the front of the crowd, jumped up and down to try and get attention. “Doesn’t this mean only the people playing hero get anything really good out of this!?”

“Excellent question, Minoru-shounen!” All Might boomed. “But all you have to do is invert the scenario! Say that you were two heroes, tracking down a pair of villains, along with a third person you cannot allow to get hurt!”

“A hostage?” Monoma heard Tetsutetsu ask.

“Correct. Now, come forward and select lots to determine your teams!” All Might held the box in both hands, and Mineta was the first to take his paper. As the students lined up, Monoma couldn’t help but notice something. The last time All Might had been close enough for him to touch and copy the man’s Quirk, he’d been wearing his Silver Age costume, which had gloves. This time, All Might was wearing his current costume, which had no gloves. All Might’s hands were bare.

The Symbol of Peace. The Number One Hero. What kind of power must that man possess, for him to be capable of such incredible feats, to be the single greatest hero in the entire world? For ages, Monoma had wanted to know. Ever since the day he understood the utility of his Quirk, he’d grown curious about many of the Pro Heroes and their powers. How did Endeavor’s flames burn from within him? What would it be like to have a folding body like Edge Shot? To use all the fabric around him like weapon, like Best Jeanist did?

What was it like to have the greatest strength in the world? Monoma put himself at the very back of the line, as the last person to draw his lot.
All he would need to do…

“Ah, Monoma-shounen—!”

He tripped himself. All Might’s hand closed Monoma’s forearm to pull him up. The forearm that Monoma’s costume’s sleeves usually kept covered.

The sleeves he’d rolled up to his elbows for exactly this purpose.

All Might and Monoma both froze for a moment. He reached out with his Quirk, tried to feel for it, for the new Quirk available to him, and… and!—

Monoma looked up to All Might, eyes growing wide.

“Stay behind after, Monoma-shounen,” All Might whispered to him. “We have much to discuss.” He righted Monoma and brushed the boy off, his ever-present smile making it seem as though nothing had happened. Monoma stood between Pony and his partner Honenuki, and while the two did discuss strategy, his heart just wasn’t quite in it. When Pony’s turn came up, he gave her a quick hug and wished her luck, and when she and Tetsutetsu emerged victorious and it was his turn, she did the same with an additional peck on the cheek. But despite Honenuki’s best efforts, and Kan-sensei’s encouragement, Monoma just couldn’t get his head in the game. He and Honenuki lost to Ibara and Mineta; Ibara used her vines to corral them into a small alley, where Mineta waited on a rooftop to pelt them with his sticky grapes, both sealing the exits and leaving them stuck in an impassable minefield. His head was somewhere else entirely. It was back in the basement command center. Because when Monoma had touched All Might, *there had been no Quirk to copy.*

“Well done, everybody!” All Might bellowed, clapping his hands and producing a small shockwave in the process. “Kan-sensei and I will have write-ups ready for you tomorrow morning. Dismissed!”

Pony gave him a tug on his arm, but he shook his head and pointed at All Might.

“Need to talk to him about something,” he whispered.

“Is everything okay?” Pony asked. “You’ve been a little out of it all afternoon.”

“It’s not that,” Monoma shook his head. “Just… something.” Pony gave him a weird look, but after one last squeeze of his hand (which actually hurt a fair bit… sometimes Pony forgot how strong she was!) she turned to join the rest of the class on their way back.

“See you back in the classroom!” Pony called. Monoma waved back.

Once everyone else was gone, Monoma turned to see All Might. The man had walked closer to him, and his smile had dipped ever so slightly.

“Monoma-shounen.” Monoma looked up at All Might. “I’m sure you have questions. I can’t answer all of them, but—”

“Are you Quirkless?” He blurted out. “I, my family, we’re usually called to see if someone is actually Quirkless or not. All of us have some Quirk that does stuff with other Quirks, and we can’t do or feel anything if there isn’t one. I know what a Quirkless person feels like to my Quirk, All Might.” He looked the Number One Hero in the eyes. “And as far as my Quirk can tell, you don’t have a Quirk.”

“Hmm.” All Might’s smile stayed exactly where it was. “I must admit, Monoma-shounen, I’ve had to
be very careful around you for exactly this reason.” All Might’s hand reached to his left side, and Monoma saw now that his ‘bodysuit’ was actually in two pieces. “Alas, there are many reasons for this.” All Might lifted up his costume’s top half, revealing his abdomen.

Monoma flinched back.

“W-what… what?”

The left side of All Might’s torso was what could charitably be considered the end result of a bad meeting with a chainsaw. From one point on his side, his skin was stretch taut, scar tissue tugging and tearing at itself to try and hold his body together. More of his left side was scar tissue than normal skin, and he could make out other, thinner scars on top of those. Surgical scars, he thought.

“Five years ago, I overestimated myself. I was hurt, badly, and my Quirk suffered for it. I’m not as fast as I once was, or as strong. I’m not as durable, and my endurance is a bare fraction of my prime.”

“But, your Quirk wouldn’t be gone even if—”

“Do you know what it means to be the Symbol of Peace, Monoma-shounen?” Monoma, taken aback at the interruption, only shook his head. “It means many things, but the most important is that I have to be infallible, untouchable. Even in our darkest hours, All Might is there. But make no mistake.” All Might’s smile faded entirely. “It is not an honor.”

“All Might…”

“Being a hero is an honor, but it is also a duty. Not just to the public, but also to ourselves, Monoma-shounen. We have to understand ourselves, understand our limits. We need to know what role we fill in this world, and for far too long now, mine has been far too great. The Symbol of Peace was always meant to be something for the people to aspire towards.” He looked away. “It was never meant to become what it is now.”

“A crutch?” Monoma ventured. “I mean, you’d already been around for ages when I was born. Any time something bad happened, someone asked if All Might was coming.”

“And the instant somebody said I was on the way, Monoma-shounen?” All Might prodded. “What happened then?”

“Everybody relaxed.” It clicked. “Everybody just sort of readied themselves to step aside and wash their hands of it, cause you were there and you’d handle it, and everything was fine now.”

“A crutch,” All Might agreed. “And yet, as your Quirk has just told you, my time is coming to its close. And I fear that we are not ready for that day.”

“But why!” Monoma yelled. “I don’t understand! I, your Quirk, it… I just don’t understand! Why, All Might?” Monoma felt his eyes burning. The frustration, the confusion, it made no sense, why, how did—

All Might put a hand on his shoulder. Monoma stiffened.

“All things have their time, Monoma-shounen. And while my star has burned bright, it is time for all of yours to take its place.”

“But I can’t take your place,” Monoma whispered. “My Quirk—”
“Your Quirk is not the type for a true stand-alone hero, no.” The words felt like a nail into the coffin of his hopes. “But in reality, Monoma-shounen, the idea of the great, lone hero is a myth. A hero does not exist in a bubble, nor is there only one type of hero. Your Quirk, with how it encourages cooperation, and the way you apply it, tells me that you have incredible potential, Monoma-shounen.”

All Might went down on one knee, and then he was level with Monoma. His smile had returned.

“I hope that by the time I must step down, heroes like you are ready to take my place. But I do not wish for any one person to bear that burden.” He prodded at his left side, and winced. “It must be spread among the heroes, all of them working to keep the world safe together. And you, Monoma-shounen, have the potential to lead them.”

“Do…” Monoma swallowed. “Do you really believe that? Or are you just, just…” He trailed off.

“I used to have a sidekick,” All Might said.

“Sir Nighteye?”

“Yes, him. And where is he now, Monoma-shounen?”

“He’s… running his own agency, a Pro Hero that even the Top Heroes defer to, yes?”

“Exactly.” All Might pointed at his temple. “Sir Nighteye’s Quirk is Foresight. He’s a precognitive, but it has limits. Instead of letting those limits weigh him down, he chose to surround himself with comrades, people whose abilities could overcome his own weaknesses, and heroes whose deficiencies could be outweighed by his own strengths. Even when we worked together, he was not primarily a front-line fighter. He was a front-line commander.” All Might’s smile grew wider.

“When I had to engage a dangerous foe, I trusted Sir Nighteye to handle the situation. Where I grappled with those he could not hope to face himself, he coordinated fellow heroes, rescuers, civilians. He tended to the wounded, he observed the scenario. Sir Nighteye fulfilled the role that you don’t always see, and in doing so, he has become something far greater than simply another ‘Top Hero’.”

“… you never did stand alone, did you, All Might?” Monoma asked. All Might shook his head.

“No, Monoma-shounen. Not by choice.” He stood to his full height. “Your Quirk is an incredible thing, Monoma-shounen, but it is not the only way you can define yourself. Nor can you let yourself become complacent in its use, or allow yourself to fall into a pattern.” He brought a hand to his chin.

“A friend I made, and a comrade I will always cherish the time I spent alongside, once told me that in this world, with great power, there must also come great responsibility. We owe it to ourselves, and to the world around us, to use this power well, not just for our own gain, but for the world around us.”

“I… I don’t think I understand,” Monoma admitted, looking away.

“I don’t expect you to quite yet,” All Might said. “It is merely something to ponder. When you find yourself at a crossroads, asking yourself, ‘why am I doing this?’, you must ask yourself what responsibility your power puts upon you. When you know the answer to that question, then you will know the reasons why.”

Monoma made to say something, but… he didn’t know what. The words wouldn’t come.

“Now, I believe we each have somewhere else to be, no? You would not want to keep Tsunotorishoujo waiting, would you, Monoma-shounen?” Monoma’s blush betrayed him, and All Might
chuckled. “Ah!” All Might’s expression turned serious. “There is one thing I need you to promise me, Monoma-shounen.”

“H-huh?”

“The UA Sports Festival is coming up, yes?” Monoma nodded. “There is a student in Class 1-A, Midoriya Izuku. You’ve seen him, yes?”

“The one who punched that big villain at USJ?”

“Yes. I need you to promise me that you will never knowingly copy his Quirk, and if you do accidentally, you must not use it.”

“W-what?” Monoma was taken aback. What could he—

“Midoriya-shounen’s ability to handle his own Quirk’s aftereffects is linked entirely to his own body. Even at his current level of preparation, any use of his Quirk outside of the absolute minimum of its ability wrecks terrible consequences. If you were to try and use his Quirk in your current condition, without being prepared for its effects whatsoever—”

“I’d die,” Monoma interrupted. “Wouldn’t I?”

“That is my fear,” All Might admitted.

“I promise. I won’t try to copy his Quirk, and I won’t use it if I somehow do anyway.”

All Might let out a great sigh.

“Thank you, Monoma-shounen. Now, go. Your… girlfriend, is it?” Monoma’s blush returned with full force. “Your girlfriend awaits, Monoma-shounen!”

“I know!” He yelled. “All Might… thank you.”

Monoma turned and left the basement command room. He changed out of his costume and returned to the classroom, where he met Pony, and walked part of the way home with her and Kanna before heading off towards his own home.

It was only after he’d arrived home and sat down at his desk for homework that he realized All Might never answered why he read as Quirkless.
“The final event of the UA Sports Festival is almost always a one-on-one battle tournament,”
Aizawa-sensei explained to us. “To prepare you, we will be having one-on-one bouts. Each of you
will be paired up with a partner; when it is your turn, you will come up and face them. Cementoss, if
you would?”

Cementoss nodded, and put his hands to the ground of Cityscape A. Within a large intersection likely
meant to resemble the Shibuya Crossing, he rose up a great platform of cement with a second raised
area upon it, shaped into something that looked for all the world like half of a football field. From
past experience and viewship, there would normally be a pair of UA logos along the broad sides of
the center arena, and burning daises at each of the four corners. Given that Aizawa-sensei just had us
practicing, I figured that was unnecessary.

“Your arena is thirty meters across by fifty meters long,” he explained. “You will lose if any part of
your body touches the ground outside of the ring, if you say that you give up, or you are determined
unable to continue. You won’t be allowed to use any part of your costumes, just like in the actual
Sports Festival itself, unless you have a special exemption such as Aoyama and Satou.” Aizawa-
sensei pointed to the flamboyant boy with his right arm, who seemed to alternately preen and quail
under the sudden attention. Satou merely shrugged and held up a small squirt bottle filled with what I
could only guess was simple syrup.

Only his left arm remained in a cast now, but he still had bandages across large swathes of his body.
Recovery takes up a lot of stamina, and given that he actually had to work during the day, there was
only so much aid Recovery Girl could give him. There was also probably the fact that they needed
X-rays or some other imaging to determine whether his arm was free to have its healing sped up
without fixing itself wrong. It would suck to have to rebreak your arm just to have it fixed properly.

“So, you will be facing each other in this order. Midoriya versus Ojiro.” I perked up; this was one
I wanted to see. Midoriya’s Full Cowl meant that what would have likely gone very swiftly in
Ojiro’s favor was now a complete toss-up, dependent entirely on whether Midoriya’s augmented
abilities and analysis could defeat Ojiro’s strength, skill, and extra limb. “Satou versus Todoroki.
versus Aoyama. Kaminari versus Hagakure. Ashido versus Asui. And lastly, Yaseiki versus
Yaoyorozu.”

I looked over to Momo in slight surprise, and she did the same.

“Midoriya, Ojiro, to the arena. Everybody else, to the stands.”

“What stands?” Kirishima asked. Aizawa-sensei pointed behind us, and we turned. “Oh! Those
stands!”

Cementoss had erected a set of stone bleachers for us to sit in. Tsuyu, Momo and I all sat next to
each other while Ojiro and Midoriya approached each other.

“So who do you think will win?” I asked the both of them.
“I’m going to guess that Ojiro will,” Tsuyu replied. “Midoriya-san has gotten so much better with his Quirk this week that it may as well be completely different, but he’s not as used to it. Ojiro-san has had his tail since birth, and is a skilled martial artist, and I think his experience will give him the edge.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Momo said. “I’ve gotten a chance to take a look at those notebooks Midoriya-san is always writing in? You know, when he starts mumbling?” Both of us nodded at that. “It was open to a drawing of Kirishima’s costume and a diagram of his Quirk, along with all sorts of notes speculating on the mechanics and possible weaknesses. I would wager he has a page on every single one of us in that notebook of his.”

“Well either way, we’re in for a show!” I stretched and leaned forward, watching Ojiro closely. “I just want to see how Ojiro fights. Not many others with tails they can actually use.”

“How useful is your tail, Kanna-chan?” Tsuyu asked. In answer, I reached up and tapped her opposite shoulder with my tail, then threaded it through the bow in Tsuyu’s hair before bringing it up and over her closer shoulder. “K-ker!”

“Probably about as dexterous as your tongue, but I don’t have nearly as much to work with, even compared to Ojiro. Plus it’s pretty strong.”

“Ready? Begin.”

Our attention snapped to the ring as Midoriya glowed, lit from within by some inner fire—One For All—and rushed forward, posture and body low to the ground. Ojiro didn’t move from his position and simply assumed a ready stance, shifting his weight further onto his back leg. Midoriya crossed the thirty meters between them in just under three seconds, but he didn’t go for a punch like we all assumed, based on how he’d always fought before.

Instead he went low, reaching for one of Ojiro’s legs.

Ojiro responded by slamming his tail on the ground and bouncing over Midoriya’s head, but it seemed All Might’s heir had planned for that exact result. He used his hands to turn himself around, and pushed off the ground with both arms and legs. In a surprising display of reflexes and agility, he righted himself, turned around, got moving again, and caught up to Ojiro before the other boy could hit the ground again. And when he got there, he grabbed hold of Ojiro’s tail, set his stance, and whirled. With all of his body’s momentum and the enhanced strength from his Quirk, Midoriya managed to lift Ojiro completely off the ground by his tail alone. With no part of his body connected to the ground, Ojiro had nothing to really move himself, and with the additional force acting on his body from the spin, Ojiro couldn’t simply pull himself closer towards Midoriya by curling his tail.

Midoriya spun him once, twice, and then let go once Ojiro’s body was facing the edge of their arena. Ojiro managed to right himself in midair, but it was already too late; the force of Midoriya’s throw had carried him far enough to be out of bounds by the time he landed.

“Winner, Midoriya. Satou, Todoroki, you’re up next.” Midoriya was breathing hard, a massive smile on his face, while Ojiro looked chagrined and more than a bit embarrassed.

“He tossed him like Mario throws Bowser,” I murmured. “Never thought I’d actually see something like that happen.”

“Like I said!” Momo exclaimed. “Midoriya-san went low, which meant Ojiro-san had to dodge
somehow. He has a habit of using his tail to solve any problem it can, so it was only natural he would use it for evasion, especially since it also wouldn’t have any of the same tells for other motions. However, Midoriya-san expected that reaction, and planned accordingly.”

“It was a very quick fight,” Tsuyu said. “I know some of them are like that during the Sports Festival, but it is very different to see it happen with your own classmates, kero.”

“Yup. Oh, Ojiro!” I looked up and waved him over. He looked perplexed, but came over anyway.

“Yes, Yaseiki-san?” He asked.

“Ugh… why does nobody call me just Kanna like I ask?” I muttered. “No, nevermind, not important. Anyway, I know you probably won’t want to until after the Sports Festival is done, but think you could give me a few pointers on martial arts forms that actually use my tail?” I waved the limb in front of him, and his eyes brightened, pulling him out of the slight slump he’d been in.

“It would be my pleasure,” he replied. “Thank you for stipulating after the festival; I would have had to say no otherwise.”

“Yeah, too busy with your own training and not wanting to lose an advantage, I get that. Thanks a dozen.”

“Of course.” He sat down on the level of the bleachers just below us, and we all settled in to watch the remaining matches.

Todoroki beat Satou with a fair amount of ease; all he had to do was throw more and more ice in front of Satou until the other boy ran out of sugar. Kirishima and Tokoyami was a more interesting battle, especially since Tokoyami couldn’t actually hurt Kirishima. That said, the redhead couldn’t actually stay close to Tokoyami, and eventually Kirishima decided to just cut his losses and retire after his last-ditch attempt, breaking parts of the arena off to throw at Tokoyami, just had the projectiles returned to sender by what I could only say was a Stand.

Bakugou versus Shouji was actually a bit different. I’d expected Bakugou to simply blow Shouji out of the arena immediately, but instead, he backed up. He moved back until he was just at the corner of the arena, his back and right sides facing the edge, with the rest of the arena available to Shouji.

“What are you doing,” I muttered.

Shouji rushed forward, additional fists forming at the end of his tenta-arms. He stopped in front of Bakugou and quickly narrowed his stance, lashing out with a powerful straight punch from his right hands.

But that was exactly what Bakugou had been waiting for. He dodged. Bakugou went down and to the right, under Shouji’s other arm, and fired backwards with a powerful detonation. The shockwave hit Shouji and threw him off the edge, simultaneously propelling Bakugou back to the middle. He immediately started heading back to the stands, as did Shouji once the massive teen picked himself back up, and Aizawa-sensei called for Kouda and Jirou.

“Since when did Bakugou learn something other than overkill?” I found myself asking.

“Fuck do you care, Teddy!?” Bakugou snarled back.
“It’s just surprising. Thought you only had two settings, ‘blow it up’ and ‘blow it to smithereens’.” I couldn’t help but snark right back at him, bright and cheerful smile on my face the whole time.

“Think you’re so damn cute, huh?”

“Cute?” I quipped. “Bitch please, I’m adorable. Here, come get a hug! You know you want one!” I stood up and morphed my arms, spread them wide, and slowly stalked towards Bakugou.

“What? No, fuck you!” I made to grab him in a very literal bear hug, but he ducked out from under my paws and dropped down a level on the bleachers. I followed him down and made another grab, but this time he jumped back up two bleachers. “Damn it Teddy, fuckin’ quit it! You’re creepin’ me out!”

“Stop moving and let me give you a hug!” I called. I followed him up and tried to get him again, but he hopped up another bleacher, then over my head. I turned to follow him—

“Asui.”

“Kero!”

—when Tsuyu’s tongue came out and grabbed me, lifting me up in the air, and Aizawa-sensei’s capture weapon did the same with Bakugou. Tsuyu carried me back over to where I’d been sitting, and Aizawa-sensei settled Bakugou back down all the way on the other side, though much less gently than Tsuyu did with me.

“Bakugou. Yaseiki.” Aizawa-sensei stared at us, his expression an odd combination of stern and mirthful. “If you two want to flirt, do it on your own time.”


“Me flirt with Teddy there!? Hah! Don’t make me laugh!” Bakugou barked. “You should go back to the hospital and get your brain checked, sensei!”

“Sit down, Bakugou.” Bakugou grumbled, but he did sit. “You too, Yaseiki.” I sat back down, and…

Honestly? Look, don’t laugh, but… I actually felt a tiny bit hurt when Bakugou said that. I mean yeah, he’s got the worst case of what I liked to call ‘Angry Young Man Syndrome’ I’d ever seen, even compared to all the examples from my first time around, and that included entitled trust-fund babies that threw a fit when their parents got them the Lexus instead of the BMW for their sixteenth birthdays. But still, it’s… I don’t know. I took a lock of hair in my hands and inspected it, pensive. I mean, I know it’s stupid, but that didn’t seem to hold any sway. I may be forty years old mentally, but as far as my brain structure and hormones are considered, I’m still a fifteen year old girl. And that means… oh lord. Okay, I know the whole ‘good girls and bad boys’ thing is common enough that it’s graduated from cliche to full-on trope, but…

Damn you, hormones. Please, please don’t tell me I’m developing a crush on that bastard. I mean yeah, he’s fun as hell to tease and poke fun at, but that’s… not exactly flirting. And besides, the rest of his personality is utter garbage, and I’ve really yet to see anything coming close to redeeming qualities other than his aspirations towards heroism. So, maybe I just felt hurt because the way he said that made it seem like seeing anyone flirt with me was something so ridiculous and outrageous that he had to be hallucinating it? Yeah, let’s go with that, definitely better than thinking that—
A nudge at the shoulder brought me back to my senses.

“I’m next,” Tsuyu said. “You weren’t paying attention to the others.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Sorry, lost in thought and all. Good luck Tsuyu.”

“Kero!” She gave me a smile and hopped up, then jumped down from the stands towards the arena.

“Kouda-san, Iida-san, Uraraka-san, and Hagakure-san won their bouts,” Momo told me. I nodded and thanked her, and she smiled. Then, “So, after Pony-chan leaves for Hosu?”

“All Might is dropping by sometime between five and six to sign Pony’s rare figurine,” I replied. “Did you manage to come up with a present idea?”

“I did.”

“And?…”

“Kanna-chan, it’s supposed to be a surprise!” I crossed my arms and huffed, which prompted a giggle from Momo. Then she reached and pinched my cheek. “Sorry, sorry, but you were too cute!”

“Adorable!” I corrected.

“Yes, yes,” she placated me. “Oh, they’re starting.”

Mina started first, spraying the area around her with acid, though it didn’t seem to be particularly strong given that all it did was coat the ground and spread out. She slid along the acid, spraying more and more out from her arms as she went, but Tsuyu didn’t just sit there either. She hopped up and over the entire area Mina coated, touching down behind Mina’s original starting point. The pink-everything’d girl turned on her coating of acid almost like an ice skater, and zipped along using that exact set of motions to reach Tsuyu’s location. Mina used the movement of her body well, and managed to swing herself around Tsuyu’s position, getting in close to try and land a blow on her.

Once again though, Tsuyu jumped. But this time, she lashed out with her tongue and wrapped it around Mina. Tsuyu hopped a short distance away towards the corner of the arena, and once she landed, she actually grabbed her own tongue with her hands, and using both her arms and the muscles in her tongue, she pulled.

Unexpectedly, Mina went flying. She tried to use her acid almost like a jet to give herself some thrust back towards the arena, but Tsuyu was having none of it. Mina landed on one foot just outside the arena, and like that, Tsuyu claimed a win.

Which meant that it was mine and Momo’s turn.

“Good luck,” I said.

“Same to you.” Momo opened up her track jacket to reveal just her sports bra covering her torso, and I took mine off entirely to show my tank top and leave my arms and shoulders bare.

We headed down, passing Tsuyu on her way back up, and took up position opposite each other. Ten meters in each, thirty meters apart.
“Ready?” Aizawa-sensei asked. We both nodded. “Begin.”

I rushed forward, an ethereal cheetah’s legs surrounding my own as I closed the gap between us. Momo planted her stance and extended a hand, and I saw a glimmer of something silvery in her palm before a metal pole shot out towards me. I grinned, let the cheetah aura fade, and hopped up, feeling my legs morph and grow itchy as I did. I landed on the pole and my weight pulled its tip down, which also sent Momo stumbling forward from the sudden change in weight. The rubbery coating on the front of my hooves from the klipspringer morph meant I wasn’t about to slip, and true to the little antelope’s name, I sprang up off the pole to land close to Momo.

A phantasmal gorilla’s arm burst into existence around each of my own, and I started jabbing at Momo with small, careful straight punches. My left-handed stance wasn’t as easy for her to handle, proving that the lefty advantage was very real, but she did manage to somehow launch an actual net towards me from her abdomen, which gave her a chance to leap back and start making something else. My fingernails shifted, and a moment later I’d shredded through the net with my new tiger claws (sharpest in the animal kingdom, folks!), but that had been more than long enough for Momo. She held a pair of escrima sticks in hand, and I wagered right then that I wouldn’t much enjoy getting hit by those. A moment’s concentration had my claws back to nails, and pangolin scales erupted along the entirety of my arms, even my fingers. My legs were growing increasingly uncomfortable by the second, but I still needed the fast-twitch agility the klipspringer offered.

Momo moved, and I followed to meet her. The first strike from her escrima stick I knocked away and tried to land a jab at her abdomen, but the follow up with her second stick, while not enough to actually hurt me through my scale armor, did knock my strike off course and past her other side. Another jab met her stick, a cross just got me an escrimo stick to my elbow, and a low kick to her shins just had her dodging out of the way. I backpedaled to try and see if I could get a bit of room, but Momo just followed, not letting up an inch.

Internally, I smiled. Perfect. I fell back onto my experience to let me keep trading blows with her, and prepped myself for an opportunity.

It came when Momo made a wider swing with her right escrima stick, throwing her left arm back and out of the way. I ducked down and towards her left arm, and in that instant, I morphed my tail. Then I spun around to build up as much momentum as I could, and hit Momo in the back with the bony club at the end of my changed Ankylosaurus tail.

Momo didn’t just stumble forward. Her entire balance failed her, and she fell forward onto the ground. I was on her in an instant, holding her down with newly-shifted hands, the rest of my body still armored up in pangolin scales.

“Yaseiki wins,” Aizawa-sensei announced, voice as bland as ever.

I stood up and let myself shift back to normal, sighing in serious relief when the fur faded from my legs, the scales left my tail, its tip reverted to normal, and both my legs and tail felt normal again. I offered Momo a hand to help herself up, and she gladly took it.

“That concludes the one-on-ones. Each of you, talk to your opponent to compare what you each noticed about the other on the way back to the main campus.”

Tsuyu, who’d been about to join us, broke off to speak with Mina, and Momo sighed.
“You’re good, Kanna-chan. Your Quirk’s really well-suited to combat, isn’t it?”

“Momo, why was it so easy for me to get close?” I asked.

“Eh?” She turned to look at me, confused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re not taking full advantage of your Quirk!” I exclaimed. “Look, remember the net?”

“You sliced through that in seconds.” She grimaced. “I barely had time to make my escrima sticks at the proper length.”

“Why weren’t you fighting like that the whole time, though?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean—look, do something for me real quick?” I pointed at one of the buildings we were walking past. “Make, like, a throwing knife, and aim it at that window there?”

“Okay…” Momo lowered a hand to her side, and—

“Not like that!” I interrupted. “Launch it fully-formed from your hand, like you did with that net!”

“Huh? O-oh!” This time, Momo raised her palm and pointed it towards the window. An instant and a slight glimmer of rainbow light from her palm later, and a small piece of metal impacted the wall just beside the window. “Darn…”

“See that?” I pointed. “If you’d just constantly pelted me with stuff like that, or dropped caltrops between us, or a smoke bomb, or—you know what? I’m coming over already, and you have a media room, let me just bring some stuff to show you.”

“O… kay?”

“Trust me,” I smiled. “Once you see this stuff, you’re going to be kicking yourself for not thinking of using your Quirk that way sooner.”

* * * * *

Once Pony left, I went back into my bedroom to prepare. Obviously I had some stuff to lend Momo, so that came first. Space in the apartment was at a bit of a premium, but the lease said we could use small nails and screws to affix stuff to the walls. We’d each gotten some shelves that we could affix to the walls, and Pony and I had liberally taken advantage of this to add some serious storage and display room. I had many, many bookshelves… and Pony had set up just one bookshelf and a ton of display cases.

Then again, her figurine collection needed proper, level surfaces to display, whereas all my teddy bears could just… lay wherever. I fell asleep in a cocoon of teddy bears most nights, actually. And I’m a big girl, I’m more than willing to admit that I love my teddy bears! Hell, I loved plushies on my first go round, and I was a guy then!
I grabbed a step-stool that we kept in the kitchen for reaching higher cabinets (it has a rubberized top so our hooves don’t slip off of it), and got a few items off of my bookshelves. First off, both the manga volumes and anime for JoJo part eight, Stone Ocean. It wasn’t actually animated when I kicked the bucket the first time, and I was very glad to find that it was, even if I had to dig for it. Next up, some Batman… and a little more Batman… and one more Batman for good measure. I don’t have anything on historical ninja, so I’ll just have to tell her to look that stuff up, along with a primer on the six simple machines: lever, wheel and axle, pulley, inclined plane, wedge, and screw. A good bit of studying those, along with Batman, and… I grabbed the rest of my JoJo anime disks for good measure. There was some seriously good stuff in there when it came to creative power use, and while nowhere near all of it was applicable to Momo, it was still a great story.

Then I grabbed Spider-Man for Tsuyu, because she could learn a thing or two from that brand of agile combat.

I was about to put everything into a backpack for easy transport when a heavy set of knocks on the door resounded through the apartment.

“Coming!” I yelled. I turned to bolt for the door, and—”Ow, shit!” I cursed after tripping over the step stool. When I made it to the door, I was still rubbing my sore elbow from where I banged it against the side of my bed frame.

“Yaseiki-shoujo! Good evening!” All Might almost boomed, his voice only barely below that volume. “Tsunotori-shoujo has left, yes?”

“All Might!” I was all smiles; I mean really, how could you not be when All Might was in the room? His cheer was downright infectious, and that smile of his could warm Siberia. “Yup, she should be en route to Hosu now. The figurine’s this way!” I turned to lead All Might to the back, but paused when my eyes fell on my kitchenette. “Ah, would you, uh, like some tea or coffee? Water? A snack? Darn it, I should’ve offered first, sorry…”

“Not to worry, Yaseiki-shoujo!” He gave a thumbs up, and I could swear the light just glinted off of his teeth. “Business first, then tea!”

“R-right! This way then!” I led All Might the short distance to Pony’s room, opened the door, and flicked on the light.

Pony had shelves on all four walls of her room, with the wall opposite the door having a shelf along its entire length, and the right wall holding two, one above the desk, one even higher. But if you wanted to find where Pony kept the centerpieces of her collection, her XXXX All Might and the crystal horse figurine I’d gotten her for her eighth birthday, you had to walk in, turn around, and look up. The two of them occupied a shelf all to themselves, but even though I turned to point it out for All Might, he was already admiring the six other figurines and other such memorabilia along her walls.

“Haha, Tsunotori-shoujo is almost as much of an otaku as Midoriya-shounen! Amazing!” He reached into his pocket and withdrew not one, not two, but five different sharpies. Two were silver sharpies, best for writing on black and very dark colors, and the other three were black sharpies of varying thickness and tip types. “Now… time to go beyond!”

“What?” I asked. But by the time I’d turned to look at All Might, he’d already begun to move. He flitted across Pony’s room, pulling box after box down, disk cases, magazines and books from the shelves, and posters from the walls. After five minutes of dizzying motion, All Might
finally, arrived at the pièce de résistance, and with the great care afforded to such an item, pulled the massive box down, delicately, and with both hands.

“Did you know, Yaseiki-shoujo?” He gestured to the box, a finger pointing at the solid cardboard wall opposite the open plastic front. “There is a small opening here where you can remove the back card, the one that states what the figure is, what run it was, and so forth. The XXXX All Might’s back card is white card stock with a faint, light-gray cityscape background. It is perfect for autographs!” Delicately, oh so delicately, he pushed the back of the box out a tiny bit, and slide the cardstock out. “It is also excellent for personalized messages!” He removed the last sharpie, the fine-tip black one, moved over to Pony’s desk, got down on a knee, and set to work.

It seemed like he would be there a while, so I went to the kitchen to get the tea started. I set the water to boil (an instant pot was one of the splurges we absolutely did not want to live without), and got the green tea out for him, and the chai tea from Principal Nedzu for myself. By the time All Might had finished up with whatever he was doing, I’d already gotten his green tea ready, and my chai was just about done steeping.

“I do believe that Tsunotori-shoujo’s collection has just tripled in value!” All Might exclaimed. “Not that she would sell it, of course. I am very familiar with the proclivities of collectors like that!”


“Ah, thank you Yaseiki-shoujo.” He took a deep whiff of his tea, followed by a careful sip. “Ah, still a bit too hot! No matter!” He put the cup down, looked at the chairs… and I realized he was way too big to not break the darn thing.

“A-ah, the sofa should work?” I ventured. “Uh… actually I hate to ask this All Might, but how much do you weigh?”

“It is fine,” he murmured. “Nedzu did tell me about your ‘circumstances’,” I stiffened slightly, my entire body (tail included) freezing where I stood for just a moment before I remembered to move. “Therefore…”

A cloud of… smoke? Steam? I sniffed; yeah, that was water vapor. A cloud of steam erupted from All Might, obscuring my view of him for a moment. The next I saw him, he was…

“… whoa.”

“Please, Yaseiki-shoujo.” All Might’s clothes hung off of his shrunken, practically skeletal form. “You don’t need to apply that wit of yours to point out the faults in my current form.”

“You went from Hans and Franz’s swole god to Mister Miyagi in three seconds flat,” I deadpanned.

“Miyagi?” All Might gave me a look. “I’m… afraid I don’t know the reference.”

“Wha—seriously?” I just… really? “Karate Kid?” He shook his head. “Wax on, wax off?” He shook his head again. “Jeeze, do none of you know the classics anymore!?”

“Oh.” Of all people, All Might gave me a blank stare.

“Damn it All Might, you look like a zombie when you do that!” He shrugged, and blushed. “Okay, well maybe not Mister Miyagi then. Maybe Gran Torino—”
“How do you know that name!?” All Might was upon me in an instant, hands heavy on my shoulders and wide-eyed stare looking directly into my soul. A moment later, one of his arms was in front of his mouth and he coughed up blood, and the other let go of my shoulder to reach into a pocket, grab a handkerchief, and wipe it clean.

“W-wha—”

“How do you know of my teacher!?” And his hands were back on my shoulders again, heavier than ever. Looking deep into his eyes, I could see… wow. I don’t think there’s any other word to ascribe to that than existential dread. I thought that was reserved for colossal threats to the world, or missing your bus stop and suddenly having to get off at the next stop and get on the bus going the other way in front of everyone. “How!?”

“All Might. I’m talking about a movie.”

“… oh.” He let go of me, all of the wind gone from his sails.

“You really haven’t heard of it? Gran Torino’s a classic story of mentorship! Wait, one sec.” I retreated into my room to grab an empty disk case and a multi-disk binder off the shelf, opened it up, and started flipping through. “Alright, not that, not you, I need to get that one back from Pony, aha!” I slid the disk out of the binder, into the empty plastic case, and handed it to All Might. “Gran Torino, for your viewing pleasure!”

All Might took the disk from me, and looked close.

“So that’s where he got his name from.”

“Yeah. Also, you were coughing up blood!”

“I’m afraid that’s a consequence of losing multiple organs,” All Might bit out. “Ah, I nearly forgot what I was going to say.”

“Something about how you spoke with Principal Nedzu?” I supplied.

“Ah, yes. How in your original universe, this one was fiction.”

“And how you met Spider-Man!” I gushed. “What was it like!?”

“This first, if you would?” He ventured. I nodded, slightly sheepish. All Might gestured towards the table, and we sat down before taking sips of our tea. In this ‘diminished’ form, he was more than able to sit in our chair and not break it beneath him, though he was still hilariously large in the darn thing, all elbows and knees sticking out. “You’ve heard of my former sidekick, yes? Sir Nighteye?”

“I have,” I confirmed.

“And you know of his Quirk?” I nodded. “While I appreciate the power of his Foresight, I try not to put too much stock into what other people say the future holds. I’ve seen what fatalism did to Sir Nighteye. I do not want to pump you for information about what you know, lest I allow myself to fall down a similar path. I really only have one question.” He looked me in the eyes, and I met his gaze. “What role did I play in the tale?”

“You weren’t the main character if that’s what you’re asking,” I said. “If anything, you were the
Obi-Wan to Midoriya Izuku’s Luke.”

“Midoriya-shounen?” All Might murmured. “I see, so that’s… wait, Obi-Wan?” I nodded. “I don’t think I like the implications!”

“Don’t worry, you’re not dying anytime soon.”

“But as you well know, I am losing my strength.” He sighed. “Either way, I will still have to leave Midoriya-shounen, much the way Kenobi did Skywalker.”

“Eh…” I hedged. “From what little I saw, you didn’t do that.” I couldn’t help but grin. “You just want from Obi-Wan to Old Ben!”

“Yaseiki-shoujo!” He threw himself back in the chair, nearly tipping it over until he righted himself with a knee on the table. “You wound me! I’m not that old yet!”

“All Might. You’re older than both of me put together. Say it with me: you’re old.”

“Yes, and I am quickly approaching the mid-life crisis to end all mid-life crises!” He exclaimed, good humor masking the seriousness of his situation. He took his cup and finished the rest of his tea in one gulp. “Ah, that was excellent. Thank you, Yaseiki-shoujo.” He held up the disk case I’d given him. “I do believe I have some interesting material to work through!”

“It’s a little slow to start, and it will rub you the wrong way at first,” I said. “But give it a chance, and probably watch it again once you’ve finished. You speak English, right?”

“But of course!” All Might said, switching languages seamlessly. “In fact, I have also visited every single one of the fifty states, as well as the British Isles, Australia, and New Zealand!”

“Right, thirty year career,” I murmured.

“Indeed.” All Might stood, and in an instant, he grew. Where moments before had been what I could only see as a grizzled, mummified kung-fu master with no fucks left to give, there now stood somebody whose sheer presence could give Superman a run for his money. “Now, I must be off! Have a good evening, Yaseiki-shoujo, and wish Tsunotori-shoujo a happy birthday from me!”

“You too!” I let him out, and with that, All Might was gone.

I went back into my room to finish packing up before heading over to Momo’s, but once that was ready, I dipped into Pony’s room to take a right and proper look. Every single piece of All Might merchandise Pony owned had been signed. Every figure, every nendoroid, each poster and tee-shirt and magazine cover. I took out my phone and snapped a quick picture, then grabbed the step stool to get her figure down from the shelf. I read the message All Might wrote on the back card, slid it out to snap a picture, and replaced it.

Then I was off to Momo’s place, backpack weighed down with many a book, tv show, and movie. According to the texts in our group chat, Monoma and Tsuyu had just arrived fifteen minutes prior, so I texted that I was on my way and would be there in about twenty minutes, tops.

It was time to prepare Operation: Sweet Sixteen.
“And you’re certain all of that was just special effects?” Monoma asked. Again.

“Yes, for the…” I had to pause to count. “Twenty-third time, yes! Look, the first Quirk showed up in 2028, yes?” He nodded. “Those movies were made in the twenty-oughts and the twenty-tens.”

“I’m just surprised nobody has mentioned the most intriguing bit,” Ibara muttered. “That you actually went to the trouble of finding these.”

“Ibara, is it really that surprising? I mean… hang on. Momo?”

“Hm?” She looked up from her seat.

“Does the limo’s TV have reception, or is it just there for a disk player and to intimidate your family’s clients?”

“Kanna-chan, I’m almost insulted by that!” She fake-gasped, touching a hand dramatically to her chest. “But yes, it does work. Here’s the remote.” She tossed it over to me, and I flipped on the TV, then turned it to the same channels Pony and I always watched on Sunday mornings.

“See this?” I flipped through. “Sir Nighteye’s Detective Mysteries. Hero Versus Food. Some crappy anime about a kid with a Pied Piper Quirk somehow beating the biggest, baddest villains in Japan every week… with mice… and no explanations.” I flipped the channel again, and we got a warning message saying that the following content was unsuitable for children and teens under the age of seventeen, with a very familiar design to the background of the warning message. “And honestly? Having to put this massive warning in front of a show that may as well be picking flowers in the field next to its old pre-Quirk counterparts?” I tossed the remote back towards Momo; she held out her hand and a small net flew out of her palm, the back of it still partly connected to her hand by a half-formed string still embedded within her Quirk’s customary rainbow glow. “See, now aren’t you glad I like the old standbys? Haven’t seen you do that before.”

“Well, I suppose.”

“Maybe use something adhesive or with suction at the end, like my tongue?” Tsuyu suggested.

Momo looked at her hand and was about to say something more when we all felt the car come to a stop. The door opened on its own, though not really because in reality the driver Momo’s family employed pressed a button to open it up, and the five of us all poured out of the stretch limo. I checked my phone, and checked the Shinkansen’s arrival time. Not estimated arrival time, but flat-out arrival time. This is Japan. If things run even five seconds early or late, massive apologies are given out, businesses are informed, the people responsible for the public transportation apologize
profusely…the like. So I knew for certain that Pony would be walking out of the train station in about… seven minutes, give or take two minutes if she got caught up in the people or had to use the restroom. Her horns may help a bit, but she is only five feet tall, and while she’s really strong thanks to her Quirk, it’s not like she can just use it to push through the crowd.

The five of us waited, leaned up against the stretch limousine Momo had requisitioned for use today. And when I say requisitioned, I mean she went to her mom, said she was getting one of their drivers to take the stretch limo out for something, and would be back in about half an hour. Her mother’s response was even more telling: just a plain dismissal and ‘okay sure’, basically. I mean, yes, Momo is really really rich. But getting a stretch limousine at the drop of a hat, complete with driver on-call without needing to put any effort into it?

Well. There’s rich…and then there’s Yaoyorozu rich.

“There she is!” Monoma called out. He broke into a run to go catch Pony, and the rest of us followed after him at a more sedate pace. He caught Pony in a hug, picked her up, and the two shared a quick kiss.

“How was home?” I asked her.

“So good,” she replied. “You should’ve come!”

“Nuh-uh, it was your father-daughter time!” I crossed my arms and shook my head exaggeratedly, but then we both broke down into giggles and shared a hug. “Come on, car’s here!”

“Car?” Pony asked. Then she saw the limo. “No. You’re kidding.”

“Pony-chan,” Momo broke in, looking over her shoulder, “I’m most certainly not kidding. I have mentioned my family is rich, yes?” Pony nodded. “Perhaps I should clarify then.”

“Huh?”

“We are Bruce Wayne rich.” Pony stopped where she was, looking from Momo, to me, then back to Momo. And then Pony rounded on me, poking an accusatory finger into my chest.

“Ow.”

“You showed her Batman without me!”

“Pony, that was my boob.”

“Do I look like I care!”

“Kero.”

* * * * *

Before we turned onto Momo’s street, she knocked on tinted partition separating us from the driver. He pulled over, and Momo pulled a strip of black fabric out of her hand.
“Kanna-chan, if you would?”

“Sure thing!” I took the blindfold from Momo, and set to getting it on Pony.

“Hey, don’t I get a say in this!?” She protested. Monoma just laughed a bit, earning himself an accusatory glare in the process.

“Nope!” I looped the blindfold over her from behind, settled it on the bridge of her nose, and tied it tight. I let go, and it didn’t move at all. A thumbs up from me to Momo, and one more knock on the partition, and we were moving again. The driver pulled around the corner and then one block forward, which was taken up in its entirety by Momo’s family’s home. Yes, it was that big that it took up an entire block all to itself. An entire block. In a prefecture near Tokyo. Where land is possibly even more expensive than Manhattan. We went down a driveway to an underground garage, and Pony shifted a bit. I know she wanted to take the blindfold off and look around, but I had my hands holding down one arm, and Monoma had the other one. Pony may have more raw physical strength than anyone else in our little group, but both of us could produce enough strength to stop her from being able to overpower us in an instant, and she knew it.

We left the limousine once more, and this time the driver actually exited with us.

“Thank you, Miyamoto-san.”

“It was my pleasure, ojou-sama.” The man, nondescript in nearly all ways, clad in a classic black suit and white gloves, bowed low to Momo. “Was there anything else?”

“Momo has a butler?” Pony asked. “I wanna see, I wanna see!”

“No.” Monoma and I kept her hands well away from her blindfold.

“Please Kanna, I wanna see, please pretty please!”

“I will come by in approximately one hour to assure that you and your companions are properly cared for, ojou-sama.” The butler, Miyamoto, turned towards Pony. “And may I wish you a happy birthday, young miss.”

“Eeeeeee!” Pony’s squeal was… well. She’s got a bit of a thing for men in formal wear. And Best Jeanist. She follows his fashion label religiously, even though he only designs men’s clothes.

“H-hey, what about my costume?” Monoma asked, almost affronted.

“Is it here?” Pony asked.

“Well, no, but—”

“You look great in it, Neito, but right now there is a butler and I can’t see him.” Monoma deflated, but Pony just pulled him back upright, laughing as she did so.

“Okay lovebirds and third wheel Kanna-chan, this way!” Momo clapped her hands and we turned towards her. She stood in front of an elevator—yes, an actual elevator—which was open to accept us. “Oh, Pony-chan, do you happen to like maids as well?”
“Yes!”

“Because we don’t have any,” Momo instantly fired back.

“Aww…”

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“And blindfold off in three, two, one!—”

Monoma and I untied the blindfold and pulled it away, and I am so glad Tsuyu thought to have her phone camera ready.

“Oh my God…”

When your family has money to throw around, you can make things happen that normally would take a lot longer. In Momo’s case, this meant that the Japanese proclivity for taking pictures had come in very, very handy. Every single day we’ve been at UA, we’ve been taking pictures. Pictures of just simple friendly interaction, selfies with the rest of us in the background as a bit of a candid shot, including some images from strange perspectives, the method only barely noticeable by the smallest flash of Tsuyu’s tongue in the corner.

Pictures like these filled up almost all available space on the walls of the Yaoyorozu’s media room. Each had been printed, set onto cork board, and hung up, for this day alone.

Pony with Ibara and me at the zoo. Pony poking fun at my cooking skills, complete with one of the only pieces of chicken I’d burnt that day under Lunch Rush’s watchful gaze. Pony and Tsuyu making funny faces at the camera, then seeing if they could slingshot Tsuyu using her tongue and Pony’s horns. Momo looking both amused and unnerved as she pulled horseshoes, nails, and blacksmithing tools out of her arms and legs, and Pony just dismissing her worries while I looked chagrined at having ruined another shoe. The two of us dozing on a massive recliner in Momo’s home, leaning into one another.

Along the far wall, Momo’d set up a table filled to the brim with snacks and refreshments, covered with cling-wrap to keep Pony from being . The center of the table held an absolutely massive confection. Not a cake. It was an enormous apple pie.

“You guys—”

“Happy Sweet Sixteen, Pony.”

She lost it right then and practically tackled us. She was crying now, tears of surprise and delight and amazement, mixed in with occasional peals of laughter. We all joined in, and when she got herself back under control and pulled away, wiping the remaining tears away with a handkerchief Monoma brought out from some or other pocket, she gave us the biggest, brightest smile she could. She sniffled, and—sniffed again. And then she turned to the side, towards the table full of treats.

While Pony was busy trying to rein herself in, Momo’d removed the plastic wrap from the table, cut a great big piece of the still-warm pie (had that been made and set so that it’d be just cooled enough
to eat by the time we got back?… must have been!), set it on a plate, and brought it over towards us. Pony turned, almost zombie-like in her stupor, mouth half-open and a bit of drool just barely kept inside of her mouth. Momo deposited the plate into her left hand and fork in her right, and Pony slowly, ever so slowly, went about carving herself off a piece of sweet, sweet apple pie.

“I remember you telling us about her reactions to apple pie Kanna-chan,” Tsuyu remarked, phone out and recording, “but actually seeing it is somehow both entertaining and disturbing.”

“Shh.” I put a finger to my lips. “Pony’s enjoying her all-American apple pie.”

“All-American apple pie made in Japan?” Monoma joked. One of Ibara’s vines came up and gave him a light thwack on the back of the head. “Ow! What was that for?”

“No poking fun at your girlfriend. Or would you like me to talk about your—”

“No no fair point I’ll stop.”

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The festivities were actually rather sedate. We still had a week and a day until the start of the sports festival, but that also meant we only had a week of training and preparation left. Plus, we’re all either nerdy, geeky, or both, which lends itself to not needing as much high-activity stuff. Pony demanded we watch the remaining two Dark Knight trilogy films (I’d only shown them *Batman Begins*, a realization that had Pony huffing and puffing and annoyed that I hadn’t clarified earlier), and then we started watching comedy and heckling it before returning to other stuff. The great big apple pie had long since been decimated, along with all sorts of other snack food, and Miyamoto the butler had come by with green tea for everyone, iced and normal.

As I’d expected, Pony went completely gaga over him. Monoma seemed a bit miffed by this, but we all just shrugged his reaction off. He’d get over it, and we told him to just let Pony enjoy herself.

The day was getting later, though, which meant it was time for something… important. Super, super important.

“Oh, Pony…”

“Hm?” She looked up from where she sat on Monoma’s lap, and Monoma tilted his own head back to not get bumped in the face with her horns. She wouldn’t have hit him anyway, Pony’s too good at knowing where people are in relation to those, but he wasn’t used to it yet, so he got a pass. “What’s up?”

“It’s time~,” I sing-sunged. Her eyes lit up, and she hopped off of Monoma’s lap.

“Where.”

Momo walked over to another sliding door, not the one we’d initially gone in, and opened it. We followed after her and emerged into yet another den-like room, though this one had a fireplace and many, many bookcases as opposed to multiple massive television screens, a hologram projector, and media display cases. On a table in the back sat five boxes. One was particularly large compared to
the others, and two rather small, with the other two being more average.

“I call dibs on first,” I spoke up. “Any opposed?” Everyone shook their heads, so I took the largest box off the table and brought it over to Pony.

“What is it?” I just smiled. She tore into the wrapping paper, actually frowning a bit once she saw what was inside. “Kanna, did you actually just grab my XXXX All Might off the shelf and bring it here? That’s, like—”

“Look closer,” I interrupted her. “Look at the back.”

“How?” She lifted the box up and took a closer look, and I caught the moment she realized something was different by the sudden intake of breath. With careful, oh so cautious movements, she slid the special back card out of the box, one hand going to cover her mouth as she took in what had been written there. “This… is this All Might’s handwriting?”

“Not just that.” I pulled up my phone to the images I’d taken of the rest of her collection. She took my phone from me and flipped through, eyes growing wider, and wider, and wider as she noticed that none of the signatures were alike. “When All Might does autographs, like in everything else, he goes Plus Ultra.” Pony carefully replaced the back card inside of her figure’s box, and set it on the table.

Then she turned around and caught me in what was quite literally a flying tackle-hug, taking us both to the floor, squealing and blubbering and thanking me like a properly fulfilled fangirl. Which she was. Tsuyu had to actually pull Pony off of me with her tongue before she got herself back under control. Pony was all smiles now, and it was amazing to watch.

“Tsuyu, do you want next?” I asked.

“Sure.” Tsuyu grabbed her box and brought it over to Pony. “I saw this the other day while shopping with my brother and sister, and it reminded me of you. It may even get the Kanna-chan classics seal of approval, kero.” I froze. Classic… reminded her of Pony… Uh-oh.

Pony opened the wrapping paper much slower this time, more curious than anything. The small, square box came out, revealing exactly what I’d been afraid of.

“Pony, I’m sorry, but I’m not watching that one with you,” I declared right then and there.

“But, but!” She held up the newly unveiled box of my personal kryptonite in front of me, puppy-dog eyes quivering with crocodile tears. “But Kanna, friendship is magic!”

“And if I watch that again it’ll never get out of my head.”

“Somehow I don’t think you’re going to have a choice, kero!” Everyone was laughing now, and when Tsuyu starts laughing, she starts to ribbit more and more. It was actually pretty hilarious, though I couldn’t help but sulk a bit. Why? Because darn it, she was right. I was definitely going to have to endure a marathon run of My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic, something that I’m actually rather dismayed survived until now, and had managed to completely and utterly avoid on my first time through life. Looks like that wasn’t an option anymore…
“Shall I continue?” Momo asked. We nodded, and she grabbed her box to give to Pony, her arms straining just a bit more than I’d have expected under the weight. “It took a bit of searching, but I do believe I’ve found something you would never have considered for yourself before.” Momo looked at me meaningfully. “If you like it Kanna-chan, then just let me know and I can arrange it.”

“… I’m confused,” I admitted. Momo just inclined her head towards the box, which, once Pony had unwrapped it, was revealed to be a shoe box. “Momo, we have hooves. We don’t wear shoes.”

“Yes you do.”

“Horseshoes don’t count.”

“Not what I meant. Go on, open it!”

Pony opened the box up to reveal… honestly? I have no idea what those are. The fronts look like the catches on skis that hook your boots, actually, but their shape reminded me more of rounded slippers, or hoof-shaped flats, or… wait.

“Are, are these shoes for hooves?” Pony asked, picking them up out of the box. She turned them over, and I could actually see a rubberized sole, along with an on-off switch on the simulated in-step. Back in the box there was what looked like a charging pad.

“They’re electromagnetic, and stay on by sticking to the horseshoes you already have.” Momo’s smile looked fairly smug. Pony flipped the switches to on, and settled her hooves down onto the ‘shoes’. They stuck fast, and Pony hopped up, experimentally taking a few steps. She wobbled a bit at first, the ‘shoes’ set her hooves at a slight incline to the ground, but we both noticed that she didn’t have to look quite as far up to meet my eyes. Normally I have four inches on Pony. Now? It was closer to two.

“Momo?” Pony asked. “These come in other styles too, right?”

“Yep!” She replied.

“Good, because I have sixteen years of building up a shoe collection to catch up on!” I buried my face in my hands. “And so does Kanna!”

“I’m not getting out of this, am I?” I asked.

“Nope!” Pony walked around the length of the room, marveling at the new sensation of not being barefoot—err, barehoof—for the first time in her life. “This is great!”

“I’m glad you approve.” Momo pointed back at the box. “There’s a catalog in there with the product line’s name, in case you want more. Don’t go buy them yourself, though; let me know which one you want, and I’ll get it for you.”

“But—”

“And you’ll pay me back,” Momo finished. “Turns out it’s one of Daddy’s companies that makes these, and I never knew!”

“Ooooooooh!” Pony exclaimed. Then she skipped over and hugged Momo. “Thank you so much!” Momo didn’t respond, face seeming a bit strained.
“Pony,” I coughed. “Air?”

“Oh, sorry!” She let go, and Momo took a deep breath of relief. “So, uh…”

“We shall save the best for last,” Ibara said.

Momo, Tsuyu and I each gave our own jokingly affronted “Hey!”, prompting giggles from Pony and a chuckle from Monoma while Ibara picked up her small, long and narrow box from the table. Pony took the box and unwrapped it, revealing a jewelry box with a side-hinge. She snapped it open, revealing a small, rectangular locket on a matching silver chain. On the front, there was a cross inscribed within a heart.

“I had to contact your father for this,” Ibara said as Pony made to open the locket. “I’m glad he chose not to say anything.” Pony flipped it open. Her eyes started tearing up almost immediately, and when I looked over her shoulder, I saw why.

Inside of the locket was a small picture of Pony’s mother, Sylvia Greenbough-Tsunotori, holding a baby Pony on her lap.

“Ibara…” Pony closed the locket, undid the clasp, and looped it around her neck. Then she stood up and hugged Ibara tight. “Thank you, so, so much…”

We waited for Pony to cry herself out, and Monoma went out to get a cup of tea for her. He handed Pony the drink, which she sipped slowly before sitting back down. The rest of us looked towards Monoma, who grabbed his box and went over to Pony.

“So… this is actually a bit of misdirection,” he admitted. Monoma opened the wrapping paper himself, revealing and empty jewelry box. “But that’s because what I wanted to get you, I don’t think is something I can buy. So instead?” He went over to Momo and tapped her on the arm, then brought one hand to his open palm, which had begun to glow with rainbow light. “I thought about this instead.”

A small loop attached to a fine, silver filigree chain appeared from Monoma’s palm, and as he pulled, more and more chain emerged, with small additional links at various spots along its length. Once it was just about five or six inches in length, the last bit of the chain left his palm, a clasp at the end of it. He took Pony’s left wrist and put it on her, but didn’t stand up yet. His palm lit up again, and he began to speak.

“A pair of crossed horseshoes, for our Pony.” He attached the charm to her bracelet. “A teddy bear, for your best friend. And her fuzzy collection.” We laughed, and I didn’t mind the slight blush at the mention of my favorite brand of plushy. “A little frog, because really, what else would I have picked?” He affixed this one to her bracelet, and Tsuyu gave a quiet, happy ‘kero’ at the mention. “A crucifix with roses. Ibara-chan’s name is just too easy to work with here.” She smiled, playing with one of her vines. “An atom for Momo, who I couldn’t do this without.” Momo blushed, but smiled. “And last but not least, the outline of a heart.”

Monoma affixed the last charm to her bracelet, and looked up.

“Because while my Quirk and costume may be the Phantom Thief, you’ve completely managed to steal mine.” And then they kissed.
“Aww…” Momo and Ibara both couldn’t help themselves. Tsuyu did as well, though an excited ‘kero’ interrupted hers at the end. I stood there smiling, not saying a word, because I know myself all too well. I’d make a comment and ruin the moment. And I don’t want to ruin this moment.

I’m impressed, Monoma Neito. That was truly Plus Ultra.

Happy Sweet Sixteenth Birthday Pony, I thought to myself.

This day was meant for you.
Pony’s birthday party was absolutely awesome. But then the next day came, and I stumbled out of my bed, miserable and achy. I dragged myself over to the restroom and sat down, because when you get thirsty in the night and drink water you always wake up needing to pee, opened my eyes, and cursed a blue streak.

“Kanna!” Pony half-moaned, half-yelled. “Midol!”

“Kay,” I grumbled back. Yup, it was… well. I don’t think I need to give you any further description. Pony has it a bit worse off than I do, but I have a particular problem she doesn’t: I can’t shapeshift certain parts of my body, or certain animals, lest I screw up my hormones and reset the whole damn thing. And one week is enough, thank you very much.

I cleaned myself up, grabbed some miracle pill for myself and Pony (even though she needs it way more than I ever will, probably), gave my sleep clothes some TLC with stain remover, and finished up the rest of the morning.

“Least it’s not next week,” Pony grumbled as she walked into the bathroom—and stole the shower.

“Hey! I was gonna use that!”

“Don’t care. Feel gross.” Pony went back to her shower.

“I’ll cut up an apple for you,” I offered.

“With peanut butter?”

“With peanut butter, alright,” I mumbled, heading to the kitchenette. Like I said: mine is much more mild than Pony’s. More than once she’s had days where she needs to visit the nurse for stronger pain relief, or just because her hormones are being surprisingly bitchy. Just make sure to get some Midol into her every so often, though, and she’s mostly fine, outside of a particularly bad… day… hm. I should probably tell Monoma about this.

I heard something fall to the floor of the shower, followed by a shrill outburst from Pony, ranting at the bottle for slipping from her hands.

Yeah… maybe don’t tell him about this, actually. The worst thing Pony could possibly hear right now is some poorly thought out comment, asking if she was always like this or… yeah.

* * * * *

“Kacchan!”
Today was certainly a surprise. Right as Midoriya got in, he made an absolute beeline for Bakugou—you know, the kid who was either Midoriya’s childhood friend, childhood bully, both, or something else entirely?—and dropped *something* on his desk.

“H-happy birthday! It, it was Saturday, right!?”

Bakugou looked at the wrapped thing on his desk. Then he turned, slowly, oh so slowly, to Midoriya.

“Tch.” He looked side-eyed at the object, tore it open with one hand, grew a little wide-eyed at what he saw, and looked back to Midoriya. “Deku.”

“Y-yes!”

“…thanks.”

I’m pretty sure you could’ve dropped a pin in China and we’d have all heard it.

“Oi, what you nosy shits think you’re looking at, huh!?” Bakugou growled, once he noticed the attention. “Fuck off!” Most everyone looked away rather hurriedly, especially since the bell rang a moment later, but I just stared past Midoriya’s back to the boy sat two seats in front of me. So his birthday was the same weekend as Pony’s, huh…

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“Lunch Rush-sensei?” I asked almost the instant I set foot into the prep kitchen.

“Yes? What is it Kanna-chan?”

“I, uh…” Hm, how to phrase this. “I kinda forgot something at home this morning and, uh, was wondering if you’d let me run back and grab it. Ah, I live two blocks away from campus, so it’s not like I’d take that long!” I explained.

“Okay.”

“I can be back here in—eh?” I stopped. “O-okay?”

“Of course!” He grabbed his knife and started chopping away. “I’ve handled this by myself for many years before you came, Kanna-chan, and I will for many years after you have gone on to become a great hero in your own right. You go handle whatever business it is that you need to do, I don’t mind!”

“T-thank you!~” I bowed.

“It is nothing. Oh, grab some yakitori skewers before you go, in case it takes longer than you expect!” He pointed off to his left. “Just make sure to wait a minute or two, then shake them off to cool them, then eat!”

“Okay!” I grabbed three of them and made my way out of the kitchen, then out of the cafeteria, then exited the campus proper through the security gate. I ran all the way home, and by the time I got
there my chicken was cool enough to eat. That took up one hand, and with my left I grabbed what I was after, a bag to put it in, a sticky note to leave a message, and finally grabbed another apple for Pony.

… actually that’s not all I did. I also took the time to freshen myself up, handle things with the home-field advantage, and just rest slightly during the twenty minutes I had before absolutely needing to head back to campus in time for lunch.

Once my time ran out, I jogged back to campus at a more leisurely rate, stopped by 1-A before heading down to the cafeteria again—

—and did a double-take when I saw Aoyama was still in the classroom. And eating his own personal, French-style lunch at his desk, complete with tablecloth, what looked like genuine silverware, and either grape juice or wine. Not sure which, don’t want to know. He hummed to himself as he ate, so I had the chance to sneak inside, place the bag where it needed to go, remove Pony’s apple from the bag, and slip back out without him noticing. I think.

I headed down the hall to the cafeteria and gave Lunch Rush a smile and a wave when I returned, and he beckoned me over before putting a bowl of tonkotsu ramen and an apple on the counter for me to grab. I thanked him profusely, grabbed the food, and headed over towards where Pony sat, slumped over on the table and groaning.

“Forgot?” I asked. She just groaned again, and Monoma gave me a look that clearly said that he had absolutely no idea what he was supposed to do. I reached into my pocket (thank you, UA, for giving your girls’ uniforms at least one usable pocket!) and pulled out a small plastic bag, which I handed to Pony, along with both the apple from home and the one from Lunch Rush.

She dry-swallowed the pill, and then set in on the apples with such ferocity that you could be forgiven for assuming she’d been dying of starvation. Monoma continued to flail a bit, completely unsure of what he was supposed to do, while the rest of us girls just looked on amused. And somewhat sympathetic.

A painful, uncomfortable twinge in my own abdomen had me wincing, and I grumbled to myself. Pony has it worse, I reminded myself. It should be done by the time the Sports Festival starts, I reminded myself.

It didn’t make afternoon hero training any easier. Though getting to repeatedly punch Kirishima in the face, ineffective as any of the hits actually were, almost made me feel better.

* * * * *

[One Week Later | Day One of UA Sports Festival]

“I guess this is where we part ways.” Pony and I looked up to see the sign outside the door: 1-B Prep Room. “Good luck, Pony! Knock’em dead!”

“I will!” She gave me a hug, just a quick one, and skipped inside. Before the door closed I could swear I heard a guffaw, though I’m not sure who from, followed by the very familiar sound of Ibara’s vines hitting somebody upside the head. Probably Monoma or Tetsutetsu. I shrugged and turned down the hallway, heading around the arena before reaching the sign for 1-A’s Prep Room,
and seeing… seeing…!

“Mom!”

“Kanna-chan!”

We both ran up to each other, and met with a hug halfway. She picked me up for a second and gave me a twirl, despite the fact that I stand a little taller than her, before we broke our embrace and looked at each other.

“What’re you doing here?” I asked. “I thought only UA faculty and staff were allowed back here! And aren’t you on call!?”

“Well…” Mom reached for a lanyard around her neck and brought the badge at the end up so I could read it. “I couldn’t quite get the day off, but this is close enough, wouldn’t you say?”

“Definitely!” Mom’s badge identified her as part of the medical staff for today’s event, which really, really surprised me. “But aren’t you, like, a rare disease specialist? What do they need you for?”

“Aww, Kanna-chan, I’m hurt!” She gave a fake gasp of shock and put a hand to her chest. “But really, I’m just here to give Recovery Girl a hand with pharmaceuticals. No need for a fully-stocked medicine chest when you have me, now is there?”

“True, true,” I admitted. I felt a buzz in my pocket and pulled out my phone, and when I checked it, I saw a text from Tsuyu asking where I was. “Sorry Mom, I gotta go inside.”

“I’ll be cheering for you!” Mom gave me one more hug before turning down the hallway, headed off to who knows where in the stadium. “Love you! Knock ‘em dead!”

“Thanks, Mom!” She left, and I opened the door to our prep room, going inside. I saw Momo sitting at a folding table in the center, nose-deep in some or other massive, encyclopedic text, and Tsuyu stood behind her, sipping from a bottle of water and idly chatting with Uraraka, who stood next to her. She turned towards the door, gave me a wave and a ‘kero’, and tossed me a water bottle from the table.

“Oi, Teddy.” I looked to Bakugou, who’d turned around in his chair and grabbed a wrapped bundle from beneath it. He got up and walked over to me, then shoved the bundle into my arms, leaning close. “You show this shit to Sparkles and I’ll fucking murder you.” I blinked, then looked down to the bundle.

It was my box set of JoJo part four, Diamond Is Unbreakable, which I’d slid under Bakugou’s desk last week as a sort of late birthday present. I hadn’t expected him to actually return it, especially since I didn’t actually say it was from me.

“How did—”

“Your name’s on the inside,” he interrupted. I blushed slightly, and was about to say something else —

“Is everyone all set!? The event’s about to begin!”
—until Tenya barged into the room, yelling and chopping his arms in his classic, semi-robotic style.

“You’re the only one who wasn’t yet, Iida-kun,” Uraraka laughed. Tenya just froze in his chopping, then slumped, which had Uraraka laughing *again*. She tossed a water bottle at him, which he caught, but then he went over to the corner to grab… orange juice? Oh, right, his Quirk’s engines are fueled by orange juice, aren’t they? Or is it just the citric acid in it that fuels him?… I have no idea, actually.

“Midoriya.”

All of us turned at this, not just Midoriya.

“Todoroki?” Midoriya asked, the same surprise we all felt writ large on his face. “What is it?”

“Hm.” He walked up close to Midoriya, almost hemming him against the wall. “Objectively speaking… I’m stronger than you are. More capable.”

“H-huh?” Midoriya stammered. “I mean, m-maybe—”

“All Might has his eye on you, doesn’t he?” Todoroki interrupted. Midoriya stiffened. I just barely didn’t. “I’m not about to pry into why that is, but know this.”

The air around us grew colder. It wasn’t just the mood, either: Todoroki was actively using his Quirk to cool things down, and I saw small flecks of frost on the ground by his right foot.

“I *will* beat you.”

“Hey, yo!” Kirishima got up from his seat and grabbed Todoroki’s shoulder, pulling him back. “Why’re you picking a fight *now*!? We’re about to go on!”

“Tch!” He pulled away from Kirishima. “I don’t care. I’m *not* here to be anyone’s friend.”

“Wow,” I couldn’t help but interject. “You know, you’re a real—”

“Todoroki.” Midoriya spoke, and I fell silent. “I’m not sure why you felt the need to say you’ll beat me… I mean, you’re clearly stronger. And I *still* can’t quite measure up to most of the others here in skill… *objectively*, even.”

“Don’t be so down on yourself, Midoriya!” Kirishima tried to cheer him up. “You don’t gotta—”

“But!” Midoriya continued, cutting Kirishima off. “Everyone… even the kids from the other courses are aiming for the top. And I’m… well, let me say this. I’m *not* going to fall behind. I’m going for it too. *With everything I’ve got.*” He looked up at Todoroki, and there was something new in his eyes. “So if you want to beat me, you’d best do the same. You got it?”

“… right.” Todoroki gave Midoriya the smallest of nods before turning away.

“O-okay!” Tenya stood up. “It’s time, everyone! Let’s go, everyone!”

“Yeah!”
“It’s UA’s Sports Festival! The one time each year when your fledgling heroes compete in a grand battle!”

We walked into the stadium, Tenya and Momo in the lead as our representatives. Present Mic’s voice was immediately audible, though it’s entirely possible all of that volume was from his Quirk alone. It’s not like the man needs speakers to amplify his voice; I mean, his voice is an amplifier all on its own.

“First up… you know who I’m talkin’ about! The miraculous rising stars who brushed off a villain attack with their steely willpower! The first years… of the Hero Course! It’s CLASS A!”

“Whoa… what a crowd!” Midoriya exclaimed, a nervous smile on his face.

“And we’re expected to put on the best performance we can in front of so many spectators,” Tenya said, and I could hear the anxious excitement in his voice. “I suppose this is merely one more necessary skill if we hope to become great heroes.”

“They’re really giving us too much credit,” Kirishima added, voice light with enthusiasm. “But we won’t let it shake us, right Bakugou!?”

“Heh!” I looked to see Bakugou had his trademark ruthless grin, and small pops came from his open palms. “This shit just gets me pumped up!”

“I guess,” I replied, somewhat subdued.

“Oi, Teddy, get your shit together!”

“I’m fine!” I bit back. “Just not a fan of crowds.”

“Hah!

“And now our other class of fledgling heroes! They may not have gotten as much screen time, but don’t you dare count them out just cause of that! They’re coming, and aiming straight for Class A’s crown! Heeeeeeeeeeeere’s CLASS B!”

It turned to see Class B enter, led by Monoma and Ibara, with Pony and Honenuki just behind the two of them, and the remainder of Class 1-B fanned out behind them. A glint of metal caught my eye, and even from here I could see Ibara had a somewhat larger crucifix than her usual around her neck. I couldn’t help but smile; she was showing the world who she was, and that she was proud of her religion. I could guess that after today, Ibara would be an inspirational figure for Japanese and other minority denomination Catholics everywhere.

“Following Class B, it’s C, D, and E of General Studies! And here come the Support Course classes, F, G, and H! And then the Business Course, I and J!”

The applause continued for some time, until the crack of a what could only be a whip sounded through the stadium’s speakers.

“Now, introducing the referees! Please give it up for the 18+ Hero Midnight, and with her, Principal Nedzu!”
“Greetings, students!” Midnight called out. “It’s time for the Athlete’s Oath!”

“R-Rated?” I heard Tokoyami ask. “I knew she had a tagline, but I’d never heard it; with that one, should she really be in a high school?”

“Quiet!” Midnight snapped her cat o’ nine tails, and Tokoyami immediately stood ramrod straight.

“Thank you, Midnight!” Nedzu said. “Now, if our student representative could come forward! For Year One, from Class 1-A, please welcome Bakugou Katsuki!”

“W-what!? It’s Kacchan!?” Midoriya exclaimed, even as Bakugou pushed past us to go to the front.

“Must be ‘cause he placed first overall in the entrance exam,” Sero explained.

“The hero course entrance exam, you mean!” A girl next to us, among the Class 1-C delegation, interjected.

“Silence!” Tenya announced. He pointed at the podium, where Bakugou stood. He had his hands in his pockets, and a slouching posture, and I was expecting something classically Bakugou. Something about how he was going to be number one, how he was going to destroy any obstacle before him, and expected everyone to fall before him, or to tell everyone to get out of his way or something.

That isn’t what we got.

“Oi.” Bakugou took his hands out of his pockets, and stood up straight. “Villain Alliance. I know you bastards are watching.” A hush fell over the crowd. Bakugou tightened his hands into fists, and sneered. “You think we forgot about you? About how you fuckers couldn’t even beat a bunch of kids?” I saw Midnight about to step forward, but a motion from Nedzu stopped her cold. “You wanna know why you lost? Well then you better fucking pay attention, cause I pledge that by the time this Sports Festival is over, you’ll know just how bad you screwed up when you came for us. You should’ve killed us when you had the chance, cause here and now, UA’s gonna show you just how bad you fucked up!”

He stepped forward, hands sparking with barely contained explosive potential, and he struck a dramatic, aggressive pose.

“Oh lord,” I whispered, drawing glances from Tsuyu and Momo. “I shouldn’t have shown him JoJo…”

“Go Beyond!” Bakugou roared. “Plus! ULTRA!”

His hands detonated. And the crowd exploded in reply.

“PLUS ULTRA!”

Chapter End Notes

So, if anybody is confused about why Bakugou's acting the way he does, there's a couple things you gotta remember:
1) During USJ, he actually got HURT. Like, wounded so badly that he had to let Kirishima and MIDORIYA help carry him, because a hit from a Noumu missing half its limbs... is still a hit from a Noumu, weakened as it was.

2) He's got a fair bit more perspective this time around, and has had more time with his class. In original canon, the sports fest was... week three? This time it's week five, which means he's had twice as much time with his classmates as opposed to the original.
Great news everyone! I recently commissioned artwork of Kanna in her costume's first iteration from the wonderful wsyl(Wendy) at DeviantArt, and after just about two weeks, I have a MOSTLY finished version to share with y'all!

https://i.imgur.com/veXweQC.png

Also, here's wsyl(Wendy)'s page, so go shower her with some love:
https://wsyl.deviantart.com/

“Now, without any delay, let’s get the first event started!” Midnight snapped her cat o’ nine tails, and a roulette wheel began spinning on the giant screen behind her. A murmur rose from the crowd as it picked up speed, fading to anticipation and bated breath when the letters became distinct and visible again. “These are the qualifiers! It’s in this stage that so many are sent home crying every year! And for our first years, the fateful event is… this!”

The wheel clicked to a stop.

“The obstacle race!” Nedzu chimed in. “It’s a race between every member of all eleven classes!” In front of us, a massive gate of interlocking puzzle pieces slid open, one segment at a time, the low roar of slowly churning machinery echoing through the stadium. “The course is a four-kilometer lap around the outside of the stadium itself! Now remember students: UA preaches freedom in all things! So long as you stay on the course, anything else is fair game!”

“Racers, to your positions!” Midnight announced. We all moved forward, facing the gate. We in 1-A and 1-B were in the center, with the other classes fanning out ahead of us in a double-sided waterfall start, putting them at the same distance from the gate as we were. Beside me, Tenya’s engines revved up, Bakugou’s hands sparked eagerly, frost wisped off of Todoroki, and the phantasmal luminescence of One For All burned deep inside Midoriya. A glow sprung up around my legs, settling into the shape of a cheetah’s legs. The totemic spirit’s phantasmal claws dug into the ground beneath my hooves, and I pushed my weight forward onto my left leg.

“STAAAAART!!!”

Tenya, Bakugou, Midoriya, Todoroki and I all rushed forward at the start, our superior speed carrying us out from the throng of students trying to push into the bottleneck. I risked a quick glance to my side, and caught sight of both Pony and Monoma next to us, the two of them running on all fours. The ground beneath us shuddered, and all of us leapt to the side before the dirt beneath our feet turned to quicksand. Except, that is, for Todoroki. A quick look back let me see Honenuki, the skull-faced student from 1-B, drop area after area of quicksand with every step he took.

“Tch!” Ice burst forth from Todoroki’s right side, freezing the ground around him and offering safe passage over the quicksand. Except, that is, for Todoroki. A quick look back let me see Honenuki, the skull-faced student from 1-B, drop area after area of quicksand with every step he took.

“Tch!” Ice burst forth from Todoroki’s right side, freezing the ground around him and offering safe passage over the quicksand. He didn’t stop there, though, because the ice flowed over the ground, trapping as many of our fellow competitors as he could within its glacial prison.
“Mummy-man! Are you ready for our live commentary!?” “Not voluntarily…” Present Mic’s and Aizawa-sensei’s voices came from the speakers, but I didn’t have time to pay attention to that. The crackling of ice behind me was more important.

“Nice try, Todoroki!” I heard Momo exclaim. I looked backwards, to see Momo and Aoyama propelling themselves with their Quirks, along with Kirishima, Mina, Ojiro, Tokoyami, and Uraraka all found some way to go up and over the ice.

“Alright, now it’s 1-B’s turn!” I felt something pull at my tail, and an instant later there was Mineta, holding onto my back with one hand on my shoulder to stabilize him. He turned to give me a wink, and climbed up to my shoulders. “After him!” Mineta pointed at Todoroki. “I wanna hit him with my balls!”

“Hang on tight!” I let the cheetah totem spread further across my body, and poured on the speed. I could feel the burn in my lungs, but within moments, I’d brought Mineta close enough to Todoroki, who was using his ice to slide along and leave a nice little hazard behind at the same time.

“Haha!” He leapt off my shoulders, hands going up behind his head. “How about a taste of my killer Grape R—”

A metal hand came out of nowhere and slammed into Mineta, knocking him away.

“Mineta!” I cried. He raised a thumbs up from where he skidded to a stop, and I sighed in relief.

“MULTIPLE TARGETS ACQUIRED.” I spun around to see what had said that, and narrowed my eyes.

“The faux villains from the entrance exam!?” Tenya exclaimed, pulling to a stop beside me, the tailpipes on his legs glowing cherry red.

“Every obstacle course needs obstacles!” Present Mic’s voice came over the loudspeakers, positioned along the course, and I could hear a faint echo from the stadium itself. “Starting with… The First Barrier.”

In front of us, something massive loomed into view. And as they got closer, and closer, I realized it wasn’t just something massive. It was about an even dozen somethings… and they were all very, very familiar.

“ROBO INFERNOOOOOO!”

“It’s the Zero-Pointers from the exam!” Somebody cried.

“Seriously!? The hero course kids fought those!?”

“Too, too many! There’s no way past!”

“So these are the faux villains they used for everyone else’s test?” Todoroki asked, crouching down. “Heh. Kinda wish they’d prepared something a little more threatening, especially for dear old dad.” Todoroki swept his hand in a lazy, graceful arc.

And winter came to Japan in April.
Ice burst forth from Todoroki’s hand, both impaling and enveloping the four Zero-Pointers in front of him. The ice he’d packed onto them glistened a deep blue, and I could hear the metal of the machines crack and fracture, the sudden cooling compacting the metal that their internal devices had heated up so much. The Zero-Pointers sputtered and died, creaking and groaning as Todoroki ran between them.

“He stopped ‘em!” Some kids from the General Studies course (I think?) pointed at the gap between the robots. “We can get through—”

“No!” I pulled them back, and just in time. The robots crumbled and all that wonderful space between the robots suddenly filled with frozen, jagged metal debris.

“I-A’s Todoroki! Busting through and sabotaging the other racers all in one move! Man, this guy’s cold! He’s way ahead of the pack now!”

I looked up at the rubble of the Zero-Pointer, making sure I had some way to go. My hands shifted as hard, bony claws grew from my fingertips, and I called for a familiar animal, in totem form this time. A glow vaguely similar to the shape of my own legs sprung up, and with the help of the klipspringer, I began to jump up the Zero-Pointer collapsed in front of me. I hopped onto the tread, knelt down, and jumped further up, burying my claws into the machine’s side to get a handhold. With a pull and a kick I wrenched myself higher, eventually cresting the summit right behind Bakugou, with Sero and Tokoyami hot on my tail.

“Down low didn’t work for I-A’s Bakugou, so he took the high road! And looks like Yaseiki, Sero, and Tokoyami are coming for him right—what’s this!? Midoriya has broken through the smaller robots, and is in second place! But what’s he carrying!?"

“Deku!?” Bakugou turned on his heel and rocket jumped off of the top of the Zero Pointer. I let the klipspringer fade and leapt from the Zero-Pointer’s crown with a small burst of flea, carrying me nearly up to where Bakugou blasted his way along, closely followed by Tenya, Pony, Ibara, Tsuyu, and Monoma. I called another totem as I reached the ground, and the leopard let me land safely before I called for the pronghorn, using its speed to carry me past Ojiro, who’d just bounded along in front of me as I touched the ground.

“What’s this!? The current leaders of the pack are overwhelmingly from class A, but class B’s shining stars are ready to overtake them at any moment!”

We ran ahead, and I let the pronghorn envelop my entire body long enough to pull up alongside Pony and Monoma. I gave the both of them a look and a grin, which they returned with their own nods and smiles as we kept going.

“So the first barrier was a piece of cake!? How about the second then!” Present Mic’s voice came over the speakers, and I looked further ahead—

“Slow down!” I yelled to Pony and Monoma. I skidded to a stop, my hooves biting into the ground, and managed to give myself more than enough room between me and the edge. Pony and Monoma nearly weren’t so lucky until the two buried their horns into the ground to stop, after which Monoma’s shrunk back into his head while he looked at the chasm ahead of us.

“Fall out and you’re out! You gotta crawl across if you wanna make it! This is: THE FALL!!!”

“Just a giant tightrope, kero.” Tsuyu hopped onto one of the rope lines, grabbed onto it, and pulled
herself across in a matter of seconds. Then she was off, hopping between the smaller gaps and using the ropes to cross ones she couldn’t jump over.

“Sorry Pony,” I said, focusing as I bent down. “But you’re just gonna have to catch up!”

I pushed off before she could answer, and let my flea totem carry me up, up, and out over the pit. As I reached the apex of my jump, my arms finished shifting, and with a flourish I spread my peregrine falcon wings, holding my body as straight as possible and holding my tail in an S-shape to help point me across to the other end of the pit.

“And Yaseiki of 1-A has taken to the skies! Doesn’t look like she can fly, but you won’t see this little birdy falling anytime soon!”

I tuned Present Mic out, and turned my attention towards where Bakugou, Todoroki, Tenya, and Midoriya grappled for first-place. Tenya used his engines to propel himself fast enough to cross the smaller pits in a single leap, and Midoriya was using the piece of armor plating he’d grabbed from one of the robots to help him balance as he sprinted across the tightly-strung ropes. A twitch of the feathers at the tip of my wing, analogous to my fingers, sent me angling downwards and towards the leaders. I tucked my wings in and angled down, dive-bombing towards Bakugou and Todoroki.

“And the lead keeps changing off, folks! Bakugou, now Todoroki, no it’s Midoriya, Iida now, Midoriya again, Todoroki once more, Bakugou, but now Yaseiki comes swooping in from above! 1-A’s changeling is in first place as the contestants reach the final barrier!”

I spread my wings right above the ground and made sure to get back up to speed, changing my arms back to their normal shape as I brought the cheetah totem back out. I could see the entry to the stadium at the edge of the clearing in front of me, and all I had to do was—

**BOOM**

A great force came from under my right hoof, and next thing I knew, I was ten feet in the air, and had to call a cat totem to right myself and land between the circles I could now see on the ground.

“That is to say, this minefield! It’s a deadly Afghan carpet! A quick glance is enough to reveal the mines’ locations, so keep both eyes open and watch your step! Ah, I should mention… our mines aren’t deadly, but they do pack a punch! They’re loud, and flashy, and strong enough you might need a change of underwear once this is all over!”

“Hah!” I turned to see Bakugou rocketing forwards along the most straight line he could manage, the explosions doing absolutely nothing to ruffle his feathers. “This shit can’t slow me down!” He rocketed past Todoroki, who’d also managed to pull ahead of me, and sent a blast into the boy’s face. “Oi, half-n-half! You declared war on the wrong person!”

“And Bakugou has taken the lead once again! Get excited, mass media! You guys LOVE this sort of turnaround! But the rest are catching up!”

I looked next to me to see Tenya curl himself up into a ball, rocket himself forward with his engines, and use his momentum and somersaulting to try and hop over as many mines as possible. Then there was Ibara, probing ahead of her with her vines to clear a path, with Pony and Monoma close behind. I’d started navigating the minefield bit by bit, but it wasn’t working. I was away from Bakugou’s and Todoroki’s central path, and… wait, I’m being an idiot. My arms shifted, I called on a totem, and crouched. If it worked once…
“And Yaseiki has taken to the skies once more! This bird of prey has the lead in her sights, folks!”

I hadn’t given myself much height to work with, but I didn’t need that. I needed momentum and speed, and gravity would only be able to help me so much. I tucked my wings in partially at my side, banking off to the side of Bakugou and Todoroki’s spat as I approached, and—

**BOOM**

—a massive shockwave pushed the air forward behind me, catching my wings and nearly wrenching my arms from their sockets. I rocketed forward way, way faster than I was ready to, and actually had to throw my wings out to slow myself down.

“A giant explosion from behind!? What caused such a blast!? An accident? Or no, it was intentional! Class A’s Midoriya surfs the blast wave right into first place!”

I righted myself just in time and angled my wings back down, noting that the shockwave had given me just enough extra height to make up for what I’d lost.

“DEKU! Get the hell back here!”

“No time!” Todoroki cried, freezing the ground in front of him, covering up the mines and making a clear path. I banked so I was over the runway, letting the aftershock of Bakugou’s explosions help keep me aloft and push me forward. We were nearly at Midoriya’s projected landing point, and just about to pass him up again—

He ripped the armor plate off his back, swung it by the cable, and slammed it down onto the ground in front of him.

_Click. Click. Click click click click click click click click click click click click click click click click click click click click—_

I had just enough to widen my eyes before the bombs blew, the explosion carrying Izuku forward, sending Bakugou and Todoroki off to the left and right, and throwing me up in the sky again. I gave a mighty flap of my wings to right myself and tried to ignore the growing ache along my back, chest, and shoulders, banking downwards.

When I hit the ground, I rolled to my hooves and called the cheetah, pouring on as much speed as I could. I ran through the tunnel, but the disruption of having to get myself back down to the ground had cost me more time than I could make up at this point, not even with a full-body cheetah spirit to sprint.

“What an amazing race, folks! How about that finish!? And the one who made it back to the stadium first, with one of the most dynamic entries we’ve ever seen at the UA Sports Festival, is none other than Midoriya Izuku!!!!”

Todoroki and Bakugou crossed into the stadium ahead of me, and right as I passed the finish line Tenya rocketed past me, a muffled curse dying on his lips as his engines sputtered out.

“Racers cross the finish line one after the other!” Present Mic announced. I looked back at the entrance, with its right side still frosted over completely, most of the remaining racers crammed into the left half. I took a look at the spectators above the archway, and actually had to do a double-take.
Was that a person in a lab coat scraping Todoroki’s ice into a test tube? And grabbing a piece of one of Ibara’s castoff vines? I looked closer and called a hawk totem to enhance my eyesight, trying to make out just what I was seeing.

Huh. Yes, there actually was a foreign-looking, pale, blonde somebody in a lab coat, grabbing residue from our various Quirks, including—oh hey, there’s Sero!—and now he’s grabbing the piece of Sero’s tape that landed near him.

“Kanna!” I looked up to see Pony, who’d just come out of the tunnel, hands behind her head and breathing hard. I went over to her, and we shared a high-five. “Do you know what place you got?” She gasped out.

“Either fourth or fifth,” I replied. “Depends if Tenya got past me quickly enough or not. You?”

“Yeah!” She chuckled. “Not sure, twentieth? We’ll see!”

“Yup!” I exclaimed.

* * * * *

“So, the first race is finally over!” Midnight exclaimed. We looked to a large stopwatch running along one of the stadium’s screens, and saw that just about half an hour had passed before it was stopped. “Let’s check the results!”

The screens lit up, and displayed our pictures along with our placements.

First place: Midoriya Izuku, class A. Second place: Todoroki Shouto, Class A. Third place: Bakugou Katsuki, Class A.

Fourth place: Yaseiki Kanna, Class A. Fifth place: Iida Tenya, Class A.

“Just like in the Quirk Assessment test!” Tenya murmured, fists clenched. “To lose a race of all things, and with my Quirk!… It’s clear I still have progress to make!”

“Don’t get so down on yourself, you did great!” I nudged him. “And didn’t Tensei only place twenty-fifth his first year?”

“Ah, you’re right!” Tenya chopped the air. “Aniki, I have surpassed you in one arena already! Just you wait, the rest are yet to come!” Tenya and I shared a laugh at that, then went back to checking the results.

Sixth place: Shiozaki Ibara, Class B. Seventh Place: Honenuki Juzo, Class B. Eighth Place: Tokoyami Fumikage, Class A. Ninth Place: Sero Hanta, Class A. Tenth Place: Tetsutetsu Tetsutetsu, Class B.

Eleventh, Ojiro. Twelfth, Pony! Thirteenth, Tsuyu! Fourteenth, Awase Yosetsu. Fifteenth, Shouji. Sixteenth, Satou. Seventeenth, Momo, and in eighteenth, the reason she scored so much lower than expected… a rather bruised and bloody Mineta, who’d piggybacked on Momo the whole time.
“That wasn’t very nice of you,” I whispered to him. “Especially after that help I gave you earlier.”

“But that didn’t work!” Mineta protested.

“And the robot was my fault?” I replied. He was about to reply when Midnight snapped her whip again, and Mineta’s eyes glassed over while he turned towards her. I just shrugged and looked towards the raised podium.

“The top forty-two from this qualifying round will move on! For those who placed lower, don’t worry; we’ve got another way for you to show off for the crowd! But before that, it’s time for the main selection to really begin! The press are going to be jumping out of their seats, so give it all you’ve got!”

The roulette wheel on the screen behind Midnight and Nedzu spun up again.

“On to the second event!” Nedzu called out. “I hope everybody’s ready to pick the winning horse —”

The wheel came to a stop.

“—because it’s time for a Cavalry Battle!”

“Oh God, he made a horse pun,” I murmured, then flinched when something hit me on the back of my head. “Ow, Ibara! Stop that!”

“Maybe I will once you stop using the Lord’s name as a curse,” she replied, serene smile still in place.

“Pay attention, contestants!” Midnight called. She snapped her cat o’ nine tails at the screen, which lit up once more, showing a picture of All Might… being carried by Thirteen, Snipe, and Present Mic. Yes, All Might, the hero who weighs **two-hundred and fifty-five kilograms**...

“Here’s the rules of the cavalry battle! Contestants will, on their own, form teams of two to four members each and get into a horse-and-rider formation. The rules are fundamentally the same as those of an ordinary cavalry battle—snag your opponents’ headbands while guarding your own—with **one** exception!”

The screen behind Midnight lit up again, and it started at the bottom of the list, with Aoyama’s name at the 42nd place spot, and a number next to it.

“Each of you,” Nedzu picked up here, “has been assigned a point value based on your placement in the obstacle race. 42nd place has five points, 41st place has ten points, so on and so forth… **but**!”

The board rocketed upwards to first place.

Next to us, I could see Midoriya start to shake.

“Our first place participant… is worth **ten MILLION points**!”

All of us turned towards Midoriya, then back to the board… then **back** to Midoriya.

Yeah, no, not teaming with him. And you couldn’t pay me to try and get that headband from him, not when **everybody and their grandmother** will also be trying to grab it.

“The higher-ranked students are the ones to aim for!” Midnight proclaimed. “This survival game is a
chance for a comeback. It’s anyone’s game, folks!”

And the crowd went wild.

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Midnight explained the rest of the rules for us, and passed out sample headbands so we could see what we’d be working with. The cavalry battle would last fifteen minutes, and each team was worth the combined points of its team members. Whoever our ‘jockey’ was would wear the headbands around the head and neck, no lower, and fasten them with velcro. The trailing strips of the headbands were so they could be grabbed onto more easily, and the velcro for quick reattachment. That said, just from inspecting my headband, I could tell that this was definitely going to be more and more cumbersome as we got more. The cloth was a thick, heavy fabric, and too many of these around your neck would just make it harder to turn, or at the least really uncomfortable.

“You’ve got fifteen minutes to form your teams!” Midnight announced with a crack of her whip. “Choose your team carefully!”

Tons of my classmates immediately swarmed to Bakugou.

“Hey Bakugou, pick me!” “Team up with me!” “He’s picking moi, of course!” “C’mon man, you know you want me!” The yammering continued on for nearly a full minute before Bakugou exploded at them. Not literally, for once, but verbally at least. I was about to walk over to offer to join his team, when a hand fell on my shoulder.

“Excuse me?”

I turned to look at the boy who’d spoken. He was the one from Class 1-C who’d proclaimed his intentions to break free from the General Studies group and into the hero course. That gravity-defying purple hair, the bags under his eyes… yup, I definitely recognized him. The only thing missing was the sneer from last time. Instead, his expression was one of… chagrin? I’m honestly not sure what to think about that.

“Hm? Ah, I remember you! I saw your name on the board but… eh, sorry?”

“It’s okay,” he replied. “Hitoshi Shinsou. Yaseiki Kanna-san, yes?” I nodded. “I was wondering, would you like to join my team?” He nodded back behind him, and I saw that both Nirengeki of 1-B and Ojiro stood there, eyes hard and expressions set. “You’d be great to round out the flank with… Ojiro-san, his name was?”

“Yeah, um…” I grimaced and looked away. How to put this delicately. “I’m sorry, I, uh, kinda wanted to team up with my friends. We know each others’ Quirks well, and… yeah.” Darn. Now I felt awkward.

“Ah.” Shinsou frowned. “So there’s no way I can convince you, then?”

“Sorry,” I replied, “I don’t thin—”

* * * * *
I blinked, awareness slowly creeping back in. My left arm and shoulder were sore, and my lower back was really hurting. My right arm was still in the form of a gorilla’s, and my tail felt off. I turned around and looked back to see it was magnificently... fluffy. Like a squirrel’s tail. I shook myself out of it and undid all those transformations, returning to my base form.

“W-what?” I heard Ojiro say next to me. “Kanna-san, Nirengeki-san, what just happened?”

“I d-don’t know!” Nirengeki whispered quietly. “The last thing I remember, I was talking to that kid from the general studies course!”

“Same here,” I murmured. “I said I wouldn’t join his team, and next thing I know…”

“In first place, Team Todoroki! In second, Team Bakugou! In third, team Tetsu—huh!? Whoa!! Team Shinsou!?”

“Heh.” Shinsou turned back to look at us. “Thanks for your help.”

“In fourth, Team Midoriya!”

None of us said anything. None of us wanted to risk what all three of us had realized.

“These four teams will proceed to the final event!!!”

Hitoshi Shinsou had led our team of four to the final round, but none of us could tell you how it happened.

Because we’d been under his control the whole time.
Ojiro, Nirengeki and I all shared a look. I could see the shame in Ojiro’s, and the dismay in Nirengeki’s.

I knew they saw the fear in mine.

“The final event itself will take place tomorrow!” Midnight cracked her whip, pointing to the screen behind her. “We’ll have a formal tournament between the sixteen members of the four winning teams!” On the screen, a bracket appeared: sixteen wide at the bottom, narrowing one at the top, a crown atop the ladder. “It’ll be a series of one-on-one battles!”

“A tournament, huh? So we’ll be up in that ring I see on TV each year!” Kirishima exclaimed. I could actually hear just how pumped up he was.

“Was it a tournament last year, too?” Mina asked.

“The format’s always different,” Sero explained, “but most years involve some kind of head-to-head competition. Last year’s was foam-sword fighting!” He said.

“The matchups will be decided by drawing lots!” Midnight held up a box she’d procured from… you know what? No. I don’t want to know anymore. I’d seen All Might do it. I’d seen Aizawa-sensei do it. I’d seen Cementoss and Kan-sensei do it. At this point, I give up: I don’t know where the teachers are getting these damn boxes from, and at this point, I don’t want to know! “Once that’s settled, we’ll move on to the day’s remaining festivities! Those of you who aren’t in the final, don’t worry; you’ll have a chance to show your mettle in various ways as well! But onto the main event.”

Midnight shook the box in her hands, and we all heard the rattling of sticks inside of it. Or maybe tongue depressors, stolen from Recovery Girl and with letters or numbers corresponding to bracket placement on the ends. Who knows.

“Now, let’s start with the first place team—”

“Excuse me!” Ojiro raised his hand. “I’d… I’d like to drop out.”

“Ojiro, why?!” Kirishima burst out. “This is your chance to get noticed by pros!”

“I…” He looked away. “The cavalry battle, it… I can’t remember anything that happened up until the very end of it.” Ojiro looked off to the side, towards Hitoshi Shinsou of Class 1-C. “It was probably his Quirk that did it, we think.”

“We?” Midoriya asked.

“We three,” he answered, gesturing to Nirengeki and me. “None of us can remember what happened. The team selection for the cavalry battle begins and then I’m here.” Ojiro closed his eyes, fists white-knuckled at his sides. “I know this is a great opportunity, and I know how stupid it must seem for me to throw it away. But this final tournament? Everyone else made it here with their own strength. And intellectually I know that my own strength brought me this far… but I don’t know how. And I just… I can’t take it!”
“You’re thinking about it too hard!” Tohru exclaimed. “You can just show what you’re made of in the tournament!”

“It’s not that!” He cried, frustrated tears forming at the corners of his eyes. “It’s my pride, here. And going through to the tournament, knowing that it might not have been my skill or my strength that got me here? I can’t do it. I just can’t.”

“I wanna withdraw too,” Nirengeki spoke up. “I don’t remember anything that happened, either. And this Sports Festival, it’s supposed to be a contest of skill, isn’t it? Letting someone who didn’t even do anything advance, that goes against the spirit of this whole event, doesn’t it?”

I looked at the two of them, my fellow contestants who’d also been put under Shinsou’s control. They looked to me, and nodded. They didn’t expect me to drop out as well.

“What a strange turn of events we have here! But will Midnight even allow it!”

“How naive and green…” Midnight glowered. “I like it!” She cracked her whip with finality and pointed at my two teammates. “Ojiro Mashirao and Shouda Nirengeki have officially withdrawn!”

“I’m sorry Ojiro,” I said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “I… I can’t join you. I still have something to show.” And, I didn’t say, someone to intimidate.

“It’s not your fault,” he replied, wiping his tears away. “You give ‘em hell for us, alright?”

“Yeah.”

“To replace Ojiro and Shouda, two members of Team Kendo, which took fifth place—”

“If it’s gonna be like that,” Kendo interrupted, pointing next to her, “shouldn’t it be them instead? I mean, we were practically immobilized the whole time, and they were in third, giving it their all right up until the very end.” She smiled. “Team Tetsutetsu, I mean.”

“You…” Tetsutetsu took a step forward, eyes watering.

“It just feels right for them to be in this, you know?” Kendo smiled, facing Midnight.

“So be it! Team Tetsutetsu, two of you will advance!” The four of them huddled, and when they broke, Ibara and Tetsutetsu bowed profusely to Awase and Honenuki.

“We’ve decided!” Ibara announced.

“Wonderful!” Midnight cracked her whip once more, and pointed at the ballot box. We rushed forward to grab our spots, and revealed them to Nedzu, who added them into some or other device he was holding. “Now then, here are the matchups!”

I looked for my name, and saw I was up against Mina. I gave her a look, and we shared a friendly, if competitive grin. My eyes went back to the board, looking for another name in particular.

“Shinsou,” Midoriya muttered. “That’s gotta be—”

“Midoriya Izuku. That’s you, yeah?”
Ojiro and I both rushed forward instantly. I had my hand and Ojiro had his tail over Midoriya’s mouth before he could say anything, and we ignored his sudden, startled protests while glaring at Shinsou with all we had.

“Careful, Midoriya!” Ojiro whispered. “Whatever you do, don’t answer him.”

“That’s how he got us,” I added. “I don’t know if it’s answering a question, or just answering to him, but it’s definitely vocal.” In front of us, Shinsou just clicked his tongue against his teeth and turned around. Yes, we had a full day to rest up beforehand, but I don’t know how long that guy’s Quirk lasts. Does he have to enforce the control immediately after you answer, or can he hold it on a delay, like slack on a leash? Is there a way to interrupt or break his control? Are there any distance or other sensory limits to his Quirk?

There wasn’t enough information.

“Finalists, please come with me!” Nedzu proclaimed, bouncing forward on the stage. “Everybody else, the rest of today is your time to shine! Midnight, I leave this to you!” Nedzu leapt down from the platform, and the sixteen of us filed after him, passing through an archway at the edge of the arena and back into the prep areas we’d been in beforehand.

“Any idea what’s going on?” Momo asked, voice quiet.

“That is an excellent question, Yaoyorozu-chan!” Nedzu interjected. He turned around to face all of us, but still kept walking, only backwards. “Who here has seen past UA Sports Festivals? Don’t be shy, raise your hands if you have!” Every single one of us finalists raised our hands. “Wonderful! Now, do you remember how the third year finalists are interviewed, and occasionally the second years?”

“Wait, do you mean—!?"

“Why yes, Uraraka-chan, I do! The media is quite interested in all of UA’s finalists this year! This is the first time in many, many Sports Festivals that the media has requested an opportunity to interview our first years. Ah, here we are!”

Nedzu reached up with his tail and turned a doorknob, opening it up behind him to reveal a well-populated lounge area. There were couches and armchairs, snacks and drinks… but most importantly, there were four additional connected rooms, each one filled with what could only be reporters, cameramen, and all the equipment their professions required.

“I’m not sure how they wished to order the interviews, but know that if you have any questions, you need only ask for me! If there are any questions you do not wish to answer, simply say so. In addition, you will all be allowed to view the final interviews and choose what content to include or exclude before it goes live. Now!” Nedzu clapped his paws. “All of that being said, if any of you are at all uncomfortable with the idea of being interviewed, please speak up. There is no shame in saying ‘no thank you’, and indeed, you may decide it suits your purposes better to decline an interview. It certainly did for Eraserhead! And lastly?” His whiskers twitched in amusement. “Once you are finished with your interview, you may choose whether to stay and mingle or head out, whether to exit the stadium, visit Recovery Girl, or the like.”

“Principal Nedzu, are they ready?” A voice called from the back.

“Yes indeed!”
“Alright!” A woman in a fashionable skirt-suit came out from one of the rooms. “Could we start with Midoriya Izuku, Hitoshi Shinsou, Uraraka Ochako, and Bakugou Katsuki?”

I slumped. They were starting from the outside and going in!? Damn it, even when it wasn’t alphabetical order, I was still one of the last!

* * * * *

[Earlier…]

Something was wrong. She knew it in her bones. Yaseiki Kimiko watched her daughter as she and her fellow competitors selected their teams, and she immediately knew that something was wrong with Kanna.

She could understand stopping to watch that Bakugou boy as he found himself inundated with requests to team up. Kimiko herself had to admit that it was as amusing as it was expected, given the raw power of his Quirk. But after talking to that boy with the purple hair, Kanna did what Kimiko considered to be the unthinkable.

Kanna didn’t try to team up with Pony.

She simply walked off with that purple-haired boy and two others to a relative corner, and the four of them simply… stood there. Whereas other full teams had started conversing, her daughter just stared blankly, as did the other two boys that the general studies student—Hitoshi Shinsou, that’s what the board said his name was—seemed to have ‘recruited’ before Kanna. Kimiko watched as Pony came over with a teammate she’d recruited and spoke with Kanna, only to receive nothing but a glazed-over look in response.

And once the cavalry battle actually began, Kimiko’s fears were all but confirmed. Kanna and her teammates were operating as one cohesive unit—too cohesive. It was a level of cooperation she’d only seen in eusocial organisms, those whose entire colony structure were built around a specific purpose, such as ants or bees. Kimiko watched her daughter use her Quirk, only to stumble around the changed anatomy and painfully contort herself in the process. She saw Kanna attempt to go straight from one animal to another without stopping at an intermediary human form, and the spasm that rocked her body nearly threw Shinsou from atop her and Ojiro’s shoulders.

Kimiko got up from her seat, flashed her badge, and set on her way. There was something she needed to know.

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“Shuzenji-sensei?” Kimiko knocked on the door to the stadium’s infirmary.

“Come in!” Kimiko opened the door to see Recovery Girl offering treatment to two of the General Course students who’d gotten injured during the obstacle course. “Ah, Yaseiki-sensei! Please come in, I was just finishing up with these two.” Her lips distended in almost grotesque fashion to kiss the first student, and then with lips still extremely puckered, Recovery Girl moved to the other. The two
of them seemed to sag, but despite the fatigue that overtook them, color returned to their palettes, and the subtle tensions associated with pain faded away.

“Thank you, Recovery Girl!” One of them exclaimed, the other bowing profusely behind him.

“Make sure to get something to eat, and rest well, understood?” The students nodded and left. Recovery Girl closed the door behind them, and turned to face her visitor. “So, what can I do for you, Yaseiki-sensei?”

“Have you been watching the Cavalry Battle?” Kimiko asked, incensed tone giving away her frustration.

“Hm? When I get a chance to peek at the television, certainly, but I’ve not been paying overly much attention. Is something the matter?”

“There is,” she confirmed. Kimiko walked over to the TV screen Recovery Girl had set up opposite the nearest cot, and pointed out Kanna’s team once they came on-screen. Or rather, she pointed at the rider. “This boy. Hitoshi Shinsou. Whatever his Quirk is, it’s making my daughter hurt herself.”

“How so?”

In response, Kimiko picked up the remote and began to rewind the footage, ever-thankful for DVR functions. She rewound to the point that she remembered seeing Kanna spasm as she tried to force her Quirk to work in ways it was never meant to. Kimiko could switch from animal to animal seamlessly. Kanna could switch between her totems seamlessly. But in the other aspect, she was like her father: only ever one at a time, and returning to normal beforehand. Trying to force that, even unknowingly… if Kimiko was honest, it was probably what had caused Kanna’s mutations.

“I see.”

“I need to know what his Quirk is,” Kimiko pressed. “I doubt that my Kanna-chan is the only one who may come to harm if this Shinsou can somehow force them to use their Quirks in ways they were never meant to be.”

“Hm. When you phrase it that way, and given that Kanna and Shinsou would not meet until the grand finals if both managed to get that far… very well.” Recovery Girl turned to her desk and leafed through a set of charts, forty-two in total. “Let me see… ah, Hitoshi Shinsou.” She offered the chart to Kimiko.

“Thank you.” Kimiko opened the file and tracked down the boy’s official Quirk Registration form. As she read, she slowly grew more and more angry at this Shinsou boy, with her rage cresting as she Cavalry Battle finished and she heard Ojiro Mashirao’s and Shouda Nirengeki’s reasons for exiting the finals. But at the same time, she felt something more. A deep, seething ember of fury awoke within her… and right here lay its reason for existing in the first place.

Kimiko flipped the chart closed and tossed it haphazardly onto Recovery Girl’s desk.

“Finished, then?”

“Yes. Thank you, Shuzenji-sensei.”

“Before you go.” Kimiko stopped at the door and turned around. “What do you intend to do now?”
“It’s simple. I’m going to speak with this Hitoshi Shinsou before he does something stupid that he can’t take back.” Kimiko left the infirmary, closed the door behind her, and walked down the hallway with purpose. Then she turned around and headed back to the infirmary, with far less purpose.

“I forgot to ask where Principal Nedzu took the finalists.”

“Ah.” Recovery Girl hopped down from her chair and pressed a button on her desk. Partly outside as she was, Kimiko could see a light come on outside of the infirmary, illuminating a sign that said that they would be back shortly. “I was meaning to head down to them anyways. Follow me.”

Recovery Girl entered the interviewee and media lounge, while Kimiko chose to remain outside. She knew her daughter well; Kanna would, more than anything else, be suspicious at seeing her mother act in an official capacity, especially with Recovery Girl there. Instead, Kimiko had to wait. A brief text exchange with her daughter (with Kanna detailing her exasperation at once again having to wait until the very end, and for a completely different reason!) was enough for Kimiko to deduce that Hitoshi Shinsou was being interviewed right now. Given the animosity in the room, he was unlikely to stick around for long afterward.

And indeed, just about twenty minutes later, Hitoshi Shinsou emerged.

Alone.

“Hitoshi Shinsou-san.” He looked up at her, expression guarded and obviously perplexed. She pointed at her ID badge, which clearly identified her as being a member of Sports Festival staff, and he relaxed slightly, though the confusion remained.

“Can I help you?” He asked.

Kimiko didn’t answer, and merely gave a gesture with her hand and inclined her head in the same direction. She could see Shinsou bristle at her lack of response, but followed anyway. Kimiko led him around the corner, and once she was satisfied that they were sufficiently out of the media lounge’s hearing range, she turned towards Shinsou.

“W—”

“Ah, ah ah!” Kimiko interrupted before Shinsou could form an actual word. “Before anything else, Hitoshi-san, allow me to inform you that using your Quirk on me at this moment, in any way, is a crime. With that in mind, adjust your behavior accordingly.”

“And what do you want,” he ground out. His eyes flicked down to the ID badge hanging from the lanyard around her neck. “That even real?”

“Your caution is well-warranted, Hitoshi-san. I’m here because of your Quirk.” He glowered. “For the moment, I am going to talk, and you are going to listen. And hopefully, you will demonstrate some measure of understanding by the time I’m through with you.”
“Hn.” His eyes flicked across her body, and Kimiko recognized it as a search for something to use as verbal ammunition against her. “Yaseiki? What, like that girl with the tail?”

“Yes,” Kimiko said. “I am the mother of the girl that your Quirk nearly maimed.”

“W-what!?”

“Her Quirk lets her shapeshift,” Kimiko explained, demonstrating with her own arm. “But while I can say, go from ape to lizard to bird, Kanna has to stop at human first. The few times she hasn’t? Well, she used to have feet. And no tail.”

Kimiko clearly saw the moment when the realization dawned on Shinsou.

“I see you understand the implication.”

“You mean…?” Shinsou looked at her, eyes imploring. “But, that’s, I never, I didn’t know that—”

“Exactly!” Kimiko interrupted. “You did not know. But unfortunately, in this world, that’s no excuse. In fact, let’s use me as an example!” She held up her hand and it turned into a cat’s paw. “If I went out like this and passed near somebody allergic to cats, and they suffered from my proximity, it’s my fault. I didn’t know that could happen, but it occurred nonetheless, and it is still my fault.”

“I don’t…” He looked away. “I didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

“Are you certain of that?” Kimiko asked, and Shinsou flinched. “There is more than one way for you to hurt people with your Quirk, Hitoshi-san, including denying them one of their only chances to participate in the UA Sports Festival.” Kimiko frowned. “UA students get exactly three chances at this event, three big times that they have the entire country’s eyes on them. Your actions, whether you intended to or not, have potentially compromised the future career opportunities of both Shouda Nirengeki and Mashirao Ojiro, and of course, my daughter.”

“They didn’t have to drop out!” Shinsou yelled. “That was their choice! And I still got them to the finals, didn’t I!?”

“You really don’t understand,” Kimiko frowned. “Hitoshi-san, when it comes to being scouted by Pro Heroes and other agencies through the Sports Festival, the end result is almost never what they actually look for. Here, how the contestants make it as far as they do matters much, much more than where they placed. Shouda-san and Ojiro-san don’t have that journey, and their own personal moral codes meant they would have had to compromise themselves to take the opportunity your actions put forward. I’m glad that Kanna was willing to continue on despite your interference, because I don’t think I would have been able to maintain this level of civility with you otherwise.”

Shinsou said nothing. Kimiko could only sigh, and her tone shifted to something else.

“I read your chart before coming down here, Hitoshi-san,” Kimiko revealed. “Specifically, I paid careful attention to your official Quirk Registration paperwork, and the various Quirk counseling sessions you’ve received through the years.” She grimaced. “Whichever professional filled out your paperwork should be stripped of any titles and positions they hold and thrown out on the street for the disservice they’ve done to you.”

“… what?”
“No child should ever be told that their Quirk is ‘villainous’ by nature, and so made to resent an integral part of themselves. But you share an equal part of the blame for accepting it. Hitoshi-san, for all that you claim to dislike your Quirk’s supposed ‘evil’ nature, you have done nothing to try and avert this notion. In fact, you use your Quirk exactly like a villain would.”

“What do you want me to do!?” Shinsou yelled. “How else am I supposed to use this Quirk? It’s not a perfect hero Quirk, like yours and your daughter’s! You wouldn’t even be here if you thought my Quirk wasn’t villainous!”

“Almost correct,” Kimiko stated calmly. “I wouldn’t be here if I thought the way you used your Quirk wasn’t, as you seem so keen to put it, ‘villainous’. Hitoshi-san, you need to think. Due to the risks inherent in your Quirk, you need to spend more time looking at the possible consequences, and when you actually do use it, you’re going to have to be thinking ahead. Once you do that, I am confident you can, and will, shake this notion of having a villain’s Quirk.”

“I…” Shinsou sagged. “Why are… what are you…?”

“Hitoshi-san.” Kimiko put a hand on his shoulder, and he looked down at her. “You and your Quirk have so much potential. I would hate to see you squander that potential further than you already have.”

“… what do I do?”

“Hm?”

“What,” Shinsou repeated, louder this time, “do I do?”

“You need to look in the mirror, and ask yourself: ‘what kind of hero am I?’ Don’t think about your Quirk,” Kimiko clarified, “because that doesn’t matter. There is so much more to being a hero than what your Quirk does, it’s how you use your power, and the mindset that accompanies it. In the meantime, though.” Kimiko reached into her purse and retrieved her wallet, and from there fished out a business card. “This is for a colleague of mine. I’ll be letting him know about your situation, and if you can make it out to Hosu City Memorial, he’ll make time to see you. I will be looking into seeing if we can rename your Quirk to something less, hm, ‘dodgy’ on your official paperwork, but that depends on where your head is at.”

“I… I don’t…” Shinsou took the business card from her, and looked carefully at it before returning his gaze to Kimiko. “Why? Why all this?”

“Because I can’t just stand by and watch as somebody else falls into a rut and makes my husband’s mistakes all over again.” Kimiko put a hand on Shinsou’s shoulder again. “Not when I have a chance to make things better.” Shinsou brushed her hand off of his shoulder, and looked away.

“I… I owe those three an apology, don’t I?”

“Yes,” Kimiko answered. “Yes you do.” She smiled. “Well, Hitoshi Shinsou-san, I hope that the next time we meet, it is under better circumstances.” Kimiko gave him one last look before turning back towards the interview lounge.

“Yaseiki-sensei!” He called after her. “Thank you!”

“You want to thank me?” She called back. “Become a great hero, Hitoshi Shinsou. Then,
and only then, will I allow you to thank me.”

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“No, no! It can’t be true!”

“Oh, yes, Iida Tenya! It is! You and your brother are uncles to all of my marvelous babies!!”

“But I’ve never even met you before!”

Whatever Kimiko expected to see when she opened the door to the media lounge, it most certainly wasn’t Iida Tensei’s brother being tormented by his sister-in-law, and most definitely not with dialogue ripped straight from low-budget TV dramas. But lo and behold, there Hatsume Mei was, proving for all to see that she was most definitely related to Iida Rei.

“Mom!” A flash of movement from the corner of Kimiko’s eye was all the warning she got before Kanna pulled her into a tight hug, one that she gladly returned. “Help. It’s another Rei.”

“I thought you liked Rei-san,” Kimiko teased her daughter, to which she guffawed.

“Only if there’s not a wrench within twenty meters!”

“This is your mother, Kanna-chan?” Kimiko followed the voice to one of the room’s other occupants, and recognized her immediately.

“Oh, you must be Ibara-chan! And Momo-chan!” Kimiko greeted the two girls that came up to meet her. “Yaseiki Kimiko, but please, Kimiko-san or Kimiko-sensei is fine.”

“Sensei?” Ibara asked. Kimiko tapped the lanyard around her neck, and Ibara leaned in closer to read it. “Ah! What kind of medicine do you practice, Kimiko-sensei?”

“I’m a rare disease specialist,” she replied. “It helps when you can produce exotic substances by… hm. Kanna-chan, could I have an arm back to demonstrate please?”

“No.” Kanna just hugged her tighter, and Kimiko just gave a bemused sigh at her daughter’s actions. Then she changed her arms into bear paws and squeezed. “Ack, okay!”

“Tch, Teddy’s mom does the bear shit too?” Kimiko and Kanna both looked to the young blonde as he sunk lower into his seat. “Of fuckin’ course.”

“Bakugou, why are you still here.”

“Fuck do you care, Teddy!”

“Teddy?” Kimiko teased. “Is there something I need to know, Kanna-chan?”

“The hell’s that shit about?”

“Bakugou,” Kanna deadpanned, “that’s mom-speak for ‘is he your boyfriend’.”
“What the fu—**NO!**”

“Good,” Kimiko replied.

“Good—the fuck’s *that* supposed to mean!?”

“It *means*, young man, that you need to clean up your language if you ever want to date my daughter, let alone *any* girl, but Kanna-chan most of all.”

“Wha—*fuck you*”

“*Somebody please just kill me now,*” Kanna groaned, face buried in her hands.

Whatever someone (probably that Bakugou boy, Kimiko mused) was going to say, it was interrupted by the doors to the interview rooms opening up one by one, and students filing out of them.

“Alright, if we could get Shiozaki-san, Kaminari-san, Tokoyami-san, and Yaoyorozu-san?” The desired contestants all entered an interview room with one of the reporters. By the time the doors had closed and locked, Kanna’s blush had reduced to merely a slight pink tint, that Bakugou boy was back to grumbling to himself, and the students that had just finished their interviews rejoined their friends.

“You going to be okay?” Kimiko asked her daughter, voice soft to not be overheard.

“Yeah,” she whispered back. “I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll be with Pony at your apartment. Text me when you’re out?”

“I will,” Kanna replied, giving her a quick hug, even in front of everyone else. “Mom?”

“Yeah sweetie?”

“Love you.”

“I love you too, dear.”

When Kimiko turned back to take one last look at the group, it was to see Kanna join Tenya over with his two friends, the brunette girl and the short boy with green-black hair. She wasn’t talking much, but it was fine. She had company, and was among friends.

And that was what mattered right now.
Chapter Thirty-Four

“I’m so sorry for the wait, everyone!” The doors to the interview rooms opened back up, and while Ibara certainly seemed content, Momo’s reaction was much more akin to relief. “If we could have the final four? Iida-san, Hatsume-san, Ashido-san, Yaseiki-san?” Tenya looked like he was offering thanks to some unseen deities, while Mei perked up and… oh my goodness she’s salivating. And scooping up her toys. And… you know what, let’s *not* look at her. She definitely needs something, maybe not a wrench, but she’s got a screw loose up top.

I looked to the woman, and she pointed me to the far-right interview room. I walked over and was beckoned inside by a well-kept man in charcoal-gray slacks and a matching vest over his blue shirt, with a matching blue tie around his neck. A quick peek at a corner of the room showed his jacket on a hanger, next to the stand microphone and one of the larger lights. If I had to guess, the man was probably in his forties, if the hints of gray at his temples and the first traces of lines etching their way into his face were any indication.

“Yaseiki Kanna-san?” I nodded. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Fujimura Shinji, with NHA News.”

“Oh, I know your station. Met some of your reporters outside the UA security gate once.” I crossed my arms over my chest and smirked.

“I think I know who you’re talking about,” he grinned back, leaning in. “I do believe she’s having a bit of trouble with the job market of late. Parents don’t appreciate their children being endangered by the actions of undisciplined paparazzi, who could’ve guessed?”

“Anyone?” I replied.

“Mm, I would say that you’d be surprised, but I get the feeling that no, you wouldn’t.” He clapped his hands together and offered a disarming smile. “Anyways! If you’d like to sit down over there, we can begin. Would you like anything to drink? Water, tea?”

“Water’s fine.” I sat down in the surprisingly comfy armchair, once again finding it difficult to position my tail properly (where are Nedzu’s wonder-chairs when you need them!?) and leaned back into it. “No hair and makeup?”

“Interferes with the image we’re going for,” Fujimura explained. “You’ve just come from a hyper-competitive, Quirk-centric sporting event. This is an incredibly difficult venue, and maintaining the overall appearance you had upon exiting the arena helps to highlight that in the audience’s mind.”

“And here I am, just wanting to take a shower,” I muttered.

“I do apologize for the wait, but there’s only so many of us available. That said, now that we’re here, shall we begin?”

“No reason to wait any longer,” I shrugged. “May as well get this over with.”

“Excellent!” Fujimura sat down in his own armchair as what I could only assume was a production assistant brought water out for the both of us. I took a sip of mine before putting it back down, and once I’d leaned back, Fujimura made a motion over his head.
“We’re live in five, four, three, two…” I didn’t hear the last number, but I could only assume that meant it had begun.

“Welcome back, dear viewers,” Fujimura began, voice smooth as silk and nearly as inviting. “I’m back with yet another of our First-year finalists, Yaseiki Kanna. Yaseiki-san,” he turned towards me, “it’s a pleasure to meet you this afternoon.”

“Please, just Kanna,” I said.

“Kanna-san then,” Fujimura said. “First, let me say congratulations on making it into the final round of your first UA Sports Festival. How does it feel, knowing you’re one of the top rookie heroes in the country?”

“It’s… daunting?” I offered. “I was actually expecting to be a lot more uncomfortable with the crowd, but it was somewhat reasonable for those first two events. I mean, I wasn’t under the spotlight specifically, and there were still dozens of us. But with sixteen left? It’s, uh.” I shrugged. “I guess I’ll find out tomorrow if stage fright sets in, won’t I?”

“Speaking from experience, it may help to avoid looking directly at the audience,” Fujimura offered. “Just focus on what’s in front of you, and let the crowd blur out.”

“I’ll try.” I smiled. “Thanks for the advice.”

“It’s my pleasure.” He leaned forward in his chair. “So, Kanna-san, it’s been noted that you are actually one of the few to grow up with heroes for parents. Did this upbringing affect your decision to apply to UA?”

“You’d think that, but not really!” I said. “It was actually seeing… you know Iida Tenya, one of the other finalists?” Fujimura murmured his assent. “We’ve known each other since we were children, and my friend Pony and I were actually there for his brother’s debut as Ingenium, at least at the get together for his friends and fellow graduates.”

“Your other friend, that would be Tsunotori Pony-san, yes?”

“Mhmm.”

“I see. So, I take it Ingenium’s debut left a rather lasting impression on you?”

“It did,” I confirmed. “I mean, it’s one thing to know your parents are heroes, though my mother really only maintains hers as a formality. It’s something else entirely to see someone else finally taking that first step as a new hero, and it’s just…” I trailed off.

“You don’t know how to describe it?”

“No!” I laughed. “It’s just… well, it’s something else. There was something magical in that moment, I guess.”

“I can imagine. Now that you’re here at UA though, how does the reality compare to the fantasy?”

“I will say this straight out: I can already see why they consider this place the pinnacle.”
“Oh? Was there anything in particular that prompted this?” Fujimura prompted.

“On our very first day, our homeroom teacher brought us out to the athletic field, told us he’d be testing how well we can use our Quirks, and motivated us with a bluff about expelling the worst performer.”

“You’re joking.”

“Nope, all true. Honestly, that bluff probably forced more than a little creativity out of people.”

“Do you think he would have gone through with it?”

“It depends,” I waffled. “I wouldn’t be surprised to learn he’s expelled students before, but I also get the feeling it would have needed some pretty serious justification. Hence him saying he would, and having the most unreadable poker face I’ve ever seen.”

“I see. Class 1-A… that would make Eraserhead your homeroom teacher?”

“Mhmm.”

“And what about the other teachers at UA? What’s your opinion on the overall quality of the teaching staff so far?”

“Well… I hear the question you’re asking, but I also know the question you want to ask. So just ask that one instead.”

“Fair enough.” He gave that same disarming grin, and I tried to keep myself from grinning back. I’m not sure I quite managed it. “I’ll get to the point then: how is All Might as a teacher?”

“Personally? I’m glad to have him there as a resource, but he’s not the greatest teacher! I get the feeling he was one of those naturals, and most of the important things about training to be a hero just sort of ‘clicked’ with him, and he’s having a hard time translating his own experience into something we can work from.”

“Really?”

“Really,” I nodded. “That being said, he’s exceptional at pointing out errors, mistakes, and weaknesses, and for all that bombastic personality? He’s humble enough to use one of his own as an example. If you ever wonder whether you’re off-base somewhere, he’s probably noticed, and is just waiting for the right time to let you know. Also, the man does a great inspirational speech.”

“Now that I can imagine. While we’re on the topic of heroes, might you be willing to share who your favorites are?”

“That’s a tricky one!” I smiled. “It’s a toss-up.”

“Between?”

He took the bait.

“Between All Might’s dentist and whoever convinced Present Mic to stick to radio.”
“I… I’m sorry?” Fujimura seemed genuinely taken aback, and I’m fairly sure I heard somebody cough to muffle a laugh behind one of the cameras or lights. Ha! Corpsing on my first interview!

“What? All Might’s pearly-whites got me to brush my teeth as a kid, and while I love Present Mic’s taste in music, he really needs to apply better standards to music videos. Song quality does not equate to video direction, and vice versa.”

“I, uh, suppose I can see that!” Fujimura laughed. “I’m sorry, I just didn’t expect that answer! Most people answer with All Might, or one of their local heroes. To clarify the question though, are there any Pro Heroes that you particularly look up to?”

“Great, you specifically mention All Might is the most common, now I have to mention somebody else!” I grumbled good-naturedly. “Hmm, I suppose it would have to be Best Jeanist.”

“Interesting! Any particular reasons for that?”

“You have to admire a man who’s confident enough to wear his pants on his head and look good doing it. Also Jeanist, if you’re watching, could you please consider a women’s clothing line?”

“I, wow! Now that you mention it, he does look like he’s wearing jeans for a jacket, and in the most literal sense, doesn’t he?”

“Well I saw a picture online of just the cloth part of his jacket down to his shoulders, and it looked like jeans. Then they zoomed out, and it was… well, Best Jeanist.”

“I see, I see! Well, I can safely say Best Jeanist will be watching the finals with keen interest. Maybe you can get him to listen on that clothing line?”

“Here’s to hoping.”

“Here’s to hoping indeed.” Fujimura took a sip of his water before continuing. “On the topic of the Sports Festival, there was some noted confusion amongst our viewers as to what exactly happened with your team during the Cavalry Battle, and how two of your teammates chose to drop out of the finals. Would you care to elucidate on the situation, perhaps shed some light on why they chose to resign from the finals? And why you chose to continue on yourself?”

“Ah…” I paused for a moment, unsure of how to phrase any of this. There was a lot going on behind the scenes there, things the casual observer who hadn’t gotten the chance to know Ojiro and Shouda wouldn’t understand. And really, I’m not the one who should be saying this.

“Take your time,” Fujimura added.

“It’s not that,” I replied. “It’s just, I really don’t want to speak for Ojiro and Shouda. They have their own reasons, and it’s not my place to try and guess at their thoughts. The rest of the situation is also… is it okay if I don’t really want to talk about it?”

“I understand.”

“Why I chose to continue on?” I looked down at my hands. “You remember Bakugou’s little speech during the pledge?”

“I do,” he confirmed. “The ‘Villain Alliance’ he mentioned, that would be the group who attacked
Thirteen-san’s Unforeseen Simulation Joint, yes?”

“That’s them,” I said. “But I’m more concerned with someone else. Look, you had to have received some background on me before this, right?” These guys were professional. There isn’t even a snowball’s chance in hell that they didn’t start gathering info on us the moment we were confirmed to be the finalists, and it’s not like my family history is hard to find either.

“You’re speaking of this… ‘Wendigo’, yes?”

“Yeah.” I stared at the water glass in front of me. “I don’t know what his vendetta against my father is,” I lied, “but that monster wants to kill him, and for some reason that extends to me too. Sins of the father or whatever, I don’t know. Point is? The Sports Festival is huge. I haven’t a clue where the Wendigo is hiding, but he’s probably watching this.” I looked up and met Fujimura’s eyes. “If and when he decides to actually do something, I want him to hesitate. I want him to look at me and think that this might not go over so well for him, and to do that, I need to be able to show why.”

“And to do that, you need the finals.”

“It’s a one-on-one tournament. It’s the best chance I have to really show what I can do, but…” I faltered again. The tournament really was the best way for me to possibly intimidate the Wendigo, but at the same time, there were two other considerations in play here. The first is my obvious lethality: I can’t go swinging my claws around and just hope I don’t disembowel somebody. That was… it wasn’t even an option!

“But what?”

As for the second? Well, if that monster really is watching this, and I do show off everything that I have...

“Hey, I can’t go giving you everything, can I? A girl’s gotta have something in her back pocket for a rainy day!” I took a page out of All Might’s playbook instead. Deflect, joke, and finish it off with a brilliant smile.

And a wink for the camera.

“And after all that build-up? Such a tease.”

“Yes, because I’m going to just tell you everything about my battle plans,” I said with a slight roll of my eyes. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if one of the other finalists did do that. I hope Pony’s got this recording, because I’m definitely going to want to parse this once I’m home.

“That’s fair, I’ll admit. Back to the competition, though, is there anyone that you are particularly looking forward to facing? Assuming both of you make it to that point, of course.”

“Yaoyorozu Momo,” I replied, using her full name for clarity’s sake. “Our Quirks are probably the two most versatile in 1-A, and very much equal and opposite. Mine is living creatures focused inward, hers is inanimate objects projected outward. It’d be human ingenuity versus nature’s creativity.”

Well, that and I really want to see how she’s improved over the last week. There was another cityscape training last week, and she kept dropping caltrops behind her. Let me tell you, Tenya was not happy when we had to carry him to Recovery Girl.
“Interesting! Anyone else?”

“Bakugou.”

“Any particular reason?” He asked.

“He’s a strong competitor, and I still haven’t had a chance to properly spar against him during training so far.”

This was true, but at the same time, there was another reason. Bakugou’s Quirk is strong. In terms of raw power, he sat just below Todoroki in my book, and for a lot of people that would be enough to want to test themselves against him. But the main reason I wanted to try my hand against Bakugou is that he is one of the worst possible matchups I could face. I’m a close-quarters combatant, and I know it. Bakugou could just set his stance, aim, and fire off blast after blast to wear me down. Sure, knowing his personality that’s not what he would do, but even closing the gap wasn’t necessarily an advantage. His combat sense is enough that I’d be lucky to land a hit on him without receiving one just as bad, if not worse, for my efforts.

“That does make sense.” Fujimura smiled. Well then…”

Over the next fifteen or so minutes, Fujimura continued to ask questions. He was surprisingly agreeable when I didn’t want to answer questions about my hooves and tail, and just mentioned that it’d be edited out. Some softer questions came next, such as my favorite animal (bears), most useful animal form for completing random tasks (orangutan arms for reaching the top shelf of the cabinet, changing light bulbs, etcetera), and favorite weird animal fact (of all the animals in Africa, the most dangerous one to humans is the hippo, a herbivore). I had to refuse another question when he began to play hardball again, since there was no way I was going to comment on the status of my parents’ marriage on national television.

“Well, we appear to be just about out of time,” Fujimura said after finishing the last of his water. “Thank you very much for your time, Kanna-san. We have one last question for you, if that’s okay?”

“Of course,” I answered.

“As we were finishing up one of our earlier interviews, I couldn’t help but overhear a bit of an argument between Bakugou Katsuki-san and yourself.”

Oh, no.

“Yeah?” I managed to keep my voice level, but I know my smile slipped a bit. “What about it?”

“Well, I do believe I heard him refer to you as ‘Teddy’. Any particular meaning to the nickname, Kanna-san?”

Crap!

“N-not really?” I tried to laugh it off. “I mean, Bakugou tends to give people insulting nicknames, so —”

“But that’s not particularly insulting, now is it?” Fujimura’s smile widened even further. “In fact, doesn’t it seem almost endearing?”
“Wh—no!”

“Really?” Fujimura held an arm up and out behind his chair, and one of the production assistants placed a sheet of paper into his outstretched hand. “During Bakugou-san’s interview, and even during the events themselves, we noted his predilection towards these nicknames you describe. Deku, Soy-Sauce Face, Raccoon-Eyes, Half-and-Half… and yet, when asked if you had a nickname, he initially didn’t reply. It took a bit of coaxing before he replied, and it didn’t have the same, how should I put this, vitriol as the other monikers he gave out.” He looked up from the sheet of paper in his hands, and canted his head ever so slightly to the side. “You wouldn’t happen to know why this is, would you?”

“Bu-wh-he—” I sputtered.

“Oh, so you do have an idea then!” He exclaimed, delighted.

“N-no comment!” I blurted out. I could feel the heat in my cheeks, and I’m fairly certain I was blushing all the way down to the bottom of my neck. Fujimura just looked at me like my reaction was the cherry on top of his interview milkshake, and I’m pretty sure I had the color to match.

“And with that, I’m afraid we are well and truly out of time. I’d like to offer a warm thank-you to Yaseiki Kanna-san for joining us.” I just bowed and nodded, still bright red and desperately trying to maintain a straight face. “Stay tuned! We’ll be back after the break.”

“And, cut!” The studio-level lights dropped out before the room’s regular lighting flicked on, and suddenly I could see the other six people in the room with us, all wearing some variation of a sappy smile or a silly little smirk.

“I’m sorry about that last bit,” Fujimura said, turning towards me with an apologetic smile, “but the studio wanted us to at least try and give the tabloid journalists some low-hanging fruit. I hope you can forgive me for that?”

“T-that’s not it!” I stammered. “I mean, I know when he started using Teddy! I offered to give him a bear hug!”

“That would explain some of it,” he mused. “I understand teddy bears, are rather cuddly, and—”

“No, not a ‘really strong hug’ bear hug!” I interrupted. “When I say bear hug,” I morphed both arms, spreading them wide and sending Fujimura staggering back a bit at the suddenness, “I mean a very literal bear hug!”

“... ah.” I changed my arms back to normal, and Fujimura recovered quickly. “Nevertheless, better to have the gossip rags focusing on nonexistent romances than topics that could actually prove embarrassing, no?”

“I g-guess…”

“Now, I believe we have taken up enough of your time, and I think you’d like to be heading home soon. You do have a big day tomorrow.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but any reply I’d been about to formulate was suddenly interrupted by a great rumbling. My blush returned in full force as everyone in the room looked down to my
... can I go now?” I asked.

“Yes, go, go! Best of luck to you tomorrow, Kanna-san!”

“T-thank you!” I turned and left the interview room as quickly as I could, shutting the door behind me and breathing a deep sigh of relief.

“ Took your sweet fuckin’ time, Teddy.” Bakugou looked at me from over the back of his chair, his usual surly expression punctuated by boredom.

I couldn’t help it; I let out a long-suffering groan of dismay.

“Bakugou, why are you still here.”

“I don’t gotta explain shit to you! Tch, fuckin’ Teddy…”


“Kanna-chan, how was your interview?” Momo asked. I opened my mouth to answer, but once again, my stomach chose that time to sing the song of its people. I buried my face in my hands, but not before I caught sight of Bakugou’s shaking shoulders.

“C-can we just go?” I asked. “I want to head home.”

“Get yourself a damn sandwich already.”

“Damn it Bakugou, shut UP!”

* * * * *

Even outside the door to my apartment, I could smell what was inside. My mouth started to water, and my stomach gurgled its anticipation.

“Welcome back, Kanna-chan!” Mom called from our little kitchenette. “Sukiyaki’s just about ready!”

“Oh thank goodness.” I practically collapsed into a chair as Mom finished up. “I’m starving.”

“They didn’t offer you food?” I could practically hear the frown in her voice.

“Mom. There were ten teenage boys there. Do you really think the food lasted all that long?”

“True, true.” Mom came over and set some food in front of me. I dug in with gusto, and Pony came over from the sofa to grab some for herself.

“Soooo, I’ve got all the interviews recording!” She exclaimed. “Ready to watch?”

“Food first!”
“And then shower, Kanna-chan. I can smell you from here.”

“Mom!”
“Alright, let’s go over this one more time.” Pony sat opposite me at our little breakfast table, and held up her notebook page. On it, she’d written my half of the bracket ladder, complete with the names. “I point to a name, you tell me what you’ll do against them. Ready? Go.”

“Pony, let me eat my breakfast!”

“Nuh-uh, this’ll take two minutes!”

“Alright, fine…” Pony started off by pointing to Mina’s name. “Mind the terrain and either grapple or overpower her quickly. The longer things last, the worse my chances.” She slid her finger over one, to Tokoyami. “Depends on how my fight with Mina goes. Can’t use the same trick twice.” Next up, Momo. “Bum rush. I cannot give her any time to think or I lose, full stop.” Tetsutetsu, he of the redundant name. “Blunt force. I may not be able to break his skin, but that doesn’t mean his innards are perfectly safe.” Kirishima. “Keep-away. His hardening might make me hurt myself back, but he’ll probably tire before I do.” Uraraka. “Watch the hands.” And lastly for this side of the bracket, Bakugou. “Armor up and try to bait. Though I doubt that’ll work…”

“Hey, it’s better than nothing, right?” Pony added. “Okay, finish up your breakfast and get ready to go, we want to be nice and early!”

“I’m hurrying, I’m hurrying!”

* * * * *

“Heh, ‘bout time you showed up Teddy.”

I flipped Bakugou the bird and looked to see who all had made it to the competitor seats already. Tenya and Momo both sat alone, poring over notes they must have compiled the night before. Ibara sat in the middle seat of the middle row, rosary beads between her clasped hands, eyes closed and lips moving in silent prayer. Tokoyami lurked in the back corner, getting as much shade as he could find. Todoroki took the other back corner, glaring at something or other on the opposite side of the arena; I followed his gaze, but all I saw was a glare. Or maybe a flicker of light. I’m not sure. Then there were Midoriya and Uraraka, huddled together and exchanging hushed snippets of conversation, occasionally looking around to see if anybody had overheard.

And rounding us out was Bakugou, who had managed to spread himself out and slouch down so far that he took up his own seat, two seats in the next row up with his legs, and both rows beside him. I couldn’t help but frown at this display, and Bakugou noted the attention, looking up and grunting.

“Well don’t you just look comfortable,” I deadpanned.

“Fuck do you care?” Bakugou snarled.

“Nothing, nothing.” I waved him off and walked towards someone else in particular. “Midoriya, you have a minute?”
“Oi, the hell you wanna talk to Deku for!?” Bakugou yelled.

“Shut up, Bakugou!” I yelled right back. “Sorry,” I turned back to Midoriya, “but it’s important.”

“A-alright!” Midoriya whispered an apology to Uraraka and got up. I beckoned him into the tunnel out to the stadium’s hallway. “U-um, Yaseiki-san—”

“What, Tsuyu gets her first name and I don’t?” I interrupted, not even looking over my shoulder as I led him down the hall.

“Ah, sorry, sorry! Kanna-san, w-where are we going?”

“Here.” I opened the door to 1-A’s prep room, where Ojiro and Shouda were waiting for us. “I got him.”

“Great!” Ojiro exclaimed. “Midoriya-kun, come on in.”

“Ojiro-kun, Shouda-san!” Midoriya stopped in the doorway for only a moment, but eventually gathered his wits and closed the door behind him. “W-what’s—wait, this is about my opponent’s Quirk, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I confirmed. “The three of us compared notes, and it’s pretty definitive: whatever his Quirk is, it’s some form of mind control.”

“A mind control Quirk?” Midoriya paled. “How am I supposed to win against that?”

“That’s where we come in!” Shouda exclaimed. “I mean, if it were just him choosing to control someone, he wouldn’t have had to talk with us, would he? It’s probably got a trigger!”

“My memories cut out the instant I replied to him,” Ojiro added. “That’s probably the trick.”

“Mine too. That said,” I paused for a moment, thinking. “He didn’t take control of me immediately. We even had a brief, semi-civil conversation beforehand. He can probably choose when to take control, but only if you open the window.”

“So it’s all over if I slip up and say anything to him…” Midoriya shuddered where he sat, and then in his characteristic fashion, began to mutter. “I’m gonna have to be careful. Gag myself? No, I’m not from the support course, I can’t bring anything in with me. Tear my shirt to make one, no takes too long. Maybe it’s only if he can actually hear the reply, but it could also just be that he perceived the target as replying, or does the idea of ‘replying’ have to be mutual between him and his target, what about duration or range or—”

“Midoriya-kun!” Ojiro interrupted. “You may be thinking about this too hard. For all that it’s strong, his control doesn’t seem inviolable.”

“Huh?”

“Remember how I said I didn’t remember anything up until the end?” Ojiro mentioned. “Well, when Shinsou had us run past to nab Tetsutetsu’s headband, I think I must’ve bumped into their formation. That’s when I snapped out of it”

“So, before the end?” Midoriya asked.
“By about five seconds,” he confirmed.

“It was definitely the physical contact that did the trick,” I added, “but there may be another component, like pain. That said, when I came back to myself, I was very sore all over, so it’s probably not just contact all on its own.”

“Well, maybe it’s a sudden, unexpected contact or bit of pain?” Shouda suggested. “I’m pretty sure he had me using my Quirk, and if it was just contact I’d have snapped out of it instantly.”

“But I can’t rely on that during a match. And I can’t have outside help,” Midoriya murmured.

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to defeat this one on your own.” Ojiro and Shouda stood up, both walking to Midoriya. “That said, I’m rooting for you, Midoriya-kun.”

“Me too!” Shouda jumped. “You’ve got this, Midoriya-san. Win this one for us!”

“You guys…” Midoriya’s eyes teared up. I sighed and brought out a handkerchief, which he gladly took. “I w-won’t let you down! I promise!”

“Just shove that in your mouth if you think you’re about to respond,” I nodded at the handkerchief. “Or pull up your shirt collar and chew on that.” I looked straight at Midoriya. “No matter what he says, do not answer. Don’t even grunt. So long as you’re quiet, he’s got an impossible matchup.”

“R-right!” Midoriya collected himself and gave us a watery smile. “I’ve got this!”

“That’s the spirit!” Ojiro exclaimed. “Alright Midoriya-san, we gotta go. Good luck!”

“T-thank you!” He looked down at the handkerchief, but I shook my head when he offered it back. “Toss that back to me once you’ve won,” I smiled.

“I will!”

* * * * *

I didn’t bother watching this fight. The outcome was pretty much guaranteed to go in Midoriya’s favor; I just needed to see which side of the arena he entered from, go to the opposite… and wait. Not even two minutes later, Midnight announced Midoriya’s win, and I got into position. I didn’t have to wait long, and soon enough I heard Shinsou’s footsteps echoing down the hallway. I pushed off the wall and plastered the sweetest smile I had on my face.

Shinsou turned the corner, saw me, and froze.

“Hi there!” I chirped.

Then I slugged him in the gut as hard as I could.

From personal experience, a good solid hit to the solar plexus will knock the wind completely out of you. Good luck trying to say anything after one of those, especially since you’re far too busy trying
to catch your breath. Shinsou fell down, curling up partly into the fetal position with both arms
wrapped around his midsection, and gasped for air.

“That was for Ojiro and Shouda,” I declared. Then I turned on a hoof, gave him one more thwack
with my tail for good measure, and walked off before he could recover. If he has something to say, I
don’t want to hear it. I don’t like Shinsou. I saw his interview, I know he has heroic aspirations, but
at this point I don’t care. What Shinsou did to Shouda, to Ojiro, to me… it was a violation. It was
horrible, and despicable, and I have only ever felt quite so helpless twice before. Even if he
somehow gets transferred into the hero course, I don’t think I could be civil with him. Any time he
tried to talk to me, I’d just think back to what happened the first time we ever spoke.

I am terrified of Hitoshi Shinsou. Not for what he’s done, but what he could do. I don’t care if that
makes me a bad person, because if you were to ask me he deserves that treatment. He had his chance
to make a good first impression, and he blew it.

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I made it back to the finalists’ seating area just in time to see Todoroki freeze Sero into the side of a
massive glacier. I’ll admit, my jaw dropped a bit when I saw that, and mentally I re-evaluated my
chances versus Todoroki from ‘very very minimal’ to ‘snowball’s chance in hell’. If he can bring that
much to bear in an instant, I don’t think I have a solution that would let me fight him
effectively anywhere in my arsenal. I mean, I’m strong, but most of my strength comes from
versatility. Todoroki?…

Well, I hope Midoriya has something in mind for the second round.

Next up came Kaminari versus Ibara. And of course, Present Mic instantly shoved his foot in his
mouth,

“It’s Class B’s assassin! Every… something or other has its thorns, right!? It’s Shiozaki Ibara!
Versus… The sparking, killing boy of Class A! Kaminari Denki! Now, we’ll have a super flashy
battle this time too—”

“Pardon me!” Ibara turned to face Present Mic in the announcer’s booth. “Please excuse the
interruption, but what do you mean by ‘assassin’? I have only come seeking victory, not my
opponent’s life!”

“I-I’m so sorry!” Present Mic burst out, flustered.

“In fact, I wished to enter UA’s Hero Course not for wicked or even selfish reasons, but to bring
salvation to others. I’ve only come so far in seeking victory so that I can earn the opportunity to
spread hope as a true heroine!”

“I said I’m sorry! My bad, okay!?”

“Thank you for your understanding!” Ibara bowed to Present Mic and continued into the arena, a
serene smile on her face as she squared off with Kaminari.

“A-anyway, START!”
“Hey!” Kaminari yelled over the crowd, loud enough we could hear it over in our seats. “When this is over, wanna grab a bite to eat? I’ll comfort you if you’ll have me!” I saw Ibara look up, an expression of mild confusion on her face. “Cause this match’ll probably be over in a second!”

Kaminari’s body lit up with electricity, sparking off into the air haphazardly. The entire arena started to stink of ozone, and Kaminari threw all of his power out in an instant, nearly three million volts. Apparently that training he’d been doing paid off!

Too bad he was stuck going up against a terrible matchup.

Ibara just turned around, sunk her vines into the concrete floor of the arena, and erected a massive barrier for her to hide behind. The electrical discharge managed to hit everything except Ibara and her vines, and the ground buckled before a massive collection of her vines burst forth, wrapped Kaminari up and dangling him in midair.

“It was decided in an instant! I’ll say it once more—an INSTANT!”

“Shiozaki advances to the second round!” Midnight announced with a crack of her whip.

“All right!” Tetsutetsu burst out next to us. “Nice job, Shiozaki!”

“You know, I almost feel bad for Kaminari,” I murmured, just loud enough for Tetsutetsu and Momo, who were nearby and next to me respectively, to both overhear. “But you know what? He got cocky.”

“He discharged all of his electricity in an instant,” Momo sighed. “Honestly, he should know better than to do that after USJ!” I agreed, and was about to let her know, but… well. Midoriya started with his muttering habit, which was distracting enough, though oddly entertaining. Though, that bit about compatibility between Ibara’s Quirk and Kamui Woods’ actually did sound rather interesting. I actually hope he offers to meet with her, even just to see how their—

“Quit your fuckin’ muttering, Deku!”

“Don’t make me come over there Bakugou!” I yelled back.

“Come and try it, Teddy!”

“Oh, don’t tempt me, you—”

“Kanna-chan!” Momo grabbed my tail and pulled me back. I squeaked at the sudden contact, and I’m pretty sure Bakugou heard, if his sudden guffaw was any indication. “Your match is after this one; shouldn’t you go down to the prep room now? Mina-chan already left!”

“R-right!” I pulled my phone out of my pocket and tossed it to Momo. “Hey, record Tenya’s fight for me, okay? I wanna see it when I’m back!”

“Kanna-chan, my fight’s right after yours!”

“… shoot. Uh, okay…” I looked at who all was here and trustworthy. “Midoriya?”

“W-what is it, Kanna-san?”
“Here, can you play videographer for me? I want to watch Tenya’s fight, but I need to go get ready.” I handed him my phone, and he took it with a slightly shaky smile.

“S-sure! I can record Iida-kun’s match for you!”

“Awesome, thanks!” I headed towards the aisle, then stopped to look back and wave. “Wish me luck!”

“... you better win, Teddy,” Bakugou ground out.

“Wow.” I stopped to give him a look. “Careful Bakugou, for a moment there, it almost sounded like you cared.”

“Fuck you too!”

* * * * *

“We’re gonna keep right on going with the fifth match!”

This was it. I took a deep breath to steady my nerves, and walked out onto the stadium floor. The roar of the crowd was incredible, and there were so many people. But I had to keep moving. They weren’t the only ones eagerly anticipating this fight, nor the most important. Somewhere out there, the Wendigo was watching with bated breath.

“Her claws are just as sharp as her tongue! From the Hero Course, Yaseiki Kanna!”

I walked up to the arena, kept my posture loose, and my line of sight low. I fixed my eyes on my very pink classmate, coming up from the opposite side to meet me.

“Versus! Is something going to come out of those horns? Well? From the Hero Course, it’s Ashido Mina!”

Mina gave a slight chuckle and pointed at me, one hand planted on her hip.

“Too bad your Quirk won’t help against my acid, Kanna-chan!”

“Wow Mina, I’m quaking in my boots,” I deadpanned, waggling a hoof. “Oh, wait.”

“Oi Mina!” Kirishima yelled from the stands. “You got this!”

“Yaseiki get her!” I actually turned to look. Was that… Mineta!? “Beat her like in those fighting games where their clothes get ripped off!”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. That damn little pervert…

“Now, why don’t we get moving?”

Now’s not the time; focus, Kanna, focus! You’ve got a match to win!

“Fifth match, start!”
“Fifth match, start!”

Mina began moving the moment Present Mic called for the match to begin. Some liquid burbled out from under the soles of her shoes, and with both arms outstretched, she began to move. The acid must have been near-neutral, since she slipped and slid along like an ice skater on a frozen lake. From either arm, massive quantities of acid spewed forth, and she skated back and forth on a lazy curve, taking her sweet time making it over towards me as she covered as much of the arena as possible in acid.

I smirked. So she was going with that plan then. In that case…

I raised my right arm and bent my hand in towards my chest, angling so my forearm was as far down as possible to ease the shift. A moment later, hard chitinous exoskeleton replaced the skin of my arm and part of my shoulder, my hand fused into a great big club, and the rest of my arm aligned along a vertical plane. I could feel the tension in my changed arm, ready to explode out in an instant.

“Ashido’s covered most of the arena in slippery acid! Yaseiki’s just standing there, but what’s this? What’s that arm of hers? I gotta know!”

“Not gonna help you Kanna-chan!” Mina cried, just about at my position. I bent my legs and got myself ready to move, eying the arena floor for a safe spot. Mina’s arc had done a good job of coating the ground, but she hadn’t been exhaustive. A slight glow built around my legs, and the klipspringer was ready to help me leap to safety. “Eat this!” Mina produced two globules of thicker, denser acid in her hands, and chucked them at me. The viscous liquid deformed once it left her hands, but still remained one relatively cohesive blob, spreading out to cover a wider area. If I didn’t move, I’d be hit, and it probably wouldn’t be pretty.

So I did.

“Look at Yaseiki’s hang time! Hey, Yaseiki-chan, do a flip!”

The klipspringer is actually very, very good at jumping around. Scale that up to human size, and it’s roughly equivalent to hopping over a three-story building in a single bound. I didn’t actually shapeshift, so I only got about a one-story leap, but that was more than enough. Sorry Present Mic, no flip, cause I’ve got something else in mind. I touched down on one of the only safe spots left on the other three-quarters of the arena, kneeled down, readied my shifted right arm, and punched.

My claw hit the arena floor. And, when put up against a mantis shrimp that one, doesn’t have to fight against water resistance, and two, is scaled up to human size? Well, think about it this way. A six-inch mantis shrimp, working through water resistance, can strike with the force of a rifle bullet. A human-sized one?

The concrete didn’t stand a chance.

“Yaseiki’s breaking the arena! I don’t know what bug has that claw, but it’s one heck of a boxer! Hey Cementoss, you better get ready!”

“What the heck was that!?” Mina exclaimed, pointing at where my strike had cratered the arena
I turned and struck again, and again, and again, shattering the ground around me and sending debris all over Mina’s carefully prepared acid field. With my untransformed left hand, I grabbed one of the smaller pieces of rubble and chucked it at her, which she dodged, and then leapt for my next spot. I landed on another bare spot and threw another strike at the ground, but had to leap away to another one when Mina threw a glob of acid at me. It hissed and spit and ate away at the arena floor where it landed, but I kept up my messy task.

Mina kept lobbing acid my way, thick and viscous globules that burned much bigger holes into the concrete arena than my punches could. Despite the sheer strength she could toss it with though, and her softball throw during Aizawa-sensei’s assessment test was almost as high as Bakugou’s unaided sixty-seven meters, she had very poor aim. It didn’t help that the ‘balls’ of acid kept spreading out once they hit air resistance, and that she couldn’t build the pressure needed ‘shoot’ her acid very easily.

“And it looks like slicking up the arena didn’t do much good for Ashido! Yaseiki’s broken it to bits, and now it’s a rock scramble!”

“Sorry Mina!” I changed my right arm back to normal, stretched it a bit, and gave a faux-salute. “Hope you like hiking!”

“Y-you, argh!” Mina stamped her foot once before charging over towards me, running this time instead of sliding due to the now-uneven footing. I couldn’t help the grin on my face, and as she got closer, my arms shifted, ripping the sleeves off of my track jacket when they failed to contain my inalienable right to bear arms. Beneath what was left of my jacket and unseen by the crowd, my skin rippled, thick scales forming to give me a living plate.

Mina, to her credit, has fairly good combat sense. She stood outside my range and on the cleanest section of ground, lobbing acid my way to force me into dodging, and make any approach incredibly dangerous. By changing both arms I’d sacrificed my ability to keep picking up broken chunks of arena floor to use as projectiles, but Mina had no such issues. Now that I think about it, that was a bad idea. While I was definitely more agile on the uneven ground than Mina was, none of that meant anything if I couldn’t hit her!

“And now it’s Ashido playing keep-away! Maybe Yaseiki could ‘bear’ to try something different, cause this isn’t working for her, haha!”

“Yeah, go Mina!” I heard Kirishima yell from the stands. “You got her on the ropes, go for the throat!”

“Quit playing the fuck around, Teddy!” I actually stumbled for a moment when I heard Bakugou, and took a glancing hit from Mina’s acid to my abdomen. It burned away my jacket and shirt, but it couldn’t quite finish eating through my scales, but damn it that hurt! “Fuck the fancy shit and beat her down!”

I grimaced and shifted my left arm back to human, dodged another glob of acid, and picked up a chunk of arena floor to throw back at Mina. Much as I want to listen to Bakugou, I still have to be careful not to play right into Mina’s hands.

Ashido Mina is many things. She’s incredibly fit and strong, energetic and bubbly, has a really useful Quirk, and is just one of the nicest people you’ll ever meet. There’s not a mean bone in her body, and anything less ‘nice’ that she does is usually all in good humor, for both sides. That said, she does have a particular deficit, one that I’m rather glad nobody’s pointed out to her so far: while she has
great combat sense, Ashido Mina has practically zero common sense.

During our interviews with the media, Mina pretty much outlined her go-to strategies for the tournament. Against anybody that wanted to close on her, slick up the arena and skate around, which would put the mobility advantage in her favor. I immediately recognized what she was doing and moved to neutralize it, and now the terrain advantage was in my favor. She had to worry about rolling an ankle, but I could settle down on much smaller solid patches with my hooves than her feet could, and didn’t have the same ankle problems. Against anyone that slicking things up wouldn’t work versus, such as Bakugou, Tetsutetsu, and Kirishima, all of whom could either ignore the acid or break through it straight to the concrete underneath, she wanted to skate out of range and pelt them with high-power acid. That’s what she was doing right now, and it was really damn annoying!

But I also couldn’t afford to close in haphazardly, because she’d mentioned one last thing: against anyone that wanted her far away or that actually could get close, she had one last trick: super strong acid from all over her body.

Basically, if I get close to Mina, I need to do my damage and get back out. Otherwise, I’m going to burn.

"Looks like Yaseiki’s plan may have backfired, folks! She can’t even get close!"

“He’s got a point, Kanna-chan!” Mina taunted, throwing more acid my way. I managed to dodge most of it and return fire with another piece of rubble, and let my other arm go back to human so I could keep throwing, but I was almost out of available projectile options. “Wanna just give up!?"

“Nah.” I hopped to another patch of broken ground and hid my tail beneath a slight outcropping, but she managed to hit my back with some of her acid on my way there, and I grimaced as it ate away at the scales I’d grown there. “I’m just getting started!” Behind the rocks, my tail shifted. An organic ‘nozzle’ of sorts formed at the end, and chitinous plates formed along half of its length. She launched more acid my way, and I had to tank these hits if I wanted to keep my plan secret, hissing in pain as I started to bleed where the acid ate through my scales and to the skin below.

“What’s she up to!? Yaseiki’s a sitting duck there!”

Strange, unfamiliar muscles formed, and I felt a sense of fullness, similar to a full bladder, but not quite the same. I called the klipspringer totem back to my legs, and leapt from spot to spot, dodging the pitted holes Mina’s acid left in the rubble, and then with one final push, leapt up and over Mina, my tail curling around me and angled down at her.

“Gotcha!” She yelled, and I saw her arms up and raised towards me an instant before acid burbled up, ready for her to toss my way.

“Really?”

I tightened the new muscles in my tail, and just as I’d hoped, a pulsing stream of liquid burst forth at high pressure. It hit Mina’s hands and scattered the acid she’d made, and I could hear the slight sizzle as the boiling liquids hit her skin. She yelped and backed away from the spray as quickly as she could, but the damage was done: even from here, I could see the blisters and burns on her hands and forearms, and her repeated statements of pain.

“What was that!? Yaseiki may have just beat Ashido at her own game!”
I angled my tail at Mina again, tightened the muscles, and let loose one more pulsing spray. She jumped to the side, and the spray flew past her to hit the ground outside the arena’s boundaries. Mina tried to pool some acid in her hands to toss my way, but I saw her wince and throw it down, then wipe her hands on the sides and back of her neck.

“That hurt!” She yelled accusingly. I just shrugged, and waved my tail before changing it back to normal.

“Bombardier beetle.” I settled into a ready stance, ready to shapeshift at a moment’s notice. “Ready to give up?”

“Fat chance of that!” Mina cried. “I’m gonna win!” She dashed forward, and just outside of the range I could hit her at she threw out a side kick, acid spurting from the holes in her sneakers far further than I’d expected. I ducked under the spray and closed the gap, wrapped my tail around her grounded leg, and yanked. The sudden pull sent Mina’s acid spraying everywhere some of it landing painfully on my legs and tail, but I let go when she was in the air, then shifted my right arm to a gorilla’s and just grew claws at the end of the fingers on my left. Mina sprayed acid from both feet to try and get some form of momentum to right herself, or maybe just to try and make me back off, but I ignored it.

With one last move, I grabbed Mina with my right arm and threw her down, then bared my claws above her.

“Sorry Mina.” I couldn’t help the smile on my face. “I win.”

“Ashido Mina is incapacitated!” Midnight declared, cracking her whip. “Yaseiki Kanna moves on to round two!”

And the crowd went wild.

“That’s the end of the fifth match, folks! With Ashido at her mercy, Yaseiki is the first from the second half of our ladder to move on to the next round! Hey, Cementoss, you better fix the arena up, this place is a mess! And get those two to Recovery Girl, hey Midnight!”

“I’m working on it!” Midnight yelled back.

I got up from Mina and shifted myself back to human, then offered a hand to help Mina up. She took it gratefully, but winced when her burnt hand touched mine.

“Ow, ow, ow!” Once she was up, she let go, flexing and shaking her hands. “Aww, I was so close! What was that thing! Some beetle!”

“Bombardier beetle!” I repeated. Midnight cleared her throat, and the two of us grumbled before crossing to the clean, intact side of the arena that I’d come in from, and leaving together that way. “It’s got two chemical chambers in its abdomen,” I explained once we’d left the arena floor and passed into the hallways, “and another one where it mixes them together. The reaction flash-boils and pressurizes the stuff, so it spurts out with a ton of pressure.”

“You squirted me with boiling bodily fluids? Eww!”

“Mina, your Quirk is using bodily fluids!” I replied.
“It’s not the same!” Mina protested.

“Whatever you say, Mina. Whatever you say.”

“What’s that supposed to mean!?”

* * * * *

“Touched your sweet time beating her, Teddy.”

“Yes, because I really wanted the world’s roughest exfoliating treatment from Spa Ashido,” I shot back. “That acid hurts, you know!”

“You can take it and you better fuckin’ know it!” Bakugou… wait. Was that a compliment? I… I honestly don’t know.

“Bakugou, just because I can take it, that doesn’t mean I want too!”

“Tch.” He reached into a pocket and fished out… my phone? “Here. Got yours and four-eye’s.”

“Hang on, didn’t I give this to Midoriya?” I asked.

“S-sorry, Kanna-san!” Midoriya stammered. “Kacchan t-took it when I started muttering again!”

I looked from Midoriya, to Bakugou, then back to Midoriya, then back to Bakugou. And then to Ibara for clarification, and she just shrugged.

“It is exactly as they say,” she smiled serenely. “Bakugou-san mentioned something about wanting to have a cleaner audio track. He was even leaning over the railing to try and get closer footage.”

“Shut up, Rosebud!”

“Hey!” I yelled at him. “You be nice to my friends!”

“Hmph!” Bakugou slumped down and crossed his arms, looking away. “… sorry.” I looked to Ibara, who just nodded, gave another smile, and sat back down. I took a seat near Bakugou for now, to which he turned and gave me an odd look for a second.

“What?”

“S’nothing.”

“Now that the arena’s all repaired,” Present Mic’s voice rang out through the arena, “we’ve got no time to lose! It’s time for the sixth match!”

“It’s Momo-chan’s turn!” Ibara whispered excitedly before yelling out to the crowd. “Good luck Momo-chan! You can do this!”

“Go Momo!” I yelled myself.

“Oi, pipe down Teddy!”
“Offense and defense in one body! The blackbird with a Dark Shadow! From the Hero Course, it’s Tokoyami Fumikage! Versus! All-purpose Creation! She was admitted through recommendations, so her abilities are certified amazing! From the Hero Course, it’s Yaoyorozu Momo!”

“Midoriya-kun,” Tenya whispered, “what do you think about this one?”

“It’s all about time,” he said back. “Present Mic-sensei is right. Tokoyami-kun is offense and defense all in one, but if Yaoyorozu-san has enough time to make something useful, then Tokoyami-kun will be on the back foot. But that’s only if she has the time.”

“You’d be surprised,” I broke in. “Remember the caltrops, Tenya?”

“Hrk!” He clenched his fists, almost seeming wounded. “Kanna-chan, I wish you hadn’t reminded me!” I turned around to give a meaningful look at Ibara, who just smiled and nodded.

“Come on Momo!” I yelled out again. “You send that tweezy bird back into his cage!”

“Sixth match, start!”
Chapter Thirty-Seven

“Sixth match, start!”

“Dark Shadow!” Tokoyami called. From the center of his chest, right above his breastbone, a pool of blackness coalesced before Dark Shadow burst forth. The ink-black, bird-shaped construct cried in excitement before rushing across the arena for Momo, who seemed to just be standing there with her hands behind her back. At the last second, Momo rolled out of Dark Shadow’s way, and the black bird flew past her. Tokoyami gestured with his arm and Dark Shadow moved to loop around and strike Momo from behind, but in that moment I could see Tokoyami make a crucial mistake.

He’d stopped paying attention to Momo’s hands. Rainbow light flared for a brief instant, and then the sun reflected off of the metal object in her hands. Momo ripped her hands apart, dropped something from her right, and chucked an object hard with her left.

I barely saw the silvered canister Momo tossed at Tokoyami in time to cover my ears and close one eye, drawing strange looks from Bakugou and Ibara. Momo ducked down and covered her own eyes and ears, conveniently slipping underneath Dark Shadow in the process, to which the bird-Quirk pulled up short with a slightly confused expression on his beaky face.

Then the flash-bang Momo threw went off.

“Fucking—!” Bakugou cursed as the flashbang left spots in his vision, and large swathes of the audience murmured and winced at the sudden sunspot.

“Yaoyorozu tosses out a stun grenade! That was some serious light and harsh sound; how did Tokoyami and his Dark Shadow handle—what’s she up to now!?”

I couldn’t help but smile when Momo didn’t stop for an instant. From the inside of each forearm more silver canisters appeared, and a quick grab with either hand pulled them away, ripped the pins out, and threw them between herself and Tokoyami. White plumes billowed out from the smoke bombs, covering most of the arena between Momo and Tokoyami, and I could see Momo take a few steps back to prepare herself. Rainbow light blossomed along her right arm and in the palm of her left hand, and objects began to take shape as we watched.

“Smoke bombs! It seems Tokoyami and Yaoyorozu can’t see each other, but we can still see both of them! Ah, but I better not say anything, I don’t want to spoil the surprises for either of them!”

Tokoyami seemed to realize he was at an impasse, and since he could neither see Momo nor what she was doing, he looked to be taking things safe.

“Dark Shadow!” “Woohoo!” Dark Shadow leapt from Tokoyami’s chest and into the smoke. Even through the fog, I could see the inky figure inside billow and grow in size, and frowned a bit before looking at Momo. This…

When we watched the footage from USJ, all of us had marveled at just how much damage Dark Shadow managed to inflict. A single hit from one of its wing-hands was enough to crush even the largest of the villains chasing Tokoyami and Kouda through the downpour zone, but what was most notable was actually not just how massive Dark Shadow had been. It was the fact that we never saw the entirety of Dark Shadow emerge in that gloomy darkness, and that when Dark Shadow did
attack, it always returned to Tokoyami after maybe a second or two, after much concentration from
the bird-boy. Looking over at him now, I could see his shoulders were tense, and he had as much of
a frown as his beak would allow.

“Dark Shadow’s sweeping back and forth through the smoke! If Yaoyorozu’s trying to approach,
she’s going to have a hard time getting past this one!”

The crowd murmured and leaned forward, the sudden sense of dramatic irony visibly increasing their
level of excitement.

Momo, on the other side of the smoke, looked to be about ready. The rainbow shimmers that always
accompanied the use of her Quirk dissipated entirely, and in their place was some serious equipment.
On her right arm, she held a buckler with little domed, raised portions along its front. I squinted, and
saw there were small… either indents, divots, or holes along those raised segments, and the entire
shield looked to have an off-white coating along its surface. In her left hand she held another silvered
canister, and by her foot lay what could only be an escrima stick, of the sort she’d used against me
during our spar.

With one finger from the hand holding the shield, Momo pulled the pin on yet another grenade, held
it for two seconds, and lazily tossed it into the smoke cloud. Then she grabbed the escrima stick from
beside her, held the buckler in front of her eyes, tilted her head, and used her right bicep and left
hand to cover her ears.

The flashbang detonated within the smoke cloud, lighting it up from within. Dark Shadow shrieked
in what could only be agony and withdrew to Tokoyami, barely the size of a falcon and—wait, Dark
Shadow is crying. How the actual hell can Tokoyami’s Quirk cry!?

“Dark Shadow! Are you okay!?” “No more raves…”

“Dark Shadow seems hurt by Yaoyorozu’s latest stun grenade, but there’s no time to rest!”

Once the grenade went off, Momo charged, dashing through the smoke with her buckler raised
before her. Tokoyami must have heard her footsteps, because he and Dark Shadow tensed, scanning
the smoke cloud carefully. He took a step back, planting his stance in preparation.

Then Momo burst through the smoke, and everything erupted in a flurry of motion.

“Go!” Dark Shadow launched himself at Momo, and even from here I could see the grin cross her
face. Momo pulled up short, and slammed Dark Shadow across the beak with her buckler. Where
the front of her shield made contact, a muffled boom erupted, complete with a flare of light that sent
Dark Shadow reeling back, squawking and crying in pain.

“Go Momo go!” I cheered from the stands.

“You can do it Momo-chan!” Ibara followed up. Over in the student seats, I could see Monoma,
Pony, and even Tsuyu all joining in, yelling and cheering for Momo.

“A flashbang shield! Yaoyorozu has a flashbang shield!”

But that wasn’t all she had, because with Dark Shadow out of the way, Momo closed in on a
completely unprepared Tokoyami. He raised his arms in a classic boxing stance, arms up to protect
his head as Dark Shadow briefly pulled back into Tokoyami’s chest, appearing as nothing more than
a tar-black puddle on the front of his track jacket. That guard did nothing to help Tokoyami though, since Momo didn’t aim for his head.

With a flash of silver, Momo buried her escrima stick into Tokoyami’s gut. He visibly lurched from the hit, but Momo didn’t give him an inch to breathe. She hadn’t been aiming for his head before, but now?

A swipe of Momo’s buckler struck Tokoyami square in the… cheek? Do birds have cheeks? It hit him hard in the side of the head, and the sudden detonation of whatever it was Momo’d used to coat her shield had him staggering sideways, a hand reflexively rising to protect himself from further hits.

“Yaoyorozu’s on a rampage! If that’d been a sword, this bird would’ve been cooked! Can Tokoyami recover!?”

Tokoyami tried to get away from Momo, backpedaling as fast as he could from her onslaught. Another hit from Momo’s escrima stick sent a loud crack echoing from Tokoyami’s arm, which had him yelling in pain, followed by a quick slam in the stomach with her buckler and another hit to Tokoyami’s thigh. He lost his footing from the hit to his leg and collapsed on the ground.

“One more hit—!” Momo’s body shadowed Tokoyami as she loomed above him, bringing her escrima stick down for one more strike to Tokoyami’s temple—

“Dark Shadow!” “GET AWAY FROM US!”

—Dark Shadow erupted from Tokoyami’s chest, careening directly into Momo and grabbing hold of her arms as he surged upwards, carrying Momo along with him as he flew. My heart sank as Dark Shadow arced to the side, and though a number of knives and spiked sticks burst forth from Momo’s midsection and into Dark Shadow, forcing the Quirk to release her, the damage had already been done.

Dark Shadow let go, and Momo landed hard on her side, outside the arena.

“Yaoyorozu is out of bounds, but Tokoyami appears to be incapacitated! One’s down and one’s out, but who’s the winner!? Which one’s the chicken and which the egg!??” Present Mic’s voice boomed from the loudspeakers, barely drowning out the roars of the crowd. “Principal Nedzu and Midnight will confer and deliver a ruling!”

“Please,” I murmured. “Please let them give Momo the win!”

“Chicken didn’t stand a chance,” Bakugou said, voice quiet. “He’s lucky his fuckin’ Quirk can act on its own…”

“Your attention please!” A crack of the whip from Midnight punctuated her statement. “We have come to a decision!”

The arena fell dead silent. Nedzu cleared his throat and stepped forward, a microphone in his hand.

“This ruling represents an unusual situation! Under any other set of circumstances, we would declare Yaoyorozu the victor, since Tokoyami appeared fully incapacitated before she touched the ground. However!”

“No, no no no!” I moaned. “Damn it Nedzu, I trusted you!”
“Quit being a fucking drama queen and listen!” Bakugou elbowed me in the side, just a little harder than he needed to.

“Unfortunately for Yaoyorozu, her opponent is slightly different from the norm. Tokoyami’s Quirk is semi-autonomous, and unless Tokoyami is fully unconscious, he cannot be considered incapacitated. Due to the fact that he remains awake and his Quirk is still combat-ready, the victor of this match… and the contestant moving on to the second round… is Tokoyami Fumikage!”

“God damn it!” I slammed my fists down on the armrests and threw myself back in frustration. “She was so close. So close!”

“Her tactics were impressive,” Ibara said, “if far more brutal than I had expected, knowing Momo-chan as we do. Kanna-chan, you are a bad influence.”

“I am not!” I protested, then glared at Bakugou when he loudly guffawed. “I’m not, I swear! You can ask Pony!”

“Pony-chan isn’t here!” Ibara sing-songed.

“Grr, fine!” I stood and turned to the left, pointing. “Tenya, back me up here! I’m not a bad influ— huh? Where’d he go?”

“Four-eyes?” Bakugou snorted. “He went with Round Face and Deku. Fuck if I care where.”

“That was real helpful,” I muttered. “Thanks a ton.” I shoved myself past Bakugou and out into the aisle.

“Oi, where you think you’re going Teddy?”

“Really Bakugou?” I rounded on him, hands on my hips. “What are you, my keeper? If you really must know, I’m off to go, what was the catch-all for telling a boy to stop prying… oh right, I need to go ‘powder my nose!’” Bakugou scowled and slumped further down while Ibara stifled a giggle. “Now, if you don’t mind?”

“Hn. Whatever…”

I looked back at Bakugou, trying to keep the perplexed expression off my face. That was more moody than angry. For Bakugou, that was odd.

“You should probably head down to the prep room soon!” I yelled over my shoulder. “You’re up after Kirishima!”

“I know, damn it!”

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Trying to find a private spot for a phone call was actually much more difficult than I’d imagined. The first few quiet places I’d found, the sheer amount of cement, bodies, and stadium above me meant I had no service, and I was too far out of range to use UA’s wi-fi. The next two locations I’d found
would have been better, but one gave me only one bar and no wi-fi, and the other gave me just barely enough wi-fi to register, but not enough to even load so much as a search engine. Definitely not enough to sustain a VoIP call.

I kept searching for a place to make the call, and after another three minutes, during which I heard Present Mic announce Kirishima and Tetsutetsu as they stepped up to the plate, an idea came to mind. Everyone likes to use their phone on the toilet, right? Wouldn’t it stand to reason that if using your phone there is so darn universal, that they’d make darn sure wi-fi was available for use? That in mind, I headed for the nearest restroom, about an eighth of the way around the hallway surrounding the arena.

“… alter my beloved baby’s cartridges, but not the overall design? A wonderful idea! I need to know! Tell me what you were thinking, now, now!”

I kept my groan to myself. Of fucking course. The one restroom I’d go to would already have somebody outside of it, and of all the other girls it could be, it was Hatsume Mei. Tensei, your wife is a wonderful woman… but her sister is absolutely unbearable right now. Alright, fine. Guess I have to go and—

“Ve have some wunderbar ideas! What do you think of chemical agents?”

… I’ve never heard that voice before. There’s also an accent there I don’t recognize. The Japanese is fairly good, but there are definite traces of some foreign language. Given that Japanese doesn’t have a ‘v’ sound, and they used that instead of a ‘w’… wait, he said ‘wunderbar’, right? Okay, that doesn’t equate to ‘subarashii’ at all, person. You may use them in the same context, but they do not translate back and forth!

“Ooh, pressurized capsules? A containment shell hard enough to survive, possibly with a weak point stripped off by the compressed air cartridge my baby uses to fire the nets? Oh, I’ll have to see if I can borrow Power Loader-sensei’s pump! Pressurize some rapidly-expanding, quick-set foam cement, have that as its own stream weapon, a high-focus nozzle at the end! Fights fires and strength-enhanced criminals!”

“And perhaps alternative modules? I wonder about capsaicin, what about a powerful topical anesthetic in the concrete foam?”

“Allergies! Hatsume Mei refuses to use anything that could cause liability! The choice cannot be clear if there is even the slightest chance of danger; it must be obvious! Hatsume Mei is reliable, Hatsume Mei is everything you want and more, but above all, Hatsume Mei, is safe and effective!”

“I believe you would do well to—”

“Sorry gotta use the bathroom sorry bye!” I squeezed past Mei and her conversation partner, some ridiculously tall, lanky blonde in a lab… coat. Wait. “You!” I rounded on him, pointing. “You were grabbing samples of stuff our Quirks left behind after the obstacle race!”

“Guilty as charged,” he chuckled. “You wouldn’t be willing to provide a sample of your bombardier beetle secretion, maybe? Such wonderfull potential, to see it scaled up at—”

“I’m just gonna go bye.” I turned around and ran into the restroom as fast as I could. I don’t know who that guy is, why he insists on wearing a lab coat around, why he’s allowed in the students and staff section, or what he wants with Mei. I just want to get away from him and make my phone call.
I pulled out my phone, checked to see if I had enough service—I did—and hit one of my speed dials. I’d had to add this one back in relatively recently, but in short order, I had my dad’s phone ringing on the other end.

He didn’t pick up on the first call. I frowned, but just called again. It rang once, twice, three times—

“Kanna-chan, I’m sorry I can’t talk now!”

“Dad?” He sounded harried, tired. His breathing was ragged, and somebody next to him was saying something. I think I heard a street name, somewhere downtown in Hosu. “Is everything okay?”

“Hero Killer’s nearby!” I froze. “We’re doing a grid search; I’m sorry, I have to go!”

“Wait!” I yelled into the phone—but it was too late. He’d already hung up. I sat down in one of the stalls and pulled up a text thread, one I hadn’t actually contributed to in a couple of weeks. I would have felt somewhat guilty about that, but I had other things on my mind right now.

‘Hero Killer in Hosu,’ I sent to Tenya. ‘My dad’s part of a grid search; have you heard anything from Tensei or your parents?’

The reply was nearly immediate.

‘Aniki called to tell me. Did your father say anything new?’

‘No,’ I replied. ‘We’ll just have to wait and see.’

‘Understood. I shall see you in the stands, Kanna-chan.’

‘Same.’ I locked my phone and left the stall, washed my hands, and pressed my ear up against the door, hoping against hope that Mei and her probably-German, maybe-Swiss paramour had left. When I didn’t hear anything, I sighed with relief, and left the restroom for the stands.

Time to go see Mom.

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“Kanna-chan!” Mom got up from her seat among the other Pro Heroes (yes, she maintains the license as a technicality, but still…) and hugged me, and I gleefully returned it. “Ooh, you made it to the second round! I’m so proud of you! And Ibara-chan as well!”

“Thanks Mom,” I said. “Wish Momo had too.”

“I wouldn’t worry about her prospects,” Mom said. “I went down to Chiyome-sensei’s office while she handled Tokoyami-san, and offered to examine Momo-chan. Aside from some moderate-to-severe contusions and a bruised coccyx, she was mostly fine. Tokoyami-san, on the other hand, had best be thankful Chiyome-sensei was there to help him!”

While we spoke, Cementoss fixed up the arena, which had been rather torn up in the middle from where Kirishima and Tetsutetsu had pummeled each other. They’d knocked each other out in a
rather vicious draw, both of them digging deep furrows into the concrete with every single blow, throw, grapple, and strike. The two of them had caused almost as much damage as Mina and I had, only theirs was concentrated in the center of the arena.

“Hey Mom?”

“What is it honey?”

“Why do you call Recovery Girl ‘sensei’?” I asked. “Principal Nedzu said she’s only an RN, not an MD.”

“What?” Mom looked perplexed. “Of course Chiyome-sensei has her MD! I had the distinct pleasure of working under her as a trauma resident for six months, and so did nine others; how could she possibly not have her doctorate?” She put a hand to her chin, deep in thought. “I would know if she’d had her license pulled, that would have been a scandal for the ages in the medical community… no, that makes no sense.”

“For the last matchup of the first round!”

Whatever we’d been about to say was cut off as Present Mic began his announcement.

“A celebrity since his middle school days, with a face only a mother could love… It’s Bakugou Katsuki of the Hero Course!”

“Wow,” I muttered. “Present Mic, that was uncalled for.”

“Kanna-chan, I really wish you had better taste in men than I did at your age,” Mom sighed.

“Mom! I do not—”

“Versus! I’m rooting for her actually… Uraraka Ochako, also of the Hero Course!”

“Okay, I’ll admit,” Mom said. “He is biased.”

“Eighth match… START!”

Uraraka charged in immediately, keeping herself low to the ground. Bakugou, as expected, brought his right arm back in a vicious hook, and I could see the light and potential gathering. When Uraraka was five feet away, he let loose, blowing Uraraka back and carving a furrow in the arena floor at the same time. The explosion threw up a cloud of dust and debris, and from here, I could barely see the dark shape flying out of the cloud. Bakugou pounced on it, throwing a vicious palm strike with his right hand—

“Uraraka threw her jacket over and sent it floating, all on the fly! What a great trick!”

I gasped involuntarily when Uraraka emerged from the cloud behind Bakugou, only to frown when she announced her presence with an inarticulate yell. Bakugou wrenched his hand backwards, releasing a steady stream of explosions to knock Uraraka back, peppering her with concrete shards as he did so… but nowhere near as many as there should have been. Something was off… and when I looked up, I saw why.

“If this keeps up, she can’t beat him.”
“Mom…”

“I mean, I can appreciate her moxie, it takes some serious guts to run headlong into an offensive like that, but still!”

“Mom—”

“She keeps charging recklessly, but this is…”

“I can’t watch this!” A pro hero in the crowd stood up and yelled down at Bakugou. “Hey! That’s not the way someone who wants to be a hero acts! If you’re so much stronger than her, just throw her out of the ring and be done with it!”

“He has a point,” Mom groused out. “I mean, this is just torturing her! Why is he—"

“Mom!” I yelled at her. “One, he’s not ‘torturing’ her, he’s showing Uraraka the respect she deserves! He could’ve blown her out instantly, but now she gets to show what she’s made of. And two, for the love of—look up!”


“Yes,” I deadpanned. “Oh.”

“Is the one who said he’s toying with her a pro?” I heard Aizawa-sensei’s voice on the loudspeakers now, the sheer amount of venom surprising. I’d never heard him talk like this, not even when he threatened expulsion. “If that’s what you’re taking away from this, then you can leave. No point in watching. Go home and start looking for a different career, because you’re in the wrong line of work.”

“H-hey!” The Pro Hero that had yelled originally. “What’re you saying!?”

“She’s come far, and he’s recognizing her strength. His caution shows that he sees her as a worthy opponent. It’s exactly because he wants to win so badly that there’s no room for carelessness or holding back.”

“Thanks Bakugou.” Down on the floor of the arena, Uraraka pulled herself to her feet, shaky, bleeding from multiple small cuts, but face set and determined. “Thanks for not dropping your guard.” Uraraka touched her fingers together.

And above Bakugou, the sky began to fall.

“I’m gonna win!” Uraraka yelled… and sealed her defeat. Because that yell was all the notice Bakugou needed to look up.

“It’s a meteor storm!” Present Mic yelled, but only after Bakugou himself noticed.

But Bakugou was undaunted. He crouched down low, pointed his hand at the sky… and let loose the largest explosion I’d ever seen him use. The pressure wave from his attack flowed over the audience, knocking Mom and me back into our seats, and reducing every last bit of rubble that had been floating overhead into nothing more than pebbles and dust.
“What an explosion! Uraraka’s secret plan just went up in smoke!”

“Right.” Bakugou gave a mad grin, and rushed forward. “Time to get serious, Uraraka!” Bakugou charged, hands at the ready. Uraraka moved to meet him, hands at the ready, and—

Uraraka fell. Bakugou pulled up short, an unreadable expression on his face, visible even from here. Midnight leapt down from the referee’s dais and over to where Uraraka lay.

“Uraraka,” she said after a brief examination, “is unable to continue.” She stood up and cracked her whip in Bakugou’s direction. “Bakugou Katsuki moves on to the second round!”

The crowd cheered, but it was far more sedate.

“Oh, poor Uraraka-chan… taken down by Bakugou in the first round.”

“He’s not helping,” I muttered darkly.

“Get it together, everyone! The first round is now over! We’ll move on to the quarterfinals after a twenty minute break. Get some refreshments, relieve yourselves, make those calls and gossip like we know you’ve been wanting to! We’ll see you back here soon!”

“You should get back to your area Kanna-chan,” Mom said. “I’m heading down to the infirmary. I’ll let you know how Uraraka is, alright?”

“Thanks Mom.” I smiled, and hugged her when I stood up. “Don’t worry, Uraraka’s a tough cookie. I know she’ll be fine.”

“Kanna-chan!” I turned back to see Mom give me a thumbs-up. “Good luck against Tokoyami! And wish Ibara-chan good luck for me!”

“I will!” I replied. “I have just the plan in mind!”

I left the section and went back into the hallways. Time to head back to the competitors’ seats… and plan.

I had a goose to cook.
She encouraged him again.

It was obvious. It was so obvious how frustrated Uraraka-chan was. And yet, she was still rooting for him. Izuku rubbed his eyes, wiping away the tears that threatened to fall. He wouldn’t let her down. He wouldn’t let her or All Might down. He’d take their encouragement, their wishes, and—

A rush of heat washed around the corner. The light of the man’s searing flames burned into his retinas, and Izuku only barely pulled himself to a quick stop before running into—and scorching himself on—the man’s burning shroud.

“You.” He pulled to a stop in front of Izuku, staring down at the short boy from his full height.

“En-Endeavor!?” Izuku exclaimed. This, this was—!

“There you are,” the second-best hero in Japan said.

“W-why are you back here?”

“I saw your fight,” Endeavor replied, pointing at Midoriya. “That’s quite the Quirk you have there; five percent, was it? Judging from how you were moving, if it scales the same way all the way to a hundred… in terms of power, it might even be on par with All Might’s Quirk.”

Izuku gulped.

“I saw your fight,” Endeavor replied, pointing at Midoriya. “That’s quite the Quirk you have there; five percent, was it? Judging from how you were moving, if it scales the same way all the way to a hundred… in terms of power, it might even be on par with All Might’s Quirk.”

Izuku gulped.

“W-what are you,” he stammered, heart pounding. “What’re you t-trying to say? N-no, I’m s-sorry Endeavor-san, I h-have to go!” He looked down and away from Endeavor as he walked around the man, thoughts racing a mile a minute. Did Endeavor know about One For All? No, that wasn’t right; even Asu—Tsu-chan had compared his Quirk to All Might’s, already, and she’d only seen the barest applications of Izuku using all one-hundred percent. He knew Endeavor was intelligent; extrapolating from five percent all the way out was something he certainly had the mental acuity to accomplish. And from the way he was talking, it was plain to see that no, he hadn’t a clue beyond the obvious similarity in how it augmented their physical abilities. But that being said, he couldn’t give any hints; if Endeavor were to find out One For All’s true nature, there was no telling just what—

“My Shouto.” Izuku stopped. “It’s his duty to surpass All Might.” Something clawed at his gut. Something cold and icy. The way Endeavor said that… his Shouto? “His match against you will prove to be quite the useful ‘proof-of-concept’. Don’t you even dare think to disgrace yourself in it like Shouto seems to be trying to.”

I will never use my bastard Father’s Quirk, Todoroki had said, I’ll reject him completely… I’ll win first place without it, and in doing so, I’ll have denied him everything he ever worked for. At the time, Izuku hadn’t quite comprehended the depths of Todoroki’s hatred for his father, the sheer loathing that consumed him. He’d been shocked by Todoroki’s interview, how whenever his father was mentioned, his face twisted into a scowl even Kacchan couldn’t compete with. Even three minutes ago, Izuku hadn’t had a clue just what could inspire somebody to hate their own father so much.
He felt like he understood now. And at the same time…

“Todoroki Enji,” he began muttering before he could stop himself. “Pro Hero: Endeavor. Number two in Japan, number eleven worldwide.”

“What are you—”

“Average number of crimes averted per month, nearly two-hundred. Criminal apprehension rate, ninety-seven percent. Villain capture rate, ninety-nine percent.” He turned now to look at Endeavor, and seeing the baffled, yet bemused expression on the man’s face, Izuku continued on. “If Todoroki-kun grows to become even half the hero you are, he’d be incredible. But he’s not there yet. None of us are.”

“Are you trying to make a point,” Endeavor growled, “or just wasting my time?”

“I’m not All Might,” Izuku said, doing his best to control the waver in his speech. “And Todoroki-kun isn’t you, either.”

“And yet, just as All Might is just another obstacle between me and the top?” Endeavor stepped forward, the flames on his body flaring. “You are but another stepping stone on Shouto’s path.”

Izuku clenched his fist to hide the tremble. He didn’t… what else was he supposed to say?

“I have to go!” He turned to walk away, but he stopped just before the corner. “Endeavor-san.”

“Hm?”

Izuku turned back to look at the Inferno Hero.

“Todoroki-kun is trying to walk a different path than you do. I think you should be helping him find his own way, not trying to force him to follow yours.”

“How I choose to prepare Shouto for his destiny,” Endeavor began, “is not for you to—”

A rush of wind passed over the hallway, and Endeavor gave the smallest gasp of surprise.

“Ah, Midoriya-shounen!” In a flash, All Might appeared beside Endeavor, placing a hand on one of the few flame-free spots on the other man’s shoulder. “I was worried when you hadn’t made it to the tunnels yet, but I see you’ve merely met my good friend, Endeavor!”

“Of all the times for you to show.” Endeavor pulled away from All Might, turning to leave. “Perhaps it would be for the best if he hadn’t arrived, though. He doesn’t stand a chance against my Shouto.”

“That is for the arena to decide!” All Might boomed, smile firmly back in place. “And in fact, I believe you’ve been holding up Midoriya-shounen from his destination, Endeavor.” He leaned in, eyes gleaming in the shadows of his brow. “So then, why don’t we leave him be, hm?”

“… I’ll be watching.” Endeavor stomped off, greatly raising the temperature in the hallway as one final act of spite. Izuku collapsed to the ground, breathing hard. Why had he?… What had brought that on? Why had he said that?

Why had he said that!?
“Midoriya-shounen!” All Might exclaimed.

“Y-yes!”

“This is your time to shine!” All Might favored him with a thumbs-up, the hallways’ lights gleaming off of his brilliant smile. “Keep your wits about you, and you can prevail!”

“T-thank you, All Might!” He returned the man’s smile as best he could, and shaky though it was, Izuku could feel his spirits lifting already.

“Now, the arena awaits!” All Might turned him around and gave Izuku a pat on the back to get him moving. He didn’t look back at All Might again, eyes fixed firmly on the way in front of him.

Todoroki awaited him… and Izuku was going to give him everything he had.

* * * * *

“Thanks for waiting everybody! The first fight of the second round is a BIG MATCH!”

Shouto walked up to the center of the arena, drowning out Present Mic’s voice. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his father’s ever-present flames… though something was different. They burned higher, more erratically. Something had annoyed or troubled him, and his fire’s dance meant that whatever it was, it had well and truly stuck in his craw.

If Shouto knew who it was, he’d give them a great big thanks, and ask them to do it again.

“Both of these competitors have won top marks in this festival so far, but there’s only room for ONE of these greats in the ring! The man who won a huge victory in the first round and literally left the audience frozen! From the Hero Course, it’s Todoroki Shouto! Opposite him, this guy always has something different up his sleeve! What could he have planned for us this time!? From the Hero Course, it’s Midoriya Izuku!”

“So you came?” Shouto asked his opponent. Across from him, Midoriya furrowed his brow, shifted his weight, and nodded. “Good. No matter what you are to All Might, I will rise above you with just my right side.”

“I can’t lose either,” Midoriya replied. “I have to live up to the hopes of everyone who supported me. And that means I’ll beat you, too!”

“At this year’s sports festival, both have shown top-class performances! It’s like two great rivals fighting against each other! Now!” Midoriya fell into an odd, front-leaning ready stance, and Shouto took that as his cue, right foot forward, hand facing out.

It’ll be dangerous to let him in close, Shouto thought. But he can’t be allowed to trade that boost of his for the overwhelming power… A chill sprung up from deep within his bones. Shouto exhaled an icy mist, and steeled himself. The instant we begin—

“Midoriya! Versus! Todoroki! STAAAART!”
Shouto unleashed a line of ice from his right foot, spiking straight for Midoriya. He forwent area, choosing instead to prioritize speed. He couldn’t let Midoriya get in close; Shouto had seen already what ‘four percent’ could do, and with the massive change from a single percentage uptick to five during the cavalry battle—!

“Midoriya jukes right! Todoroki’s first strike misses!”

No! Shouto turned to face Midoriya, moving his vulnerable left side away from his opponent’s advance. A line of ice spread from the jagged spikes already dividing the arena in two, but Midoriya tilted forward and poured on the speed, arms pumping wide to help him steer and balance. Shouto narrowed his eyes; Midoriya was close now. One more barrage from this range, and—

“Uptick,” he heard, “six percent!”

What!?

The light of Midoriya’s internal furnace flared for an instant, and all of a sudden he was so much faster. The ice Shouto had launched at him went wide, there wasn’t enough time to react—

“Texas… Smash!”

The inside of Shouto’s cheek split against his teeth as Midoriya’s augmented right fist careened into the left side of his face, the hot taste of blood filling his mouth. He didn’t get even the slightest moment’s respite though, because Midoriya wasn’t done. He let the follow-through from his punch carry him into a full one-eighty turn, and with his right hand on his left, finished the turn by burying his left elbow into Shouto’s diaphragm. Shouto buckled, an acrid taste rising into his mouth as his stomach tried to rebel against him, but he kept his left hand out and away while his right lowered, feeling and reaching for the ice—

Midoriya’s hands closed around his left arm. Shouto’s eyes shot wide and he looked to see himself buckled over Midoriya’s shoulder, the other boy’s side close, so close. He reached with his right, and the ice grew, rising onto Midoriya’s right leg, slowly—

“Haaaaaaaah!”

Shouto gasped when his feet left the ground, and in a fit of deja-vu, he knew what was coming. His back and coccyx landed hard on the rough, uneven ground left by his ice, and the hasty breath he’d sucked in burst from his lungs in an instant. He could hear what little ice he’d managed to plant on Midoriya break away, tinkling on the floor like glass, and he flexed his power to hastily erect a protective barrier around himself.

“Midoriya lands not one, not two, but THREE solid hits on Todoroki! But it seems Todoroki’s walled himself off for the moment; can he fight from behind that barrier!? Will it be enough to stop Midoriya!? I’m on the edge of my seat here folks!”

Shouto allowed himself only a few seconds to get his breathing back under control. It was definitely one of the harder blows he’d received, but his father had dealt out worse than that over the years. But for that kind of power to come from Midoriya, and the sudden increase from ‘five percent’ to six…
He had to rethink his entire battle strategy. He couldn’t trap Midoriya with precision strikes, not when he moved at *that* speed. He shivered once, and grimaced. It was tempting to use his left side to ease the chill already threatening to envelop his right, exacerbated as it was by Midoriya’s attack… but no. He’d made himself a promise. Shouto turned to the side and spat out the blood from his cheek, probing the cut with his tongue. Freezing it over could do more harm than good… he’d just have to protect his head better.

Shouto raised a platform of ice beneath him, carrying him out from the protection he’d crafted for himself, and saw that Midoriya had taken the time to clear the ice he’d left behind before retreating once more to the far end of the arena. It was a sound tactic; the speed advantage was in Midoriya’s favor, and they both knew it.

“You caught me by surprise there,” he spoke loudly. “I hope you remember the feel of your fist hitting my face.”

Around Shouto, the ice rose higher, rumbling and cracking as it threatened to burst.

“Because it *won’t* be happening again.”

The ice beneath his feet *exploded* outwards. He hadn’t wanted to do a repeat of his fight against Sero, but well…

As his glacier rose up to crash down atop Midoriya, Shouto couldn’t help but consider it a sign of professional respect.

* * * * *

“That’s the same throw he used on me,” Bakugou murmured. “Damn Deku… don’t fix what ain’t broke, huh?”

“I’m not so sure about that,” I said, pointing at Midoriya. “Right hand and left elbow.” Even as I pointed it out, the light emanating from Midoriya dimmed slightly, and his breathing seemed to ease just a bit, and we watched as he set to work clearing the ice left behind from Todoroki’s opening salvo. Here and there though, you could see that his offensive had cost him just a bit: blood ran down the fingers of Midoriya’s right hand, starting at his knuckles, and deep purple bruising had already started to form at his left elbow.

“I mean, sure!” Kaminari’s voice came from behind us, and when I turned to look, he’d edged yet another seat closer to Ibara. Either she hadn’t noticed, or was very good at pretending; I was guessing the latter option. “He looks a bit battered, sure, but I’d *much* rather be Midoriya right now than Todoroki!”

“Hey, Todoroki’s coming out!” Sero exclaimed. We all looked closer, and just as Sero said, Todoroki came back into view, riding high atop a platform of ice. I heard him saying something, but the crackling of ice was loud enough to drown out whatever his words were. “Oh *shit*, here it comes!”

“Here comes *what*, soy-sauce face!?” Bakugou snarled.
“That!” He pointed.

We all looked to the ice surrounding Todoroki, and in an instant, it burst. An absolutely massive wall of ice spread across the ground of the arena, the somewhat lackluster speed completely outweighed by the sheer quantity of ice barreling down on Midoriya. But for all that, he didn’t balk. Instead, Midoriya calmly set his stance, raised his left arm, and supported it with his right the way Bakugou did when firing off one of his larger explosions.

“He’s—”

Midoriya flicked one finger. Even over the crackling rush of the ice, we all heard the gunshot-like crack that echoed from his hand, and the sudden flinch that passed over his face. An immense rush of raw force impacted Todoroki’s glacier, shattering the base into pieces and blowing Todoroki off of his frozen pedestal, a barricade of ice growing behind him the only reason he remained within the ring.

The rest of the glacier tumbled forward, the momentum of its growth still present as it fell towards the audience.

“Ah! Todoroki’s attack—”

A white-blue flame streamed from beneath the falling glacier, and where it hit, the ice sublimated. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars… the ice didn’t even get a chance to melt. It passed straight from solid to vapor.

“Whoa, that’s Endeavor!” Kirishima pointed, and we all looked to where the Number Two Hero stood, a steady stream of fire streaming from his hands and into the ice that nearly threatened the audience. I couldn’t help but boggle at the heat he must have been producing. Melting ice with such high energy that it jumps straight to gaseous form? Just how much power did Endeavor have!?

“Thank you Endeavor! Midnight, Principal Nedzu, are you okay down there!?”

“Just fine!” Midnight gave a thumbs-up, and I did a double-take. She was wearing a parka. Somehow, in the minute since the match began, she’d secured herself a parka. And beside her, Nedzu wore his own parka while sipping from a thermos. Where did she get the parka? Where did he get the thermos? No, no, don’t want to know, forget about it Kanna, that way lay—

“Midoriya stopped the same attack that won Todoroki advancement to this round in the first place! Sorry Todoroki-kun, it doesn’t look like that’s going to work again!”

Todoroki pushed himself off of the ice wall he’d crafted for himself and lowered his stance slightly. The ice in front of him expanded and spread upward, and Todoroki leapt from his ice walkway to a pillar he’d fashioned for himself, ten meters above the arena floor. He kneeled atop the ice pillar, and it rumbled menacingly.

“He’s gonna do it again!” Sero marveled.

“Oi, Deku! Do something you damn nerd!” Bakugou yelled.

And Midoriya did. He sprung into action, the light of One For All pulsing red before dimming into green sparks. We watched as he rushed to Todoroki’s pillar, clasped his hands together, and brought them around for a hammer strike.
“Dakota SMAAASH!”

Where Midoriya struck the pillar, that section of its base might as well have disappeared, and the entire thing began to lurch dangerously sideways. Midoriya recoiled, the outside and little fingers of his hands visibly swelling and bleeding, and I could see splotchy, darkened bruising developing along the length of either arm. His shoulders seemed to be twitching with visible muscle fatigue, and as we saw, that gave Todoroki an opening. Todoroki hadn’t just sat there as his pillar crumbled. No, he built an ice slide for himself and spiraled downward, landing atop Midoriya, his own right hand coming down hard on Midoriya’s shoulder. Midoriya staggered under the sudden weight, and where Todoroki touched, ice spread along Midoriya’s body.

“And Todoroki has—no, wait!”

Midoriya brought his left hand over the back of his head, and with yet another gunshot-like crack as a second finger crumbled beneath the strain, Todoroki flew up and away from Midoriya. The force carried Todoroki outside of the arena proper, but a curving wall of ice sprung up behind Todoroki, guiding him right back into the playing field without ever touching the ground. Midoriya pushed himself upright, right hand clutching the broken middle and ring fingers of his left, glaring hard at Todoroki and…

And smiling.

Midoriya had noticed something in that instant, something absolutely crucial to understanding either Todoroki’s strategy or how his Quirk worked. He said something, and Todoroki grimaced, but damn if I could tell what it was. Todoroki launched another offensive, running up the ice to close in on Midoriya, who glowed with power as he backed away. It wasn’t until Todoroki used his ice to slide back down and build some speed for another hit that Midoriya pushed off the ground, striking Todoroki with his right elbow before pushing off of the ice, backing away in that brief instant that Todoroki had been dazed. Even still, Todoroki had managed to get some more ice onto Midoriya, and the smaller boy visibly shivered as he broke the ice away while backpedaling, strategically leaving the ice on his broken fingers as a form of splint.

“Did Midoriya-san just… let Todoroki-san spread some ice on him?” Ibara asked. “Look at his hand.”

“Tch, leave it to Deku to use your own fucking Quirk against you, that bastard.”

I frowned. That… that was clever. Like it was something he’d thought of before. It seemed as though Midoriya went into the fight assuming he’d have to sacrifice a few fingers to fend off Todoroki’s larger offensives, and altered his approach accordingly in order to—

“Tenya?” I asked.

“What is it, Kanna-chan?” Tenya didn’t look away from the arena, where Todoroki had actually closed in on Midoriya, strategically using sudden spikes of ice in conjunction with what looked like Tai Chi to try and corral the smaller boy, driving him towards some of the ice Midoriya had yet to clear away.

“You have Midoriya’s notebook, right? The one he’s always writing in?”

“Ah, I-I do!” Uraraka spoke up. “B-but I can’t let you see it! You might still—”
“I’m not asking to look at it!” I snapped. “Just—Uraraka, you’re out already. Just take a quick look, and tell us: does he have a plan?”

“Kanna-chan,” Tenya broke in. “This is Midoriya-kun. Of course he has a plan.” His confident smile wavered, turning sheepish. “I merely have yet to discern it myself! But I am certain of a plan’s existence!”

“You really haven’t seen it yet?” Bakugou groused. “Fucking idiots…”

“Would you care to enlighten us, o wise king of explosions?” I bit back, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. Bakugou gave me a look, and I sighed. “Please?” I asked, trying to inject some sincerity into my voice.

“… fine.” He tapped me on the right arm and pointed to the arena. “Watch Half-n-Half’s arm after he freezes shit.”

“Right…” I muttered, leaning in to try and get a closer look. I blinked a moment, and smacked a palm to my forehead; duh! A green glow built up around the edges of my vision, and then everything sharpened as the falcon totem took hold.

Todoroki threw a wide, short wall of ice in front of him to try and keep Midoriya away, but the smaller boy jumped over the wall. I’d expected Todoroki to take the opportunity and raise it higher to catch Midoriya, but by the time the ice responded, Midoriya had already swung with a vicious haymaker to Todoroki’s right side, shattering the ice that had built up along his arm and flank.

“The ice,” I whispered. “If he’s not using his left, he can’t keep himself warm, can he?”

“That’s Deku’s game,” Bakugou replied. “Even when we were runts, you couldn’t keep that fucker down. Nobody could.” Todoroki tried to back away, throwing ice along the ground to slick it up, but Midoriya pushed forward and closed the distance. He grabbed Todoroki’s left arm, wheeling the other boy into yet another throw. Todoroki hit the ground, and the instant he placed his hand on the ground, another monstrous wall of ice leapt up to envelop Midoriya.

But compared to the last two times, it was slow. So, so slow.

Midoriya’s full-power finger flick to destroy the wall was almost lazy. He didn’t set his stance, bring his other arm up for support, or anything. His left arm rocketed back from the recoil, but he didn’t so much as blink at what must have hurt like hell. There was so much adrenaline rushing through Midoriya’s system right now; I could probably stab him in the gut and he wouldn’t even notice.

Midoriya was hurting; anyone with eyes could see that. Blood ran down both arms, both from where the ice had nicked and cut him and where the strain of One For All proved too much for his body. Swelling and contusions spread up and down both arms, and I could see the first traces of them peeking up beneath his shirt collar. His torso was probably a messy, sickly-looking mess of bruised tissue, and his left shoulder had to be aching something fierce from the recoil of his finger shots.

But opposite Midoriya, ice flaking off his body as he slowly, painstakingly pulled himself to his feet, Todoroki was clearly in far worse shape. His body was wracked by shivers, every breath coming out in an icy cloud. The bridge of his nose and the edge of his jaw had both split open, bleeding and staining his collar red, and his right shoulder hung deliberately loose, his body tilted forward as if to tax the joint as little as possible. The skin along his right side, as well as his lips, were
turning blue from the cold he’d subjected himself to, and a frosted-over, deep-blue residue ran up his right bicep to trail up his neck and along his cheek.

Midoriya readied himself to charge… and then he stopped. He let himself relax somewhat, pulling his body into a more centered stance, directly facing Todoroki and offering what had to be the largest target yet.

From here, I could see his lips moving, but I couldn’t hear what he said. The two exchanged words, and Midoriya seemed to grow angry by the answer. He rushed forward, and though I could see Todoroki trying to bring his ice to bear, nothing happened. The blue frost spread over the entirety of his right arm, breaking away in a solid layer of ice when Midoriya’s simple, reckless straight punch hit him in the stomach. Todoroki tumbled away, barely able to pull himself partly upright.

Midoriya leveled a fist in his direction.

“It’s your power, not his!” Midoriya stamped his foot, and the ground buckled beneath his strength. “So take it, and come at me with everything you’ve got!”

The arena fell silent. And then…

And then Todoroki burned.

* * * * *

Four weeks ago, if somebody had asked Aizawa Shota which of these two students would win, he wouldn’t have even bothered to answer. It was so clearly obvious to anyone with a lick of sense that Todoroki Shouto stood far above Midoriya Izuku and his uncontrolled, self-destructive Quirk.

But now… now he wasn’t so certain.

That spark of potential he’d seen in Midoriya, the same glimmer of hope that had kept him from expelling the boy on the spot? Midoriya had taken that spark, and helped it grow into a great, brilliant inferno. In Aizawa Shota’s mind, the only one of his students that stood a chance at knocking Todoroki down from his pedestal and forcing the boy’s fire side to the fore was Bakugou Katsuki, who displayed raw ability and deep knowledge of his Quirk that already surpassed large swathes of the Pro Hero community. And yet…

And yet, here Midoriya was, choosing to sacrifice a third finger to the overwhelming force his Quirk could unleash. Aizawa looked at Todoroki, at how gingerly the boy pulled himself up. To his eyes, Todoroki’s most recent attempt at trapping Midoriya in the same glacial prison that had entombed Sero just might have been the last one he had in him.

Midoriya pulled himself up… and then he paused. Aizawa’s earpiece crackled as the microphones positioned around the stands picked up what was being said, transmitting it directly to himself, Present Mic, Midnight, Cementoss, and Principal Nedzu.

“Why are you holding back?” The microphones transferred Midoriya’s words to Aizawa’s ears, and he used the fingers of his right hand to cover his ear, prevent anything from interfering with the sound. “I know there’s no way I can really know your circumstances Todoroki-kun, or your resolve.
Here and now, everyone else is giving it everything they can!”

Midoriya’s grimace was visible even from up here.

“All of us want to be great heroes, to reach for the top! But for you to stand there and say you aim to become number one without giving it your all, just to spite your father…”

The sound of Midoriya’s teeth grinding against each other was loud enough that Aizawa could practically feel it in his bones.

“Right now, I think you should stop screwing around!”

“… shut up.” Todoroki shifted with his reply, but even from here, Aizawa could tell he’d taxed himself overmuch. The frost spread along his body, rooting him in place.

“That’s why… that’s why I will win!” Midoriya’s straight punch, the kind that was so wide-open and full of holes that Todoroki could—no, should have won right then and there, struck him hard in the gut. Todoroki careened backwards, barely able to pull himself to a stop inside the arena as Midoriya finished his follow through. “I’ll surpass you!”

“… refuse… old man’s—” The microphones couldn’t quite capture Todoroki’s words as he pushed himself upright. But Midoriya had heard them loud and clear.

“It’s your power, not his!” The ground crumbled beneath Midoriya’s foot, and Aizawa barely caught the tremor in his leg. “So take it, and come at me with everything you’ve got!”

The arena fell silent. Beside him, Present Mic opened his mouth to comment. But then…

But then, Todoroki erupted.

“Th-this, this is—!” Present Mic’s voice resounded through the arena. Aizawa’s gaze softened. Something rose within him, some feeling burbling up from the hardened pit of cynicism that he’d cultivated through the years.

“Even though you want to win,” Todoroki’s voice managed to carry over the roar of his flames. “Damn it… helping your enemy like this? Which one of us is screwing around now, Midoriya!?!” The iced shell over Todoroki’s right half evaporated, scorched away by the unleashed heat of his left. “I… I want to be a hero too, damn it!”

In that moment, Aizawa Shota felt pure, unbridled pride.

The inferno burned brighter, wrapping around Todoroki and spreading through the arena, scorching the concrete and searing away what ice remained as it did. An impossibly bright flicker from below caught Aizawa’s attention, and Endeavor flared blue-white, an expression of pure ecstasy contorting his features.

“SHOUTO!!!!”

“Wh-what the?” Present Mic murmured over the loudspeakers.

“Have you finally accepted yourself?!” Endeavor stomped down the steps, partly melting the concrete as he went, though so great was his control that the heat of his passing didn’t so much as
slightly trouble the audience members around him. “That’s it! Good! It all starts from here for you! With my blood, you will surpass me… You will fulfill my, OUR destiny!!”


But Aizawa knew better. From the sudden shake of Todoroki’s shoulders, he knew what it meant to have his father say that. Despite all that this moment meant to Todoroki Shouto, everything that had culminated in this one fight, Endeavor still loomed as a shadow over him. With the briefest flash of crimson, unnoticed by any save perhaps Present Mic next to him, Aizawa briefly erased Endeavor’s Quirk. The white-blue flames he’d surrounded himself with dissipated, and an instant later normal, cooler flames took their place. Endeavor obviously noted what had happened, and directed his glare to the announcer’s box, which Aizawa returned with another infinitesimal flash of Erasure.

The message was clear: you may be his father, but this is his moment. Endeavor merely crossed his arms and returned to watching the match.

Midoriya burned with his Quirk’s power, and in an instant, he lurched forward, using the same speed he’d brought out earlier to break through Todoroki’s initial offensive. The first time, Midoriya had managed to dodge the ice thrown his way. The first time, he’d been able to pass safely on the right. Again, Todoroki struck with his ice, sending it spiking towards Midoriya, and again, Midoriya dodged to the right.

But this time, Midoriya threw himself straight up against a jet of fire, only barely managing to lurch his body down and pass mostly beneath it. His right forearm danced along the outside of the lancing inferno, and a brief cry of pain followed before Midoriya pushed himself back upright. He continued on his path, and Todoroki slammed his left hand on the ground, a burning nova spreading from his location. A two meter high wall of fire impeded Midoriya’s progress, and though he again leapt over it, he landed directly on a sharp outcropping of ice Todoroki had prepared, which almost instantly began to grow over his foot.

Midoriya pulled himself in, striking the ice restraining him with a hammer blow to shatter it, and he pushed off of what remained to finally come within range of Todoroki. Green lightning arced over Midoriya as he glowed brighter, and with his face screwed up in determination, reached into Todoroki’s inferno to grasp the boy’s left arm.

“Even through the fire and the flames, Midoriya refuses to back down! What’s he going to do next!?”

With a cry of both agony and effort, Midoriya sparked brighter, and with a great effort he ripped Todoroki from the ice anchoring his right side and threw him skyward. Todoroki righted himself immediately, but Midoriya already had his left hand at the ready, the light of his Quirk emanating almost blindingly from his forefinger and thumb as he aimed up at his airborne foe.

“Canaveral… SMAAASH!”

The recoil carried Midoriya down into the concrete, cratering it partly beneath him. The pressure from his attack slammed into Todoroki, sending him flying higher and farther out of the arena proper. Aizawa could see multiple minuscule jets spurt from his fire side, and what looked to be an air foil or wing-shaped structure from his right side, and right as Midoriya pulled himself up, Todoroki landed back down in the arena.

“Todoroki won’t go away, and Midoriya won’t give in!”
The two contestants stood opposite each other, Midoriya’s power surging in emerald sparks about his person, and Todoroki holding himself resolute, ice growing up along his left arm and out into some blunt, battering construct.

“This has gone on long enough,” Todoroki said, looking at Midoriya ahead of him. “I’m going to end this now, Midoriya. If you try to fight it… don’t you blame me for what happens next.”

Todoroki crouched down, right arm encased in deep blue, glacial ice in front of him, and the stream of fire tightening behind him. Opposite, Midoriya’s body burst with light, dying down and concentrating on his left leg. The power streamed from him, tearing away the cloth of his track pants and fraying the shoes he wore.

And above it all, Aizawa’s eyes widened. He analyzed the situation, and made a snap judgment call.

“Cementoss, Midnight!” He yelled into his earpiece. “If I erase Todoroki’s Quirk, he won’t be protected from its aftereffects! But if I only stop Midoriya, he won’t be able to protect himself! You have to end the match! Now!”

“Midnight!” Cementoss roared, the concrete beneath him surging forward in a stone river. “Sleep gas!”

“IT won’t travel!” She quailed. “Todoroki’s creating too much of an air current! You have to hurry!”

Midoriya’s foot came down, and with a shove that destroyed the entire half of the arena he’d stood on, he surged forward, right arm arcing with uncontrollable force and fist trembling with unmatched might.

“I’ll give you everything I have!” He roared. “Come at me with all you’ve got!”

Fire surged from Todoroki’s right side, tightening into a jet. The lightest of taps was all it took to send him airborne, and with more ice arcing from his frozen battering ram, Todoroki rocketed himself to meet his foe.

“Midoriya… thank you.”

The two raced toward each other.

Slab after slab of concrete rose up to stop them.

Midoriya and Todoroki struck.

* * * * *

“Holy shit!”

The wind from Midoriya’s and Todoroki’s final clash rolled over us, and it was only swift action from Ibara and her vines that kept everyone anchored as the pressure wave threatened to throw us up and out of our seats.
“Man, seriously!?” Kaminari gasped out. “That, that was—”

“What happened!?” Momo cried, one hand in front of her eyes to try to keep the dust out.

All around us, the rest of the audience held themselves tight as the aftermath of Todoroki and Midoriya’s final offensive slowly petered out. The audience was almost dead silent in the wake of this monstrous show. How were any of us supposed to respond to that!? It was… it was ridiculous!

I could hear Bakugou’s teeth grinding next to me, and his fists clenched the armrests so tightly they creaked under the pressure.

“What was that just now?…” Present Mic’s voice seemed oddly distant from the microphone, and there was an odd echo to it, as though he’d used his Quirk to say it out loud in the broadcaster’s booth and have it carry enough so we could hear. “1-A, what the heck is up with your class, huh!?"

“The air that had been thoroughly cooled by Todoroki’s ice,” Aizawa-sensei’s cool, level voice explained, “was rapidly heated, and expanded as a result.”

“That’s what created this explosion?…” Present Mic asked, aghast. “Just how hot WAS that!? Jeeze, I can’t see a thing! Hey, Midnight, Principal! Who won the match!?"

Just outside the dust cloud, we could see Midnight pull herself to her feet, rubbing the back of her head where she seemed to have cracked it against the ground. Moments later, the dust cloud began to fade, and we could finally see what it hid.

On one side of the arena, Midoriya lay against the far wall, crumbling over sideways onto the ground before our eyes.

And on the other side, Todoroki slumped backward down the other far wall, possibly just as unconscious.

“No fucking way,” Bakugou whispered.

“M-Midoriya and Todoroki are out of bounds!” Midnight announced. “The first match of the second round… ends with a tie!”

And the crowd went wild.

“How?” I stammered. “How do we match that?” I turned to Bakugou, who still stared at the scene before him with wide eyes. “How the hell are we supposed to match them, huh!?"

“We don’t,” he replied. “I don’t even know if I can match that so easily. But we don’t have to.”

He turned to me, face solemn.

“Unless your Quirk’s hiding some shit, you can’t even hope to match it. So you don’t try.”

“So I just give up?” I whispered. "Is that w-what you're saying?"

“No!” He yelled, grabbing me by the shoulders and shaking. “No Kanna! You don’t give up!” He pointed out at the arena floor, where the medical bots were lifting Todoroki and Midoriya onto
stretcher. “If they try to beat you with strength, you *change the fucking rules*, you got that!?”

“B-Bakugou—”

“Urgh!” He pushed himself to his feet and made for the hallway. “Be right fucking back.”

“I-I…” I trailed off.

“W-we’ll take a ten minute break before the next match, folks! I know I need it…”

I felt a soft hand on my left shoulder, and looked to see Ibara trying her best to smile at me. On the opposite end of the aisle, Tenya stood, face resolute with shoulders and arms back, fists clenched by his waist.

“We’re up next,” Ibara said. “I won’t ask you to wish one of us luck over the other, so…” She fell silent.


“All right everyone, get yourselves back under control! We’ve still got three more matches in the second round, so prepare yourselves for some more crazy fights!”
“Of all the boneheaded, stubborn, reckless children to come through my infirmary in my many years of practice, you, Midoriya Izuku, may be the worst!”

Next to his pupil, Yagi Toshinori quailed, looking on as Midoriya’s left leg and and the fingers of his left hand rapidly healed, drawing a great deal of energy in the process. The IV inserted into Midoriya’s left arm provided much-needed fluids and electrolytes, and Toshinori felt himself shudder slightly as he looked at the bag. Those things were the bane of his existence for what he felt was an overly long period five years ago, though he would never say he didn’t appreciate it.

“Did you even realize that the two of you could have killed each other with that final bit there? No, of course not, children have no concept of just how dangerous their powers can be. I will give credit where it is due, however; this is the first time I’ve had to tend to you in two weeks now.” Recovery Girl looked to Toshinori, who reflexively tensed up beneath her gaze. “I’m not sure what you did, but it’s a good start.”

“T-thank you,” he stammered out. “Ah, it was mostly Midoriya-shounen’s work however. I merely gave him a small hint, and he took it from there.”

“E-excuse me, Recovery Girl-sensei?…” Recovery Girl looked to Midoriya, who’d remained silent as the two spoke. “I, I don’t want to sound presumptuous but—”

“Will you be able to continue on?” She finished for him. Midoriya nodded. “That depends entirely on yourself.”

“Huh?”

Recovery Girl pointed to Midoriya’s still-broken right arm, and the nasty burns trailing up from his right hand.

“If I heal you enough to continue, I will have to neglect that hand of yours. Honestly child, you grabbed what was essentially an open flame with your unprotected hand. It may not have been for long, but the damage was done, and now you have to make a choice.” She looked Midoriya in the eyes, even removing the pale pink visor from over her own. “This damage can be repaired, rest assured, but if you choose to wait on a full recovery and continue on in the tournament, the process will be far more painful. Or I can heal it now, and simply set your arm in a cast and leave it until you have enough stamina for that as well, but you will have to withdraw.”

“I-I see…” Midoriya looked down. Toshinori felt something tug on his heartstrings.

“Midoriya-shounen,” he began, voice uncertain. “I know that this tournament means a lot to you, but there is more than one way to ‘win’ here. And after your performance out there—” Toshinori coughed, blood spurting from between his teeth. A handkerchief came from his pocket to wipe it away, and he cleared his throat. “After what you have already done, I do not believe you have anything left to prove.”

“All Might…”
“I…” He leaned in close to Midoriya, taking the boy’s healed hand with his own. “When the Sports Festival began, I said that this was your chance to truly show everyone what you were made of, to announce yourself to the world. You… I am so, so proud of you.”

He sniffed, using his handkerchief to dab away the tears threatening to fall.

“Not a single doubt remains. Midoriya-shounen… you have arrived.”

* * * * *

I spent a few minutes ruminating on Bakugou’s words. Damn him, but he had a point. Against raw power of that caliber, there was absolutely no chance that I could pull out a similar performance. Midoriya shattered glaciers, and with one finger. Todoroki was one of the more terrifying sources of raw elemental destruction I’d ever seen, and if he ever lost his shit, it’s possible a whole city could disappear before he ran out of steam. I can’t match that. I mean, Bakugou might be able to, and given enough time Momo could as well, but…

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tokoyami creep out of his corner and out of the stands. Shit, I nearly forgot; he and I were up right after Ibara and Tenya, weren’t we? I got up and headed for the aisle, pulled out my phone, and fired off a text message to my mother to meet me at the prep room.

Bakugou’s words had merit. After the crazy clash that was Midoriya and Todoroki, I’d have to pull out something completely different to be noticed. Those two had a monopoly on using overwhelming force, so I had to try a different approach. Power is nothing special, not after this. But panache? Style?

That, I think I could handle.

I opened the door to the prep room and saw Ibara there, sitting at the table with her rosary in hand. She finished up a prayer and gestured to what I think are the stations of the cross, then stood up and smiled at me.

“Kanna-chan. Here to prepare for your bout with Tokoyami-san?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Sorry, I won’t be able to watch yours live. It’s recording at home though, so I can watch it then, alright?”

“It’s no worry,” she said, voice placating. “I wish you the best of luck in your match.”

“God be with you,” I said, and she stopped. “T-that was okay for me to say, right? I mean, I’m not Catholic or even monotheistic, so—”

Ibara turned around and gave me a hug. I squeaked my surprise before hugging her back, more out of reflex than anything.

“I know not what I did to deserve such friends as you all,” Ibara whispered. “But I thank God every day for bringing us together.” She let go and pulled away, favoring me with a serene smile. “May God be with you as well, Kanna-chan.”
“Y-yeah.”

She turned to open the door, and in the doorway stood my mother, a slightly bemused expression as her hand hovered where the doorknob had been an instant before.

“A-ah, Yaseiki-san!”

“Kimiko is okay Ibara-chan, I told you that already!” Mom chided, voice light. “Off to your match?” Ibara nodded, and Mom smiled. “Good luck! Show Tenya-kun what for!”

“I will!” Ibara left, practically skipping as she traveled down the hallway, and when the door closed Mom turned towards me, expression serious.

“Before you ask,” she held up a hand, “Midoriya-san and Todoroki-san are fine. Todoroki-san will need some caps on his bottom teeth, and Shuzenji-sensei had to set Midoriya-san’s left leg and fingers before fixing them, but they will both make a full recovery.”

“Oh, good!” I flopped down into the chair, and Mom took the other one opposite me at the little folding table. “So, I had a couple ideas, right?”

“For your match,” Mom nodded. “What did you have in mind?” I smiled, and told Mom.

The widening smile on her face, and the rather minor input she provided, was enough to tell me that I was onto something good.

* * * * *

He’d only just gotten enough water from the fountain to fill his other two-liter bottle when the noise hit him.

It was faint, to be sure, but he wasn’t sensing it just with his ears. The sound drilled into his skull, bounced around in his eyes, his teeth, his sinuses… there was no direction to it, no impetus behind the sound. It was merely noise for the sake of being loud.

With a growl, he poured out a quarter of the water bottle over his head, staving off the midday heat for another little bit as he tromped back to the stands.

“What,” he ground out as he returned to his seat, “is making that noise!?”

“Huh?” Another one of the Pro Heroes nearby turned to look, his baffled expression enough to prove that he wasn’t simply taking the piss. “I don’t hear anything; what, you imagining stuff now?”

The man’s eyes looked down to the pair of two-liter bottles in his massive hands, the plastic crinkling in his grip. “Sure you’re not just hearing things? Dehydration can make you hallucinate, you know.”

“Hm…” He sat down, eyes scanning the match playing out below, searching for the source of that infernal din. It was obnoxious, ear-piercing, and—

His eyes widened. A hand reached into his pocket, withdrawing the simple flip-phone in a waterproof case, and called his first speed-dial.

“I need you to request the paperwork for offering an internship to one of UA’s students,” he
articulated slowly, making sure to enunciate every word clearly, then waited for the incredulous reply to pass. “Yes, I am thinking clearly! Trust me, you’re not here. You may be watching the same match, but you’re not hearing what I am.” The disbelief continued on, but more docile. “I’m certain.” He looked down at the field, unable to keep the gleam out of his eyes.

“Yes. This one will go far, even with just a week’s worth of extra guidance.”

* * * * *

“It’s time for the third match of the second round, folks!”

The audience cheered as Tokoyami and I stepped up the stage. This may sound weird, but even though I technically couldn’t sense anything more than the impact, the concrete felt weird without horseshoes on my hooves. And there wasn’t quite the same sound, either. It was more… I guess hollow?

“What magnificent monsters will she manifest from her menagerie! From the Hero Course, it’s Yaseiki Kanna!” The crowd went wild, and I tried to suppress the blush as best I could. Points to Present Mic for the alliterative appeal, but my animals are not monsters damn it! “Versus! Quoth the raven, nevermore! From the Hero Course, it’s Tokoyami Fumikage!”

The two of us faced off, falling into a ready stance. An inky puddle blossomed in the center of Tokoyami’s torso, and I could see a pair of eyes blinking out from it. My tail twitched behind me anxiously, and I had my fingers splayed, arms held out low by my sides.

“Second round, third match! STAAAAART!!”

I called my Quirk instantly, flipping through my body as quickly as I could; my throat engorged, the skin growing slick and rubbery, bright white at my jaw and pitch-black at the sides and back. I set things in motion, then focused back on the rest of my planned morphs; I had an order to get through before Tokoyami’s—

“Dark Shadow!” “My pleasure!” The flanged, echoing voice of Tokoyami’s other half carried over the distance between us, and Dark Shadow spread his ‘wings’ wide, lancing through the air towards me. I didn’t have time to do much more yet; I’d have to start with just one!

I dashed to my left, right arm darkening to a pitch-black and growing hard, stiff, and rigid. My fingers fused together while my thumb shifted shape, and my hand and forearm flattened out before doubling in size. The separation between the two grew sharp and serrated, and once Dark Shadow passed me, I gripped down hard on the connection between Tokoyami and the shadowy bird, twisting and wrenching it down. Dark Shadow squawked and flailed slightly in my grip, but a quick yell from Tokoyami had Dark Shadow turning around to dash at me from behind. I let go of him and tried to dodge, going further to the left with my claw-arm in front of me as a shield—

“Hiyaa!”

Dark Shadow slammed into my back before I could concentrate on shifting that area, and I fell forward, barely tucking into a roll to keep from landing hard on my chitinous emperor scorpion claw.

“Yaseiki seems to land a hit, but Tokoyami’s Dark Shadow gets her back in a striking reversal! Hey,
I grimaced, but without human vocal cords I couldn’t do much more than growl and vocalize, not that any of them would hear it. Tokoyami nodded at Dark Shadow, who pulled back once more before charging forward. A quick glance around me was enough to see that I was dangerously close to the edge of the ring; he was probably trying to push me out, wasn’t he? Claw in front of me as a shield, I charged forward, feeling my skin rippling and changing as I went. Scales formed beneath my clothes, coating my sides, front, and unchanged left arm. Three of seven; I wasn’t anywhere near ready, and Dark Shadow was already closing in!

I braced myself for the hit, a vivid green glow in the shape of an ethereal bear’s paw building around my left arm. Dark Shadow came in, and I bent down low to soak the head-on hit—

“Nope!” Dark Shadow whooped as he swooped down and between my legs, coming up behind me to grab my tail. I gave a wordless, inaudible shriek of surprise as he lifted me in the air.

“Dark Shadow goes fishing, and he comes up Yaseiki on her own built-in line!”

The fact that it’s the middle of the day is the only reason I didn’t just lose right here and now, but if I wanted to get out of this, I had to act now, and thank goodness Midoriya and Ojiro had shown me exactly how to respond to this kind of situation two weeks ago!

The little bit I’m fairly certain Tokoyami didn’t know: my tail is fully prehensile, and incredibly strong. Maybe not on Ojiro’s level, but I could lift a bit more than my own body weight with my tail. I was about to give away that little bit of information; I’d have to change things up, this surprise won’t work again!

I straightened out fully, sucked in a deep breath, and flexed up on the exhale. I pulled up hard with my tail, getting enough momentum to swing straight up and face Dark Shadow head-on. I gave him a sweet smile…

“Whoa, Yaseiki’s like a monkey with that tail! Wonder what she’s—ooh, that had to hurt!”

Then I gripped down hard on Dark Shadow’s beak with my claw, and punched straight at his gleaming, beady eyes with my bear totem-augmented left. He yelped in what seemed like pain, letting me go. I backed away from Dark Shadow and turned towards Tokoyami as quickly as I could, letting the bear totem fade from my arm and shifting my tail while I had the opportunity.

“Dark Shadow, stop her!” “I’ll try my best!”

A quick glance back showed Dark Shadow gaining on me, looping around so that if I faced him, I’d have to show my back to Tokoyami. I had no doubts that Tokoyami could call Dark Shadow back to him in an instant, and with the inky connection between the two looped wide around my position, he could probably sweep my legs out from under me, or he and Dark Shadow could clothesline me. I looked back to Tokoyami and readied my claw-arm, pincer extended towards Tokoyami as I closed in. I had to wait for it, wait for it—

A pitch-black talon appeared out of the corner of my left eye. That was it!

A brief flare of green enveloped my legs, and I leapt up and over Dark Shadow, the cat’s totem helping me get height. But that wasn’t all it did. I righted myself in that instant, spinning to swing my tail down on top of Dark Shadow. If I could speak, I probably would’ve said something cheesy; I
know I wouldn’t have been able to help myself. Something like how I’m the cat that got the canary, or how the little tweety-bird was Sylvester’s now. But you know what, I don’t think it was needed.

The spikes on my shifted stegosaurus tail stabbed at Dark Shadow, sending the bird recoiling far away to the other end of the arena. I stuck the three-point landing on my hooves and left hand, and slammed the arena with my tail for good measure, gouging a chunk of the concrete with the bony spikes protruding from my tail.

“’What’s on her tail!? Aizawa, what are those things!’”

“The term is ‘thagomizer’,” Aizawa-sensei’s cool voice rang out over the arena. “And before you ask, yes, Yaseki is currently part dinosaur.” The crowd erupted in cheers and shouts, and I heard what could only be the sound of kids shrieking in excitement.

Tokoyami stared at me, Dark Shadow at his side. The two were conversing, likely working out some sort of strategy in this brief instant. I couldn’t fault him, especially since he’d appeared to be following Midoriya’s own plan from his practice bout with Ojiro, and I’d thrown a monkey wrench into things. This entire match, Dark Shadow has been going for my back. I’d kept my tail low and out of the way at the start, and I don’t rely on it nearly as much as Ojiro does his, so I didn’t give him an opportunity at first. That adaptation from Dark Shadow to dive between my legs and get at my tail from down below was absolutely ingenious, credit where credit was due, but he wasn’t able to force the same situation as Midoriya. Dark Shadow had picked me up instead of just whipping me by my tail, and that’s where the two had make their mistake, giving me a chance to recover.

Tokoyami and Dark Shadow were still speaking, but right then, I saw Tokoyami’s eyes lose focus. It was only for a brief instant, but it was enough that I could catch it. Judging from his reaction, Dark Shadow noticed as well, and while I couldn’t hear the exact words, the tone was absolutely one of slight worry. I grinned, and set about the next phase. Right arm, throat, body, tail. I had two more to go. I only hope that this doesn’t have some negative aftereffects; I haven’t tried it before!

“Hey, check out Yaseki’s bad hair day!”

I scowled as Present Mic drew attention to what I was doing, but it was too late for Tokoyami and Dark Shadow to stop me. The bobby pins holding my hair out of my face fell to the concrete as my hair bunched up and spiked back, the actual hairs and follicles changing to become something similar, yet absolutely different, and even more of them grew besides. I didn’t have to worry about my hair getting in my face. I didn’t even have hair at the moment. Instead, as I shook my head, light, hollow quills bristled along my head and sprouted all the way down my back. I tensed my neck, shoulders, and jaw muscles, and my quills stood on end, splayed and ready to stop Dark Shadow’s next attempt to take me from behind.

… that came out wrong.

“Okay, I take it back! It’s not just her tail that’s all spiky, now it’s all over her head and shoulders too! I do not want to be Dark Shadow right now, folks!”

“Can you still do this?” I heard Tokoyami ask Dark Shadow.

“Absolutely!” He replied. Then with a caw, he swept towards me, talons reared back and ready to strike. I grimaced and threw my weight forward, the quills along my back bared and bristled, emperor scorpion claw out front. Armored from the right, protected from the back, and too low for him to sweep without noticing. I’d left Dark Shadow exactly one avenue of assault, and that was my
left side. He came swooping in, and in that moment, I shifted my left arm. I swiped at Dark Shadow with my enlarged, black-furred arm, and batted him away. His beak and talons raked along my arm, tearing out clumps of fur and tracing lines of burning pain up its length. I know he couldn’t hear it, but my voice leapt even *higher* than it already was, the sudden pain absolutely taking me by surprise. Damn it, for a shadow that thing *hurt*!

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tokoyami wince when I’d shrieked, bringing a hand to his… I guess his temple. I don’t know the human-to-avian cranial equivalent. Above me, Dark Shadow cawed, then swooped down for another strafing run. I fell all the way forward onto my stomach, legs and gorilla arm beneath and holding me up, claw, quills, and tail all curled protectively around my person. I felt *something* strike the back of my head, sending stars exploding through my vision as I staggered. A good chunk of my quills had been pulled out by whatever hit me, and there was now a bald spot on the back of my head that I really, *really* hoped wouldn’t translate to hair once I changed back.

“Yaseiki’s hunkered down like a fortress, but even all those spikes aren’t deterring Tokoyami’s Dark Shadow! Come on Yaseiki, you’re not giving up are you!”

I scowled, and reached for the final transformation I needed. There was no *fucking* way I was going to give Present Mic the satisfaction of watching me lose after that.

My legs shifted, scales growing over my skin. In what had to be the weirdest sensation I’d felt in a long time, my hooves softened and *splayed* out, shaping themselves into *feet* with five large, distinct toes. I pressed each toe to the ground and felt them grip.

Even when Dark Shadow passed again, beak biting deep into my right thigh as his claws raked harmlessly along the scales and ridges on my tail, my toes didn’t budge so much as a fraction of a millimeter. I couldn’t keep the smile off my face, and laughed, inaudible to probably everyone present, including myself. I set my sights on Tokoyami, snapped my claw… and advanced.

“Yaseiki’s not breaking any land speed records, but she’s bearing down on Tokoyami!” Almost in response to Present Mic’s words, Tokoyami shifted to the side, circling to maintain his distance from me. Dark Shadow lashed out again, this time aiming to rake his claws across the only well and truly vulnerable spot he could still access on my body: my face.

And that was exactly the opportunity I needed.

When I snapped down on his talons with my scorpion claw, digging hard into the inky blackness of his body, I marveled ever so slightly at the sheer range of expressions Dark Shadow had. But I didn’t stop there; I reached forward with my gorilla arm and grabbed Dark Shadow’s body in a slightly odd hold: I had his beak held shut in the crook of my elbow, and a solid hold on the tether between Dark Shadow and Tokoyami with my massive hand. I let go of Dark Shadow’s arm and let him swipe mostly ineffectually at my side, wincing slightly as he managed to tear off one of my pangolin scales, and gripped hard on the tether connection Tokoyami and Dark Shadow with my pincer.

Then, I yanked. Tokoyami let the slack between him and Dark Shadow extend, and I stepped closer, continuing to yank as I did so. Dark Shadow moved from raking at my sides to trying to lift my left leg, but while it was planted, my gecko’s foot was an immovable object. He clawed at it, drawing blood and making me wince, but I started spiking him with my tail every time I stepped forward. Dark Shadow’s struggles grew weaker as he took more hits, and unable to return to Tokoyami to restore his shadow body, he was reduced to clawing at my flanks. I advanced on Tokoyami, who eventually reached the end of his ‘rope’, and resisted as best he could.
“Yaseiki’s got a hold on Dark Shadow, and she’s reeling Tokoyami in like a fish on the line!”

As I got closer, Tokoyami seemed to grow more and more distressed. He swayed on his feet, slumping over, and not just because of the hold I had on Dark Shadow. Tokoyami grit his teeth and tried to right himself, but I took a step closer, and he stumbled harder. By the time I was within ten feet of him, Tokoyami looked absolutely green around the gills, his throat and stomach spasming oddly.

And I wasn’t surprised at all.

Because the entire time I pulled him closer, just as I had since the fight began, I was screaming.

When Tokoyami got within five feet of me, he lost his balance completely and fell to his knees. He shuddered, spasmed, and vomited while he tried to hold himself up with his hands. Dark Shadow yelled something, but it was indefinite, muffled by the grip I had holding his beak shut.

“I—” Tokoyami heaved, breathing heavily. “I give up!”

I stopped screaming.

“Tokoyami has forfeited!” Midnight snapped her whip. “Yaseiki advances to the third round!”

The crowd cheered, but it was subdued, confused.

“For the love of—FINALLY Yaseiki, that racket’s been driving me NUTS!” As one, the audience murmured in question, and I began to shift myself back to human one body part at a time. “I know pretty much nobody ELSE here could hear it, but that girl’s been shrieking in ultrasound since the moment this match started!”

“Urgh…” Tokoyami groaned, and Dark Shadow wrapped protectively around him. “Is that what—” He broke off, another wave of nausea wracking his frame. I finished shifting myself back to normal and offered Tokoyami a hand up, which he gladly took.

“Sorry about that,” I said, slinging his arm over my shoulder. “Let’s get to Recovery Girl, shall we? I say we could both use her help.” I fixed Dark Shadow with a look. He gave one right back, then blew a raspberry at me before diving back inside Tokoyami.

“We’re taking a five minute break before the next match so I can get Recovery Girl to help my migraine. Oi, Yaseiki, do me a favor and quit with the sonar!”

“Just for that, I’ll do it again!” I yelled back. At least a few people in the crowd laughed, and off to my side, I saw Principal Nedzu—

“I’ll have to add this to our material for his next roast!” Nedzu exclaimed, whiskers twitching.

Okay. No. There is no way he had a camcorder hidden inside that vest of his. That thing’s half as big as his head!

* * * * *
“Second round, final match, STAAART!!”

Damn it, the match started already!? I hurried my pace through the hallways, racing back to the competitors’ seats. By the time I got there, a few minutes had already elapsed, and I’d tuned out at least four bits of Present Mic commentary.

“Kanna-chan, you’re back! Congratulations!” Momo exclaimed, holding up a pair of horseshoes. “Do you need these? I noticed you changed your hooves.”

“Not now! Match to watch!” I scooted in beside her and set my focus on the fight, wincing as I saw Kirishima land another brutal backfist onto Bakugou. “How long has this been going on?”

“Since the match began,” Ibara explained from behind me. “I confess, I am unsure as to Bakugou-san’s strategy. All I know is that he seems to be doing something with his left hand.”

“Huh?” I leaned forward, paying special attention to Bakugou’s hands. Sure enough, Ibara was correct; Bakugou had his left hand pointed down at the ground, occasionally flexing and wiping it on the concrete, and was only firing blasts from his right hand. Each and every hit he’d landed so far seemed to have done nothing more than ruin Kirishima’s clothing, the explosions unable to pierce the other boy’s hardened skin. I saw Bakugou dodge under another of Kirishima’s punches, left hand low to the ground, and fire a blast back at Kirishima with his right. Kirishima staggered, but recovered instantly, and was on Bakugou in an instant.

“Bakugou’s having a hard time fighting back against Kirishima’s fierce attack!” Present Mic bellowed over the loudspeakers.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Midoriya muttered beneath his breath. “Kirishima’s Quirk is simple, but that’s what makes it strong. And Kacchan seems to be on the defensive, but he doesn’t look stressed or strained. He’s not doing anything that he hadn’t already anticipated; he’s not scowling as hard. Then there’s the fact that he’s only using his right hand for his Quirk.”

“Deku-kun?” Uraraka asked, looking over at him with slight worry.

“He’s not imitating Todoroki-kun, there’s no point in, Kacchan knows that, but he’s also definitely doing something with his left. He’s also been careful to aim all of his explosions up; something on the ground? Trying to keep environmental damage to a minimum, show that he can fight more carefully?”

I thought about that last bit. Was this how Bakugou planned to change things up? Show that he could take a Quirk so clearly designed for raw destruction and use it with surgical precision?

Bakugou ducked under another of Kirishima’s punches, and launched another upward-angled blast at Kirishima’s side. But unlike the two times I’d seen him shrug it off before, Kirishima recoiled.

“Whoa, Bakugou counters again! And unlike before, it’s working!?”

He flinched, and the visibly jagged effect of his Hardening lessened along his entire body.

“About time, hair-for-brains!” Bakugou surged forward, launching another explosion at the same spot he’d hit Kirishima before, then followed up with a left-handed palm strike to the solar plexus that sent Kirishima tumbling.
“Grr, damnit—”

“And now…” Bakugou held up his left hand, fingers curled most of the way into his palm, and thumb raised high. “Time to blow you to smithereens!”

Bakugou angled the bottom of his hand so that it pointed at his opponent, and brought his thumb down. A sudden flash of light shot out the open bottom, the cylinder of his fingers shaping the charge so it aimed straight and true, but not at Kirishima himself. The blast hit the ground next to Kirishima.

And all the nitroglycerin sweat Bakugou had laid out beforehand, painstakingly laid out along the ground and just waiting for the right trigger, detonated at once.

Kirishima flew through the air, the brief bit of hardening he still had the stamina to use not enough to do more than keep his bleeding low. Kirishima hit the apex of his arc, and Bakugou clenched his hand in that cylinder shape one more time. He brought his thumb down, and another shaped charge lanced out to strike Kirishima dead-center in the chest.

Right where Bakugou’s palm-strike had left a great big explosive stain.

The explosion carried Kirishima back and out of the arena. He tumbled end over end before coming to a halt.

“Heh.” Back on the center stage, Bakugou turned, and gave an exaggerated bow towards Present Mic and Aizawa-sensei in the commentators’ box. “And another one bites the dust.”

“W-we have a winner!” Midnight cracked her whip. “Bakugou Katsuki advances to the third round!”

“It was a trap! I can’t believe it folks, Bakugou used his explosive sweat to leave a landmine for Kirishima! And with that, the second round has concluded!”

“Kanna-chan?” Ibara asked, voice slightly tremulous. “D-did you show him that series, the one with the stone mask and the weird Quirks?”

I slumped.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” I muttered. “I should not have done that.”

“We’ll take a twenty minutes break before the next round, folks! Get ready, cause it’s just about time for the SEMIFINALS!”
Sorry for the wait folks! Just finished a move cross-country to Los Angeles.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please!”

I looked between Momo and Ibara. The three of us all shared a rather perplexed expression, and when I looked at Bakugou next to me, and Kaminari, Kirishima, and Sero behind him, each of them seemed to share in that confusion. After a quick look at the rest of us finalists, the only ones who didn’t seem to share it were Uraraka, who had a sad smile on her face, and the trio of Midoriya, Todoroki, and Tenya, who… weren’t here. Okay then…

“Any idea what’s up?” I stage-whispered. Momo and Ibara both murmured a negative, while Bakugou just shrugged. We turned our attention back to the floor, where Midnight was walking onstage with… what’s Midoriya doing there?

“As you know,” Midnight spoke into the microphone she’d procured from… I don’t even want to guess where, “the first match of the second round ended in a draw. This would have resulted in a tiebreaker to determine who advanced, as was the case with Kirishima Eijiro and Tetsutetsu Tetsutetsu. However, Midoriya Izuku has an announcement he would like to make!”

Midnight handed the microphone over to Midoriya, who took it with his left, given that his right arm still rested in a sling.

“U-uh…” Midoriya closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then exhaled. When he opened his eyes, he seemed calmer, although his smile was still the shaky, nervous one I’d come to associate with him. “During my fight with Todoroki-kun, I hurt my right arm rather badly, and my right hand was also severely burnt by his fire side. Ah, after some discussion with Recovery Girl, and reviewing my options, I’ve decided to let her heal me fully, to the best of her abilities. To do that, I hereby withdraw from the Tournament.” Midoriya bowed to the audience and hurriedly pressed the microphone back into Midnight’s hands before hopping off the stage as fast as he could.

Then the clapping began. It was slow at first, and started up in the Pro Hero section. Then 1-A and 1-B, and all of us in the finalist section (except Bakugou, until I thwacked him with my tail) stood up and joined in the clapping. Midoriya stopped where he stood and turned to face the crowd. His smile had spread from ear to ear, and even from where we sat, I could tell he was crying. Tears of embarrassment, frustration, joy? I couldn’t tell. What I do know is that when he left the arena, the applause continued for a full minute unabated.

“Now that we have our first match’s participants set, it’s nearly time to begin!” Present Mic announced.

“I’m gonna head down to the prep area,” I told Momo and Ibara. They both wished me luck, and when I turned to exit, I saw Bakugou waiting at the stairs. He gave a nod towards the stairs, and I
resigned myself to joining him for the walk towards our respective prep rooms, given they sat right next to each other. We climbed the stairs and passed into the hallways in silence, him with hands shoved deep in his pockets and pointedly looking away, me fiddling with my fingers and trying not to glance at him. The sound of my hooves on the floor echoed, drowning out Bakugou’s footsteps.

This… this was awkward. Mina and Tokoyami had both gone to the prep areas separately from me when it was time for our matches. I didn’t have to try and, I don’t know, purposefully avoid small talk. Besides, what was I going to say to him? Thanks for that little pep talk earlier, it really helped figuring out a better plan against Tokoyami? I like that you’re using your Quirk in interesting ways, but I just don’t think Kira’s whole ‘living a quiet life’ thing is for you? Besides, he’s probably not the type who’d actually appreciate small talk, and think it was a waste of time. Maybe even say something scathing. Though if he did, it’d probably make it easier for me to fight him; I mean, anger is one heck of a motivator, and Bakugou is nothing if not good at making people get mad at—

“Oi.” Bakugou pulled up short right before we rounded the corner to the prep rooms. I turned to face him. He stared hard into my eyes, his characteristic scowl not quite as heavy as it usually was.

“Y-yes?” I stuttered, fidgeting with a stray lock of hair. Damn, do I have another bobby pin? I need to get this back and out of my face; wouldn’t be good if it fell into my eyes while fighting.

“Back at USJ, that ‘Noumu’ thing.” Bakugou’s eyebrows furrowed deeper. “If you hadn’t poisoned it, it would’ve killed me.” He looked away, scowl softening slightly. “… thanks.”

“A-ah,” I stammered. “Y-you’re welcome? I mean, it wasn’t… I mean, that’s—”

“I’m getting that shit outta the way now.” Bakugou interrupted. “I’m not going to fuck around against you. If I hurt you, shit happens. If you hurt me, shit happens.” He stepped closer, and I had to look up to meet his eyes. “But don’t think for even a fucking second about holding back. That shit about not killing people? That’s what Blockhead and Striptease are for.”

“Bakugou, I’m not going to poison y—”

“Fucking do it, Kanna!” He yelled, grabbing my shoulders. “I’m not allergic to shit, I don’t need one of your damn magic syringes. You’re not a moron, so fucking pick something that hurts! Cause if you’re not giving it your all…” He grimaced and looked away, his hands dropping from my shoulders.

“… alright.” I sighed, running through my mental library to find something that could work. “I—look, a fair warning? If I hit you, it’s going to hurt.”

“Heh,” he scoffed. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“I’m being serious!” I scolded. “I know I won’t be able to push you the way Todoroki or Midoriya could. But what I can guarantee, Bakugou, is that I can hurt you much more than they could.”

“Worry about yourself.”

We made it to the doors. Given where we sat on the ladder, I was in room A, and he was in room B. We made it to the latter of the two first, and I stopped in front of it, feeling my phone vibrate in my pocket.

“Hey Bakugou?” I asked. He stopped walking and looked back at me over his shoulder. “Thanks for
calling me by my name.”

“Hm.” He turned back towards his room. “Thought you’d prefer it.”

“I do.” I turned the handle and pushed the door open. “Looking forward to seeing a different kind of dynamite.”

“Hah!” He laughed, and stopped at his door. “How long you been saving that one?”

“Oh, you know,” I shrugged. “Two weeks?”

We shared a nod, and walked into our respective rooms. I pulled my phone out once the door shut, checking the message that had come in.

* Good luck, Kanna-chan. * It was from Dad. I unlocked my phone to type out a reply, then set it down on the table, closed my eyes, and just breathed. I breathed in for a count of five and exhaled for the same, using the meditative act to corral my thoughts. I… I don’t know if I can win this fight.

But damn it, I’m going to try.

* * * * *

“*It’s time for the penultimate match of the tournament everyone!*” The crowd swelled in time with Present Mic’s words. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a wave start up and go around the arena, passing through the front of my vision and exiting out the other side; from the way his eyes tracked the motion, Bakugou must have seen it too.

We stood opposite each other on the platform, ten meters in, thirty meters between us. If the Quirk Assessment was any indication, I’d have at most three seconds to respond to whatever he led off with. I’m not Uraraka; he doesn’t have any reason to just stand there and let me approach him to show what I’m made of. Against her, he wanted to see what the girl had in mind, given how much surety and confidence she seemed to have when facing him. Given the slight tremor of my forearms and clenched fists, he probably couldn’t say the same.

If only he knew that it was actually my anatomy shifting, new glands hooking up to each sharpened, hollowed nail. Inside my body, electric organs brimmed with potential, and the small, fine hairs along my forearms and the back of my neck stood on end.

“If in fair Musutafu, where we lay our scene! No happy dagger for this Juliet; our little Teddy has all the knives she needs!” I barely held back the groan, but I couldn’t hold the scowl, and neither could Bakugou. “From the Hero Course, it’s Yaseiki Kanna!” The crowd roared, though I could definitely catch more than a few whistles of, ahem, ‘appreciation’. I tried to keep my hackles from raising; focus, Kanna. Focus. “Versus! Oh Romeo, Romeo, wherefore dost thou hide all those explosions Romeo!? From the Hero Course, it’s Bakugou Katsuki!” A chant of ‘Plus Ultra’ went up from the crowd, and Bakugou punched his other palm, lighting off a small blast with the impact. I set my stance low and bared my claws, tail lashing behind me.

“For a spot in the finals! Ready!? I focused, and felt a shiver run through my skin. “Match! STAAAART!”
My skin rippled, hard, thick scales rippling across my skin as I shifted my weight towards my left, and a shimmering green aura sprung up about my torso, settling into the shape of a mantis shrimp over my arms. Every single time I've seen Bakugou fight, he’s always, always led off with a sweeping right hook, and a powerful blast to go with it. He’s right-handed, it makes sense he’d do that, but it did make him predictable. I counted off the seconds in my head: one, two, now!

I leapt forward and to the left, just barely making it past Bakugou’s right arm as it swung across where I’d been standing, and swung out with my own. It was a close thing, just the barest touch, but one darkened, clawed fingertip bit through Bakugou’s jacket and into the skin of his right shoulder. The venom spilled out from my claw, and Bakugou recoiled, yelling louder than I’d ever heard him before.

I darted away from him, not quite fast enough to keep the hasty response explosion that issued forth from his left hand from grazing me, and winced at slight burns and scrapes. Bakugou stared at me with wide eyes, gritting his teeth, and holding tight to his wounded shoulder with his left hand, the right spasming and twitching at his side. He bit back grunts and groans of pain, an angry tone creeping into Bakugou’s voice as a cold sweat broke out over his forehead.

“Yaseiki lands a hit! It didn’t look like much from here, but it definitely seems to have hurt!”

“Y-you…” Bakugou turned towards me, glaring hard from under his brow. “The f-fuck was—”

“I told you it’d hurt.” I took a few cautious steps forward, claws bared again. “I wasn’t joking.” Bakugou snarled and lashed out with his left; I was barely able to shroud myself with an ironclad beetle totem and lower myself in time to soak most of the blast. I skidded backwards, hooves grinding against the concrete. Bakugou gave a wordless yell and struck again, and I had to dodge to the side as a massive, focused explosion lanced through the area where I’d just been standing. I rolled to my hooves and rushed forward, the cheetah’s totem alighting my legs in green, and Bakugou practically fled from my outstretched claws. I couldn’t blame him.

I wouldn’t want to get stung by a bullet ant either.

The bullet ant has the single most painful insect sting in the world. It gets its name from the closest comparison to what its sting felt like: getting shot. Unless you’re unfortunate enough to be allergic, the bullet ant’s sting isn’t going to kill you; hell, the damn things’ stings are a crucial part of some or other indigenous tribe’s adulthood ritual. But just because something won’t kill you, that doesn’t mean you want to get stung by the damn thing, as Bakugou was experiencing firsthand. He’d told me to bring out all the stops, including the ones I normally wouldn’t have against a fellow UA student.

He knew what he was in for when he made that request.

I rushed Bakugou again, lashing out with my claws to try and give him another taste. He fell onto his back to dodge my swipe, and leveled his right hand at me with a grin.

The magnitude of the explosion that issued forth made me very, very glad I’d thought to armor myself in ankylosaur scales at the very start. Even through those, I still had the breath knocked out of me, and I flew back a good five meters before landing hard on my side. I pulled myself up slowly, breathing hard, then—shit!

“Oraaa!” Bakugou lunged, and I barely rolled away from his hand before the blast issued forth. I
may have dodged the heat, but the shockwave still slammed into my side, sending me rolling across the arena until I swung my tail to get my momentum back under control. I got to my hooves, and—dodge!

“Bakugou’s not giving Yaseiki any room to breathe! Is this going to be it, folks!?"

I ducked under an arm and threw an elbow at Bakugou’s stomach, releasing as much electricity as I felt was safe to try and stun him, but all that did was light up the zipper in blue sparks and leave a small scorch mark; I’d hit one of the dry spots on his jacket and undershirt, and those were enough to insulate him. I got a point-blank explosion right in my side for my efforts, and winced at the pain even as I rolled back upright several meters away. My hand came to my side and felt at the scales I’d grown there, and I hissed as I found a spot that he’d managed to break through with force alone.

Shit, okay, this… this isn’t working. I don’t know if I can outlast Bakugou at this rate; just like Momo, he’s one of those fighters where the longer things go on, the more dangerous it gets for you. The longer he’s active, the more he sweats, and the more of that explosive sweat Bakugou has access to—oh. Oh fuck.

I looked at Bakugou more closely now. He was breathing and sweating hard, but from how the shudders were contained to his right side, it wasn’t from exertion. It was from pain. The underarms of his jacket were stained completely dark, and his collar would be joining it soon. And looking at his hands… they were dripping with sticky, explosive sweat. Much, much more sweat than they normally did. Realization dawned, and I morphed my bullet ant stinger-nails back to normal. The bullet ant venom didn’t help me. It didn’t help me at all.

It may have caused him pain, yes, but I think I’d inadvertently given Bakugou a goddamn power-up.

“That i-it?” Bakugou taunted, wincing in pain as his arm spasmed again. “I’m just getting started.” Bakugou lunged for me, right arm outstretched. I didn’t have time to dodge far enough out of the way; I called the ironclad beetle again and hunkered down, weathering the explosion as best I could. It hurt; even through the beetle’s armoring spirit and my scaly hide, it hurt like hell. I pushed off the ground with both arms and legs, hoping to land a hit on Bakugou while the debris from his explosion obscured me, my left hand outstretched and sparking with electricity.

I hit empty air.

“Heh.” Next to me, Bakugou stood, left hand in that cylinder shape again. My eyes widened; he brought his thumb down.

The nitroglycerin on the ground beneath me detonated, sending me flying up and away from Bakugou. I landed hard on the wrecked concrete; black crept in from the corners of my vision, and the roar of the crowd sounded like it came from the inside of a tin can against each ear. I pushed my body up off the ground with my hands and tried to get my hooves beneath me, but one slipped on a crumbling section of ruined arena, sending me back to my knees.

“Is this it!? How much more punishment can Yaseiki take!?”

“Get up,” I heard Bakugou say from across the arena. I looked up at him, and got one hoof under me. “Get the fuck up!”

I pushed myself upright, lashing my tail to one side to keep from swaying over. I blinked hard to clear my vision and fixed my gaze on Bakugou. He was smiling. Not grinning, sneering. Smiling.
I frowned. I didn’t have much left in the tank. Maybe one big hit? Two? My arms and legs shook with fatigue, and the burning in my lungs nearly matched the ache on my side, back, and lower legs from Bakugou’s explosions. I concentrated for a moment, and the scales receded from across my body, leaving my redundant organs the only parts of my body still transformed.

“Hope you’re ready,” I murmured, more to myself than Bakugou. He looked at me puzzled, but stood there, waiting for whatever I was going to do.

“Looks like Bakugou wants to see what his opponent’s got in store for him! Hey, hey, Bakugou! You sure that’s a great idea!? She already got you by surprise once!”

I hunkered down slightly and called my Quirk, ignoring Present Mic. The entirety of my skin shifted, and I opened my mouth before everything hardened into chitinous carapace. Segmented segments formed at each joint, allowing me to retain freedom of movement, and I began to breathe as hard as I could. Changing my skin into an exoskeleton was a double-edged sword: the protection it afforded was second to none, but remember people, you skin serves a very important purpose. Without skin, I had a hard time regulating my body heat, and I was stuck basically panting like a dog to try and keep myself cool. I couldn’t maintain this form for long. I only had one shot at this.

I had to make it count.

“Here she comes!!!”

I charged. The totem of the mantis shrimp shrouded my body, adding striking power to the protection of my ironclad beetle’s carapace. Bakugou stepped back, leveled an arm in my direction, and fired off a great explosion, but aside from slowing my charge, I was undeterred. It didn’t even sting. He fired off explosion after explosion, but they did nothing. I closed in, and brought my fist back, feeling the mantis shrimp empower me. One punch… all I’d need was one—

“It’s over,” I heard Bakugou whisper. He fired an explosion down at my hooves, and my world erupted into light and heat.

When I hit the ground, my carapace cracked.

“Yaseiki steps on Bakugou’s biggest bomb yet! I don’t know how much more she can take!”

I… I hadn’t even noticed it. I’d been so focused on getting to Bakugou that I hadn’t even processed the importance of that step backwards. It was the second time he’d caught me with his new landmine trick. And I—

I shifted my shell back to skin. Blood ran down my arm, dripping from my fingertips onto the ground. I pushed myself up and brought my hooves under me, but when I tried to stand, I faltered. I fell back down and caught myself with my hands, gasping from the pain and shaking with tiredness.

I… I…

“Get up!” Bakugou roared. “Damn it Kanna, get yourself back up!”

I don’t… I don’t want to lose—

“Yaseiki Kanna canno—”
“NO!” I interrupted Midnight. I pushed myself up hurriedly, but I fell back onto my hands and knees a second later. “I’m… not done yet… I…” I focused, my Quirk sprang up, flaring over my body in a flash of formless green. I needed, I needed… I don’t know what I needed. I tensed up, and felt the electrical organs inside of me respond, sending sparks shuddering through my body and into the shapeless, unaspected totem around me. I need something… I need to get up. I don’t want to lose.

“You can barely move,” Midnight said.

“I… don’t care…” I brought one hoof under me, fighting as hard as I could to keep moving. I could see the green darkening in the corners of my vision, clouding over. “I’m not… going to lose… here!” Fuck Midnight, fuck her calling the match, and fuck losing this fight. I’d barely done anything to Bakugou. One hit, one measly fucking hit. My breathing grew ragged. Sparks flew off of my body, staining my totem deep blue-grey as it began to take shape around me. I… I wasn’t doing that. My Quirk was acting on its own, and it…

And that’s when I felt it.

It was like somebody had poured liquid fire into my veins. I opened my eyes wide, suddenly more awake than I’d ever been in my life. All the aches and pains of the fight, the agony of the wounds Bakugou had inflicted upon me, they disappeared in a wash of raw power. I felt energized. I felt alive.

It felt good.

Around me, my Quirk coalesced into a new, unfamiliar shape, absorbing the sparks flying off of my skin. It hung over me like a mantle, stormy wings spread wide over my arms, levin talons carving narrow gouges into the concrete beneath my hooves. Just above my head, I could see its head looming, eyes ablaze with electric light. I stood in the eye of a storm, and in that glorious moment, I felt powerful.

“It’s not over yet, Bakugou!” I cried to the heavens.

And thunder roared in response.

Lightning arced off of my body, striking the ground around me. I brought my arms around, and this strange totem’s wings shifted with it, carving into the concrete where the ‘feathers’ touched. This was… this was different. This was new. My totems aren’t like my father’s; they’re purely ephemeral creations, completely spiritual in nature. I can’t actually claw something with a bear totem, or grab something larger than normal with a gorilla one. My father’s totems are solid, but mine aren’t.

Except for this one, I marveled. This one… this one was something else entirely. It was stronger, it was faster, it was better. I felt amazing, like nothing in the whole wide world could possibly dare to hold me down, like I could soar up into the skies and never stop… especially not for that blonde motherfucker opposite me. He thought he could play with me. That he could toy with me, and taunt me, and fuck with me. I’m nobody’s plaything! And especially! Not! HIS!

I locked eyes with Bakugou, and smiled.

Then, with a clap of thunder, I was off.

The distance between us closed in the blink of an eye, and I reached for him, lashing out with that
same right hook he just loves to use. I was so damn sick of always seeing that damn right hook, but I admit, it felt good to watch my claws carve away his jacket, to see the bolt arc from my fingers into Bakugou and send him flying away, rolling on the ground and clutching at his new burns. It must’ve been so satisfying for him to do that to me, to toy around with me, to try and goad me into letting him hurt me more, and more, and more.

“How do you like it!?” I screamed. He’d used me as his goddamn punching bag this whole entire match. This fucker thought he could play with me!? That he could save his strength for the finals, like it was a guarantee I was going to lose here!? “You think you’re hot shit!?” I surged forward again, and lashed out with a kick, the totem’s talons shrouding my hooves. Bakugou blasted himself up and over me, and another bombardment took me in the back, sending me staggering forward as he kept his distance. I turned and rushed him again, but once again that motherfucker managed to get away from me! I swung out with the totem’s wing, and carved great swathes of concrete from the arena. Another wingbeat sent them flying in Bakugou’s direction, and I followed behind it, determined to finally rip the sneer off that bastard’s face once and for—

“Not good enough!” Bakugou yelled. Something struck me in the side, and an instant later it burned, and I was flying to the side and towards the far edge of the arena. I dug in my hooves and talons, throwing my momentum down into the ground to bring me to a stop, and glared at Bakugou. My hand rose to my side, and when I brought it away, it was slick with blood. An instant later it had been seared away by a stray arc, and I set my sights on Bakugou.

He pushed his hands beneath him and fired down, sending him flying straight up into the air. He carried himself up and out of the arena proper, and once he had a fair bit of height, he fired behind him. Then Bakugou wrapped his arms around his body, firing explosions up and left, then down and right. He began to spin, as did the air swirling around him, dark as it was with dust and other particulates. He spun faster and faster, his speed increasing as gravity carried him back to earth.

I pushed the electric organs in my body as hard as I could, pumping as much into the storm cloud around me as possible. It darkened further and took on a distinct blue-purple tint, and the air around me smelled like it did after a rain. Then, with a great push, I flew off the ground and towards Bakugou. I pushed hard with my arms and the wings carried me up, and then they seemed to shift towards my back. The talons slid up my body and to the ends of my hands, lightning pooling in the space between my fingers.

“Howitzer IMPACT!”

“This is the END!”

His hands were aglow with heat. Mine were alight with electricity. We approached, this little boy who dared think he—

The storm fell away from my body. The light and heat gathered in Bakugou’s hand, just waiting for the final trigger, dissipated like so much dust in the wind.

The two of us slammed into each other, our Quirks Erased. We hit the ground; I heard and felt something give way. The two of us tumbled against each other before rolling apart, settling a couple of feet away from each other. The whole time I’d been reaching for my Quirk and waiting for it to come back, and I even tried to push some electricity into Bakugou… but I couldn’t. I was tapped out. I felt the moment my Quirk sprung back to life, but even then, I couldn’t do anything with the electric organs in me except shift them back to human. There was none left in the tank; I’d spent it all on… on… I don’t know. I don’t even know what that was.
“Testing, testing, mic check one two three! HaHA, the distortion’s gone! Oi, Aizawa, what the hell have you been feeding these kids!? What WAS that!?”

“It’s not something I taught them,” I heard Aizawa reply. “But no matter what it was, I Erased their Quirks for safety purposes. One set of Midoriya and Todoroki was enough.”

“You heard the man, but it looks like they’ve still got some fight left in them! It’s still anyone’s match, people!!”

I pulled myself up to my hooves once more, just one more time, and nearly toppled over even with the help of my tail. Opposite me, Bakugou stood, grinding his teeth hard in pain, left hand clutching at his shoulder, where I’d stung him all the way at the beginning of the match.

“You’re f-finished,” he bit out, advancing upon me slowly. In his right hand, sparks leapt, growing in intensity with every step he took.

I stepped forward, pushing off to meet him, calling my Quirk to—

My right knee buckled when I moved to take another step with my left, suddenly unable to bear my weight. Pain like a knife lanced up my leg, and I crumpled forward, straight into Bakugou as he kneeled down to catch me. His arms hooked under mine, I slumped down onto my left knee, my right shuddering and swollen. He wrapped his arms around my back and pulled me upright.

“Can you stand?” He asked. I tested putting my weight down on my right, and fell back forward, only staying upright with Bakugou’s help. I shook my head, and looked to the referee stand.

“Yaseiki Kanna is unable to continue!” Midnight announced, cracking her whip. “Bakugou Katsuki advances to the final round!”

The crowd roared, and a chant of Plus Ultra started among our classmates, spreading to the rest of the arena in short order. The cheers were deafening, but I couldn’t find it in my heart to care.

Bakugou hoisted me off the ground and into a full-on carry, snarling at Recovery Girl’s stretcher-bearing medi-bots enough to send them into a full-on retreat. Even despite the embarrassment of the situation, I could only close my eyes and look down, and avoided looking at Bakugou, even as he adjusted his hold so my tail didn’t drag along the ground.

I should have protested. Told him to let me go. But right now, I couldn’t muster the energy to so much as tell him off. I’d been so close. I just knew that I’d nearly had it. I don’t know what that was, but it was so damn strong, so fast… and it still wasn’t enough.

In the end, it didn’t even matter.

“The finalists are determined, folks! We’ll see you in twenty minutes for the final spectacle of the Sports Festival for UA’s amazing First Years, Todoroki Shouto versus Bakugou Katsuki!!”

I lost.

Chapter End Notes
The chapter subtitle, ii'ni', is the Navajo word for "thunder". I think the reason should be apparent.
Chapter Forty-One

Chapter Notes

Chapter was put out in a slight rush. It may undergo revisions in the coming days.

Bakugou set me down on the cot in Recovery Girl’s office, barely holding himself up on the edge of the bed once he didn’t have to carry my weight anymore. Recovery Girl bustled over with a saline IV bag and all required tubing, alcohol wipes, and a needle ready to stab right into me. I felt the cold alcohol wipe at the inside of my left elbow, and before I could muster any protest (I prefer needles in my non-dominant arm, thank you very much) felt the sting. No tying off my arm to make the veins stand out, no tapping to try and raise the skin or whatever, just straight into the vein it went. Say what you want about Recovery Girl, but she is very good at her job.

“Bakugou Katsuki, if you are not on that bed within the next fifteen seconds I will stick your IV drip into your neck.” Bakugou growled at the slightly hostile treatment Recovery Girl ‘offered’ him, but acquiesced and pulled himself onto the other cot next to mine. He grunted once to let her know he’d done as she asked, and she turned around once she got my saline drip flowing. She puckered up and kissed Bakugou on the cheek, but it didn’t seem to have any visible effect other than slightly reducing his shaking. “Yaseiki’s mother is on the way to produce an antidote to whatever she stung you with. Just bear it a touch longer, child.”

“T-this is nothing,” he groaned. Recovery Girl jabbed a finger into his shoulder, to which Bakugou yelped. Yes, he actually yelped.

“Nothing, hm? Now hold still.” I watched her swab his elbow and stick an IV in, get that started, then go around to his other side and stick another one into his other arm. “Now I only get to keep you for fifteen minutes, twenty at the most, and I will be damned if I let you walk back out onto that stage with more fluids on your body than in it.” She bustled over to a mini-fridge in the corner and pulled out a couple bottles of sports drink. “Now you’re also going to drink these, and—”

“Alright Kanna-chan, what was it?” Mom picked that exact moment to burst into the infirmary, one sleeve of her blouse rolled up and a fingernail already extending into what looked to be a porcupine quill. “Warrior wasp? Giant hornet? Please don’t say it was Irukandji, that one’s a touch difficult to—”

“Bullet ant,” I interrupted, coughing at the irritation in my throat. “It was bullet ant.”

Mom stopped. She turned, and gave me a look.

“Well.” I saw the porcupine quill growing from her fingertip fill up with a thin, somewhat yellowish liquid, and watched as Mom jabbed Bakugou in the side with it. He flinched slightly, but then he groaned in relief, and the sound of him shifting on the mattress faded. Mom pulled the quill out of his side and let her fingertip turn back to normal, then turned back to me and pinched the bridge of her nose. “If there was ever any doubt that you were my daughter, it’s definitely gone now.”

“As I was saying,” Recovery Girl continued, “you are to drink these.” She opened the bottles and
put one in each of Bakugou’s hands. “If I had my way, you would be staying right there, young man. But this silly tournament just must go on.” She threw her hands in the air, then waltzed back to her chair. “You drink those and go do your silly little fight. But the moment you finish, you head right back here, understood?”

Bakugou mumbled something unintelligible.

“I’m afraid I didn’t quite catch that, child!” Recovery Girl said, voice sugary-sweet with the promise of something terrible.

“I fucking get it!” Bakugou roared.

“Mom?” I said quietly. “Give him a light thwack for me?”

“Sure thing, honey.” She turned around and swatted Bakugou on the arm, to which he grumbled.

“Language, Bakugou,” I mumbled. He seemed like he wanted to say something, but just brought one of the sports drink bottles to his mouth and chugged.

“As for you, young miss.” Recovery Girl pulled the cap off of her cane’s tip, revealing an actually functional, massive needle. I backed as far away from her as I could while still laying on the bed, wincing as I tried to push with my right leg, but only succeeded in backing up against my mother. “I confess to being unsure about what exactly it was that you did out there, but what I do know is that you depleted most of your body’s electrolytes in the process.” I was about to protest when Mom pointed above my head, which showed a full-body scan, blood pressure, blood sugar, EKG, and who knows what else on a holographic display. There was a significant red area highlighted around my right knee, which I suppose corresponded to whatever I managed to do to it.

“Please don’t stab me with the giant needle,” I muttered hastily, screwing my eyes shut and praying to whatever gods may be listening that she keeps that damn thing away from me. “I’ll be good I promise I’ll do whatever the doctor orders just please don’t stab me with—ow ow ow ow ow please stop!”

“Such a baby. If you actually looked, you would see it was your mother injecting something from the other side of your leg.”

“E-eh?” I looked over to Mom, and saw her capping a needle before removing it from a syringe, and dumping it into the sharps container between mine and Bakugou’s cots.

“Heh,” Bakugou chuckled. “She’s scared of needles, huh?”

“Oh, always has been,” Mom replied cheerfully. “It was even harder for me to vaccinate her once her Quirk fully emerged. Trust me, trying to catch my little girl when she’s climbing on the ceiling is quite the challenge, especially if you’re holding a needle in one hand!”

“M-mom…” I groaned, too tired to do more than that.

“Anyways.” I saw Mom fuss over Bakugou, shutting off his IV drips and pulling out the needles and all that getting him set to fight entailed. “You’ve got one more match before Chiyo-sensei gets to keep you. Finish those,” she nodded at the sports drinks while applying gauze and tape to the injection sites, “and get back here. Then we can discuss your intentions towards my daughter.”
“Mom!” I managed to yell. Bakugou just flushed and turned away.

“Honey, I’m not blind, and I’ve seen too many teenagers slam their metaphorical heads against the wall with this to let you do the same.” Mom took the empty bottle from Bakugou’s right hand and grabbed yet another sports drink, which she pressed into his hand while he stood there, growing more and more red. “You have a crush on him, he has a crush on you, and if neither of you has the gumption to just come out and say it?”

“I didn’t ask for your fu—” Bakugou caught himself. “I coulda said it myself.” I couldn’t help it. I boggled.

“Mhmm.” Mom stared at Bakugou with arms crossed, and he squirmed beneath her gaze.

“Kimiko, let the boy go,” Recovery Girl interjected. “We still have your daughter to tend to.” She turned to Bakugou, and nodded. “Remember: right back here after you get your medal, whether it be silver or gold.”

“Tch!” Bakugou scoffed. “Half-n-Half won’t know what fuckin’ hit him.” He scooted around Mom, specifically not brushing past her with his shoulder, and slid the door open with his foot.

“Bakugou!” I called, sitting up slightly. He turned to look at me. “Give him hell, yeah?”

“Yeah.” He stepped halfway out the door before stopping. “It’s Katsuki.”

“What?” I asked.

“If I call you Kanna,” he turned to look at me, “you call me Katsuki. Got it?”

“Y-yes!” I stammered. “G-go on, Katsuki. I’ll be fine.” He stood there for a moment. Then he grinned, to which I smiled in response, and left.

Mom cleared her throat.

“What?” I asked. “Are you expecting a ‘thank you’?”

“No, no,” she waved me off. “Just reminding you that there’s other people in the room, so you can stop making cow eyes at your new boy toy.” I squeaked, but nothing came out, and I could feel my cheeks heat up a bit. I mean yeah, I’d been more than a bit sappy there, but… cow eyes? I hadn’t been—I mean, I don’t think I was—wait, was I? I thought about the past few conversations I’d had with Baku—Katsuki before this, examined how we interacted, our body language, how he reacted to what I said and my response to what he said, and…

… shit. Maybe I am that sappy, and I just hadn’t realized it yet.

“Anyways.” Recovery Girl tapped her syringe-cane on the floor, drawing my attention back to her. “Now that I have your full, undivided attention,” I blushed slightly, but didn’t exactly deny my previous distraction, “we can discuss your treatment.” She pointed at my knee. “You’ve managed to partially tear your anterior cruciate ligament, likely during that kerfuffle where you and the young man hit the concrete. Since you were on the bottom, you took somewhat harder of a hit, hence why he seemed mostly fine.”

“Right,” I murmured. Damn it. Ligament tears are… they’re bad. Wait, can’t I just—?
“Are you able to use your Quirk, Kanna-chan?” Mom asked.

“Um…” I frowned, focusing. “Y-yeah, I think I can?”

“Good!” Recovery Girl leaned in and puckered up. Her lips distended in horrific fashion, and I had to resist the urge to back away from her as she gave me a great, wet granny kiss on the cheek. I felt her Quirk take effect immediately, and sighed in relief and sudden fatigue. “Now pick something that can regenerate, and focus on your right leg.”

“O-oh, right,” I murmured. I concentrated for a moment, and a green glow enveloped my leg, resolving into the shape of a stubby, almost peg-shaped leg. Starfish were the first things I thought of, and so a starfish it would be.

“I know you can’t feel it right now, but your leg is healing.” Recovery Girl pointed up at the holographic display above the cot, and I saw the red splotch over my knee lighten to an orange, then yellow. “Just like with Bakugou-kun, I’m going to want you back after this. You’ll be more than healthy enough to walk out on that podium and collect your bronze, but just to be sure, I’ll be keeping you both the rest of the afternoon.”

“I… yeah, okay.” I flexed my knee experimentally, and felt that much of the pain had gone out of it. It still ached a little, and likely would for the rest of the week, but I could move. A quick look at Mom told me it was okay to get up, so I swung my legs over the edge, set my hooves down on the floor, and pushed up carefully. There was a definite twinge in my right knee, but nothing I couldn’t handle.

Well, not until I tried to take a step, at least. My knee buckled and I fell forward, right into Mom, who’d positioned herself to catch me.

“Let’s not be so hasty!” She hoisted me up and back onto the cot, then checked to make sure I hadn’t pulled my IV out. “You lay back down for a bit and let yourself heal. Now get out the starfish again,” she nudged me, “and we’ll try again in a few minutes.”

“But the match—!” Mom silenced my protest with a glare and a poke in the side. I grumbled, but set my Quirk back to healing my knee.

Damn it. So much for watching the finals…

* * * * *

I managed to get out of Recovery Girl’s office just in time to catch the tail end of Ba—Katsuki, gotta remember that, Katsuki’s fight with Todoroki. The two of them stood in another mini-arena of ice, and Todoroki reached out to grab Bakugou with his left arm. His fire arm.

“Shit,” I murmured, worrying at my thumbnail. A small tug on my tail and shoulder led me to a seat, and I quickly found myself sitting next to Ibara.

“He won’t use it,” she said, and true to her words, Todoroki simply tossed Katsuki and sent ice coursing towards him. Katsuki just blew it away and closed towards Todoroki’s left side. I thought that maybe this time he’d bring that fire out again and toast Katsuki, but no. He just slid away on his
ice, but was close enough that the shockwave sent him flying further away until he caught himself on even more ice.

“You bastard!” Katsuki roared, explosions flickering between his hands. “The fuck you doing!? I want a real win, not this half-assed shit you’re giving me! It’s not worth it if I can’t force you to fight like you did against Deku! It’s not worth it if you won’t fight like Kanna did! If you ain’t gonna fight like they did, like you actually want to win, then why the fuck are you even here!?”

Katsuki fired down at the ground to gain height. I gasped and gripped the armrest tighter; he was going to do that again, wasn’t he!? I looked to Todoroki. He flexed his left arm, raising it slightly, but then let it fall back down. The frost crept higher up his body, rising to his neck and face, and—

“Todoroki-kun!” Midoriya yelled, standing up and knocking Uraraka away slightly. “Don’t lose! You can do this!!”

Life seemed to flow back into Todoroki, and he brought his left arm across his body. Even as Katsuki began his spin, the frost faded away into steam. Fire ignited along Todoroki’s left half, and he brought his burning hand to bear in Katsuki’s direction.

“Howitzer—”

But then, right as I saw Katsuki maneuver himself into the perfect position for Todoroki to strike…

The fire went out.

“IMPACT!”

All that momentum, all the air and particulates Katsuki had built up around him, all of it ignited in that one instant. The shockwave of his sudden, improvised fuel-air explosion sent us rocking back into our seats, shattered all the ice Todoroki had left behind in the arena, and showered us with frigid wind.

“Whoa! Just like he tried against Yaseiki, Bakugou added momentum and rotation to the huge blast he used against Uraraka! He was like a human missile! Oi Aizawa, why’d you stop it the first time, that was amazing! And it looks like even though Todoroki didn’t use that left side of his the same way he did against Midoriya, he may have still been able to absorb the blast!”

Holy shit…

“There but for the grace of God go you, Kanna-chan,” Ibara murmured, crossing herself. “That was…” She fell silent, unsure what to say.

“Y-yeah…”

“Oh, the dust’s clearing! Midnight, who’s the winner!?”

We looked intently at the center of the arena. Katsuki pushed himself up from where he’d landed after his attack, staring at the edge of the arena. Todoroki lay there, collapsed against a hastily-erected wall of ice, well out of bounds of the arena proper.

“Todoroki is out of bounds!” Midnight announced, hand raised high. “Bakugou is the winner!”
The crowd burst into cheers. But as I watched, Katsuki walked over to where Todoroki lay. He said something, I couldn’t hear what over the roar of the crowd, before he shoved his hands in his pockets and turned around.

“And our contest concludes in explosive fashion! The First-Year winner of the UA Sports Festival is none other than Bakugou Katsuki of Class 1-A!”

* * * * *

“All of the first-year events for this year’s UA Sports Festival have concluded!” Midnight announced. “And now, we will begin the award ceremony!”

I could hear the celebratory fanfare and pyrotechnics going off from our place down below the field proper. The platform shook beneath my hooves, and with a final burst of confetti, fireworks, and artificial smoke, it began to raise. To my right, Katsuki crossed his arms and turned away from Todoroki, not even looking at our year’s second-place finisher.

“Tch.” He looked down towards me, flashing a grin. “Rather you or Four-Eyes were there. Fucker doesn’t deserve it.”

I sighed, looking next to me where Tenya should have been standing. He’d been gone by the time I’d gotten out to see the end of Katsuki’s match, and when I retrieved my phone, there’d been a brief message that something had happened with Tensei. There had also been a message from Dad, saying he’d be coming by to see me tonight, but that had been about it. Something about it seemed… it was off.

“In third place, we have both Yaseiki Kanna and Iida Tenya. However, Iida-kun was forced to leave early due to a family emergency. We hope everyone will understand!” Midnight announced. I shifted slightly, suddenly aware of the attention I was getting, and couldn’t but look away from the crowd. This much attention, it… I mean, during the actual tournament it was easy enough to ignore. I wasn’t actually focused on the crowd, or the cameras, or the media, or the media’s cameras, or… holy crap that was a lot of cameras…

I hurriedly ran a hand through my hair, trying to get it to lay better, checking that it was still pinned back in places and hadn’t started to frizz or curl at all. I mean, it does tend to frizz up a bit if I use an electric organ morph, and for that to be on national television? Oh no, please don’t tell me I’m blushing, I don’t want to—

“Oi.” I looked to Katsuki, who fixed me with a stern expression. “Calm the fuck down. Your hair’s fine.” I bit back my knee-jerk response of ‘says you’, and thought better of what I was about to say, fiddling with a stray lock that just refused to stay behind my shoulders.

“T-thanks.”

“And now!” Principal Nedzu jolted me out of my reverie with a clap of his paws. Presenting the medals for our First Years, the one, the only!”

Laughter rang out from the top of the arena, punctuated by another burst of smoke and confetti. Silhouetted by the sun, a figure appeared, instantly recognizable by the shape of his hair, the cut of his figure.
“I am—!”

The audience went wild, and with a great leap, he was airborne.

“Here with the medals!”

All Might landed on the ground with a thud, surprisingly soft given the distance he’d traveled. He stood up from his three-point landing and flashed a thumbs-up to the audience. Predictably enough, they went nuts. Cameras flashed one after the other after the other, and I had to actually bring a hand over my eyes to keep from seeing spots.

“Now, All Might shall present the medals, beginning with third place.”

Midnight took the proffered medals and offered the bronze back to All Might. He took it from her and approached the podium, climbing the steps to stand in front of me. I looked up to meet his gaze, and despite the heat in my cheeks, I couldn’t help the smile that formed as I saw his glowing, radiant expression.

“Yaseiki-shoujo, congratulations!” I lowered my head, both to hide the blush from the cameras and so he could lower the medal over my head. “One year ago, I said I hoped to see you among us. And now I can say I am proud to see you standing here.”

“I…” I looked back down. “T-thank you.”

“You still have much work to do, though!” He put a hand on my shoulder, and I looked up to meet his gaze now. “You need to work on your transformation speed, and ways to combine its two facets. You’ve honed your mind to match the demands it places on your knowledge level. Now hone your Quirk so it can keep up with your mind.”

And then All Might hugged me. I stiffened up for a moment before hugging him back, leaning into it for as long as I could get away with before he had to pull away. He stepped down the stairs to my podium and up to Todoroki’s.

“Todoroki-shounen, congratulations.” He placed the medal around Todoroki’s neck. “I notice you held back in the final. I assume there is a reason you chose not to use your left side?”

“I… after my match with Midoriya, I feel like I lost my way. I know you’ve taken an interest in him, All Might… I think I see why.” He paused. “I’ve always wanted to become a hero like you, All Might… I can’t just forget and ignore what’s happened. It’s not enough to do that, I… there’s still something I have to settle.”

“Hmm…” All Might paused, and I got the feeling he was hugging Todoroki too. “That’s a new look I’m seeing on your face, Todoroki-shounen. Say no more; whatever it is you need to settle, I’m sure you can do it.” All Might stepped down from the podium and now rose to meet Katsuki, “Bakugou-shounen.” He lowered the medal around Katsuki’s neck, stood up, and smiled. “You lived up to your promise. Wonderful!”

“This damn medal doesn’t mean shit,” he murmured. “Half-n-Half didn’t go all out.”

“Nevertheless!” All Might continued on, undaunted. “In a world that’s constantly graded on a curve, there aren’t many who can continuously be on top. Even so!” All Might went in for a hug, but
Katsuki stepped back slightly, just in time for All Might to lose his balance, which set me off in a fit of giggles. He faltered, but settled for a hand on the shoulder instead. “Bear that medal as a sign: that you do not compromise, that you refuse to give anything less than all of your potential!”

All Might hopped down from the podium, and posed for the audience.

“Well then! These are your winners! But hold on, everyone.” He swept a hand over all of our classmates. “Everyone here today has the potential to be standing up here, as you all witnessed! Competition! Encouragement! Pushing each other to climb higher and higher! The sprouts of today will grow into the heroes of tomorrow! In that spirit, let’s have one final cheer!” He raised a finger skyward, in the classic pose memorialized by so many figures. “Everyone, say it with me! One, two, and Go Beyond!”

“PLUS ULTRA!!!!”

* * * * *

Once we’d made it off the arena floor, Katsuki and I headed back towards Recovery Girl’s office. It wasn’t just the two of us, though. Somebody else apparently needed to surrender his body to her tender mercies.

“Oi Deku, go a different direction damn it!”

“B-but Kacchan, this is the only way to the infirmary!”

Yeah, it would seem Midoriya needed to go back to Recovery Girl as well. She’d healed up his burnt hand, but hadn’t done more than set his broken arm in a cast and hang it in a sling. His fingers looked to be mostly fine, though the skin was a shade lighter, and seemed somewhat shiny when I looked at it.

“Whatever, damn nerd,” he grumbled. “Kanna, leg fine?”

“It’s fine, Katsu,” I groused. “Just like the last three times you asked. A bit of a twinge, nothing I can’t handle for a little meep—” I froze. Somebody was grabbing my tail. Somebody had a hold of my tail, and was running a finger along it.

“Interesting!” Another voice, thickly accented, broke in from behind me. “Zhe skin along your tail is tougher zhan normal. Accident? By design? How curious!”

“Hey!” Katsuki turned, hands igniting. “The fuck are you—”

“And you, herr winner!” He let go of my tail and bustled over to Katsuki, scooping a test tube along his palm between explosions. Katsuki himself froze at this, raw confusion replacing his anger. “Your sweat is an actual explosive, but what of the mechanism? How do you ignite it, simply by thought, or perhaps somezhing else? A chemical marker in your sweat, a near-undetectable emission of light?” The tall German who’d been speaking with Hatsume Mei earlier turned back to me, and I finally got a look at the badge hanging around his neck. It identified him as a representative of the support companies, but he moved too quickly for me to catch sight of his name. “Und your biology! How does it maintain compatibility despite such varied genetics? Crustacean and mammalian anatomy, coexisting seamlessly!”
“E-excuse me!” Midoriya broke in, only to be ignored by this loon in front of us.

“How is it zhat Quirks allow such anatomies that seem to have no biological viability? Plastics and adhesive stored in zhe body, organic combustion engines not powered by hydrocarbons, a wildly impossible calorie to mass produced ratio, these seem to make zero sense! I woulnd not know, I am Quirkless myself und have no personal reference for zhis phenomenon, but zhat is why it is so fascinating!” He adopted a thinker’s pose for a moment, then rounded on me once again. “Oh, but zhere was one that seemed explicable, entirely by an exotic chemical in zhe blood! What’s the name, you mentioned it already frau Third Place, what vas it… Appalachian, Cannibal—no no, Vendigo!”

Katsuki rushed forward and threw the strange man against the wall, then grabbed me and Midoriya and pulled us away from the crazy. Midoriya protested, but soon enough we were at Recovery Girl’s office, catching our breath.

“You see that fucker again,” Katsuki said, voice low and deliberate, “get away. I don’t care if he works for those support groups, he creeps the shit out of me.”

I didn’t answer. I just ran my fingers along the medal around my neck, even as Katsuki put a hand on my shoulder and guided me inside Recovery Girl’s office.

No biological viability. That’s how he’d been talking about Quirks. But when he looked for one that seemed to have an explanation, he’d twiggled on one specific example. He’d selected the one Quirk I hated most in the entire world.

I didn’t even notice when Recovery Girl slid the IV into the back of my right hand, nor did I really register her kiss. Even as the fatigue overtook me, and I lay back on the cot and closed my eyes, I only had one thought.

Who was that man?

And what does he know about the Wendigo?
Chapter Forty-Two

If you’ve ever woken up with an IV in your arm, then you know just how uncomfortable it can be. You want to move your hand, or elbow, or wherever the damn thing is, but you can’t because there’s a stiff thing stuck in there. It’s cold, it’s hard, it’s annoying, but you also don’t want to move too much because it’ll suddenly become painful. When I woke up in the infirmary, it was to an obnoxious sound, along with an annoying, sliding sensation in my right hand; a look at my right hand brought the memory of Recovery Girl stabbing me with yet another needle rushing back. That woman and her needles… her cane was a fully-functional giant needle, she probably had multiple different gauge needles in her pockets, and all sorts of different tinctures and concoctions to inject and help her Quirk’s healing along.

A quick glance to the right showed me that Recovery Girl was busy at her desk, mumbling to herself about impetuous, hyper-competitive teens. If I had to guess, she was getting her charting out of the way so that she could relax and head home once all of us woke up and headed home. I looked to my left and saw that while Midoriya was nowhere to be found, Katsuki was sleeping on his cot, IV bag nearly empty. Also, that obnoxious sound? Well, while Katsuki doesn’t snore, he does grind his teeth in his sleep. This… this actually doesn’t surprise me as much as I thought it would. Now that I thought about it, he’d been very careful to control his anger around me, but he was still prone to that particular emotion. It really didn’t surprise me that it came out in his sleep… though I really don’t want to be the dentist that has to take care of all the cracks and chips he’s bound to cause with that. And also… oh. Ohoho. Oh, this is just too perfect of a chance.

I flexed my right hand experimentally, and couldn’t help but marvel at Recovery Girl’s skill. She’d slid this needle into my vein without so much as looking, and it didn’t seem to obstruct the natural motion of my hand in the slightest. Yes, it was somewhat uncomfortable if I tried to move my hand too far over towards my left, but that was to be expected; the needle was, after all, pulling against the rest of my skin when I did that. I looked over my shoulder and saw that my own near-empty IV bag hung on one of those wheeling poles, the type that you can grab onto and wheel along while you walk down the hall. An experimental flex of my right knee was all I needed to know that it was fully healed, if more than a little stiff, and I carefully sat up on my cot. I slung my legs over the right side and set my hooves down on the ground, letting my right leg take my weight first to make sure there wasn’t any issues before standing up fully. A quick use of my Quirk ignited a green aura over my hooves in the shape of cat’s paws, and I padded over towards Katsuki’s cot, careful to make as little noise as possible. I reached out for his right hand and oh-so-slowly moved it over his phone’s fingerprint scanner, and I didn’t bother to hide the evil little grin that spread across my face when it unlocked.

Alright, first thing’s first: picture. I tapped open his phone’s camera app and flipped it around, then leaned in close to Katsuki. I winked at the camera and took a picture, then opened his photo library and added a caption, labeling the picture ‘Sleeping Beauty and Princess Charming’. I doubt he’ll get the reference, but oh well. Now that that’s out of the way… I opened up his contacts and created a new one for myself, using the picture I just took, and sent that one to myself as a text message so I’d have his number. I considered sending it to 1-A’s Line group chat for a moment, but then promptly decided against it. I could share this with Pony, Tsuyu, Momo, Monoma, Ibara, and even Tenya, but there was no way in hell that I was going to give some of the people in our class (especially Tohru!) that kind of military-grade ammunition.
I was about to put Katsuki’s phone back down when curiosity got the better of me, and I tapped back to access the rest of his text messages. Aside from the one I’d just sent to myself, the second most recent was from… crap, how am I supposed to read those kanji. Hika—no that’s not right, not in concert with the other one. Kou—? No, “Bakugou ‘something’kou” just doesn’t sound right. Ugh… wait, this is one of those annoying offbeat readings, isn’t it? Okay, it’s probably either Katsuki’s mom or dad, so maybe a similar reading? Damn it, why do people keep diving deep into the more archaic readings for kanji when picking names?! This is like… I dunno, an Englishman naming their kid Llewellyn! Ugh… I can’t believe this. I’m going to need a dictionary to find this one.

I reached into my own pocket and looked up that particular character, and finally came up with a possibility that made some sense for the first one: ‘mitsu’. So add the second character and we’ll get, uh… shit. Mitsuna? Mitsuku? Mitsu… ki! That’s it! Mitsuki!

Word to the wise: if you’re trying to learn Japanese, make sure you have a damn good resource with you. Trying to learn new kanji, or even new readings for kanji you already know, is a pain in the tail. Literally, because I’d just smacked mine into the railing of my own cot at the realization, and it smarted something awful!

Alright, back on topic… so. Mitsuki. That’s a feminine name, so… Katsuki’s mom. Okay. This, I have got to snoop on. Invasion of privacy? Maybe. Okay, fine, yes it is. But damn it, I’m too damn curious. I’ll apologize later!

I tapped the conversation to pull it open, started reading… and felt myself blush deeper than I had in a long, long time.

Oi old hag I need some advice

Katsuki if you lost your wallet again I swear by all the Kami I will whoop your ass into next Tuesday!

I think I might have a girlfriend

…

Are you fucking serious Katsuki

What do I do
Fuck woman I said ‘might’
How do I tell
There’s no manual for this shit

… Katsuki, you better not have knocked that girl up or so help me…

WTF NO ARE YOU FUCKING CRAZY

WELL WHEN YOU PICK UP SOME GIRL I’VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE IN A BRIDAL CARRY
WTF AM I SUPPOSED TO THINK
THERE ARE RULES IN THIS HOUSE YOUNG MAN
YOU TELL ME WHEN YOU LIKE A GIRL SO I CAN KNOCK SOME SENSE INTO YOUR DAMN HEAD
OR DO I NEED TO REMIND YOU ABOUT YUKIKO

FUK U
NO THANKS
KATSUKI
KATSUKI ANSWER YOUR FUCKING PHONE WHEN I'M CALLING YOU
WE ARE GOING TO BE HAVING WORDS WHEN YOU GET HOME YOU LITTLE SHIT

This…

I put the phone down.

Wow. Okay.

Katsuki’s mom is just as vitriolic as he is. Should’ve known something like that would run in the family, but still. I tapped back to exit the conversation and started looking for wherever his dad was. If his mom is like that, was his dad the same way too? Or maybe—

“Ahem.”

I froze. Then slowly, ever so slowly, I turned around.

And came face to face with Recovery Girl, who was now standing on my vacated cot with a very bemused expression on her face.

“I’m fairly certain that isn’t your phone,” she said. I blushed, exited out to the home screen, locked Katsuki’s phone, and put it back down. “Good. Now!” Recovery Girl lifted her needle-cane, still capped thankfully, and jabbed Katsuki in the side. “Wake up, you damn layabout! I’ve got four more days of Sports Festival to prepare for, and I need you lot out so I can do it!”

“Kill that damn—stupid fucking…” Katsuki mumbled and grumbled, but eventually his eyes blinked open. He looked at me blearily, and blinked a few times. “The fuck’re you doing in my room.”

“Sorry,” I said, “still in the infirmary. Though I really don’t want to know how lumpy your bed is if you thought this was it.”

Before Katsuki could say anything, Recovery Girl jabbed him in the side again, which had him flailing and wide awake in an instant. She hopped from my cot down onto her rolling desk chair, which she’d somehow gotten next to me, and grabbed my right hand. Before I could say anything, she removed the IV from the back of my hand and slapped a cotton ball down over the entry site, which she covered with a blue-and-gold All Might-themed band-aid. Then she turned to Katsuki. Eager to get his IV out, he offered up his arm, only to receive a pink Recovery Girl-themed band-aid instead of an All Might one. He looked about to complain, but a brief look from Recovery Girl was all it took to get Katsuki to stay quiet.

“You two are free to go,” Recovery Girl said, giving us each a look. “Yaseiki, take it easy for the next couple of days. Nothing more than some light stretches and calisthenics to get the stiffness out of your leg. Bakugou, not even that, and don’t go using your Quirk if you don’t have to. Give your hands and arms some time to recover.” She pointed her cane my way. “If you have any questions, I’m going to be very busy these next few days, so just ask your mother. And if you,” she pointed at Katsuki now, “have any questions—”

“You’re gonna be busy, ask her mom, I fucking get it!” Katsuki yelled.
“Good.” She tapped her cane on the floor. “Now, if there was nothing else—”

“A-actually!” I spoke up. “There, uh, there was something that happened while we were walking over here?” Recovery Girl fixed me with a look, then beckoned for me to continue on. “Uh,” I floundered for a moment, “t-this really creepy foreign guy showed up out of nowhere and he… uh, well…”

“Fucker started treating us like his personal lab rats,” Katsuki supplied, hands already shoved deep into his pockets.

“Hmm…” Recovery Girl hopped down from her desk chair and walked to her desk, then opened up the filing cabinet. “This person wouldn’t have had a badge, would they?”

“H-he did,” I confirmed. “I, well I didn’t catch the name on it, but it was a support company badge.”

She slammed the filing cabinet shut, far harsher than I’d expected her to.

“Those bloody support crews!” Recovery Girl griped, voice heated. “I keep saying that they shouldn’t be allowed to just mingle, that we need to go back to making appointments like fifteen years ago, but does anybody listen to me?” She slammed her cane on the floor; Katsuki and I both jumped at the noise. “Let me just say this: you two are not the first to mention issues with support company representatives. Now, you said it was a foreigner, yes?”

“Accent was so fucking thick I could swim through it,” Katsuki said.

“… not the analogy I’d have used,” I mumbled. “Oh, right! Uh, I think he’s German? I heard him talking to the Hatsume Mei earlier, right? The support course finalist?”

“That will be more than enough information for me to work with,” Recovery Girl interjected. “Thank you very much for bringing this to my attention, you two. Now… unless you want to help me prepare the infirmary for the second years?”

Katsuki and I left the infirmary so fast I’m pretty sure we set a new land speed record.

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So it turns out that either Katsuki lives in the same direction that Pony and I do, or he lives close enough to take the local metro in the mornings, which is also in the same direction that Pony and I go (Tsuyu takes a different line, whose station is in the opposite direction). Whichever one it was, I found Katsuki accompanying me on my walk back home, which, since neither of us really knew what to say… was a very awkward affair. I wasn’t quite sure what to say to him, especially after what I’d seen on his phone, and I’m fairly certain he was in the same boat. Plus, it’s not like I could just come out and say it. I mean really, I’m not going to admit that I’d unlocked his phone and peeked at his text messages! That was… well, uh.

You know what? In hindsight, that wasn’t my best idea. There are some things I really wish I didn’t know. Plus it raised a tricky question, one that didn’t have any particularly good answers. Namely… what were Katsuki and I? I mean, Mom had been pretty damn clear when she hit us both over the head with a Clue-by-Four, but that didn’t actually help when it came to working things out! Yes, fine. I’ll admit it. I have a bit of a crush on Katsuki, though I couldn’t tell you where the damn thing
even came from. And apparently he has a crush on me, though I’ll be damned if I know what I did to merit that. W-well, I mean, I know I could be considered conventionally pretty, I’ve spent enough time learning from my mom and looking over Pony’s shoulder at some of the fashion and beauty magazines she brings back from her annual trips to the States to know how to take care of my skin and my hair and how to do makeup and all that, but still! It’s just… I mean, well it’s… ugh, this is such a mess! I’ve been a teenager before, I should know how all this stuff goes! Why is it so damn frustrating!?

You know what? No. I’m not going to think about this. Instead, I’m chalking it up to hormones. There, it’s all my hormones’ fault.

The two block walk from UA to my apartment complex seemed to last forever, but finally I stood in front of it.

“T-this is me,” I stuttered, brushing a stray lock of hair back behind my ear. “Uh, well, I… guess I’ll see you, um—”

“Hey,” Katsuki interrupted. “You like arcades?”

“… w-what?” I floundered, surprised at the seeming non-sequitur. “I mean, y-yeah, I guess, but, um, well…” I trailed off.

“If you’re free tomorrow, there’s a good one near here,” he said. “This is your place, yeah?”

“Y-yes!”

“Hn.” He gave me a look, a nod, then a grin. “Noon.” And then he turned to walk off.

I…

I just stood there. Watching him leave.

My mind only caught back up with reality once he rounded a corner and was out of sight.

Did… did I just get told that I’m going on a, well… not-date with Katsuki tomorrow!? That… nope! Not going to think about it. Going to think about literally anything else. Like the fact that I stink to high heavens, and really, really want to take a shower!

I walked up the stairs to my apartment, but before I could so much as put the key in the door it flew open, Pony grabbed me, and I was pulled off my hooves and into the apartment proper. The door closed behind me, and the next thing I knew, I’d been forcibly stripped, tugged into the bathroom, and bodily tossed into the already-running shower.

“Don’t forget to wash your hair!” Pony called back on her way out. “Momo said dinner’s on her parents! There’s clothes on your bed; fix your hair and get on some makeup once you’re done, ‘kay!”

Standing there under the hot shower stream, I couldn’t help but sigh. Looks like once again, I’d been displaced by Hurricane Pony.

At least she’d actually warmed the shower up first this time!
Say what you will about Pony, that girl has some serious fashion sense. She had on a forest-green sleeve dress that stopped just above her knee, and had picked out a cream-colored blouse and navy skirt for me. I’d been ambushed with a blow-dryer the instant I’d finished drying off, and thanks to that my hair fell in light waves to just above my shoulders. Pony went in for more-or-less full makeup, but I’d put my hoof down and stuck with nothing more than eyeliner and lip gloss. I really don’t like how most foundation feels, and while getting taken out for a celebratory dinner by the Yaoyorozu was definitely a special occasion, I was going to be around friends, and didn’t particularly care to use the one liquid foundation I’d found that didn’t bother me after half an hour. Besides, it was just dinner with friends, right?

Well… once we arrived at our destination, I regretted that decision, because Momo’s parents had reserved the entirety of a three-star Michelin restaurant for us.

“Kanna-chan, Pony-chan!” Momo greeted us when we arrived, and guided us over to the rest. Her parents sat at the far end, speaking with somebody that I assumed was the chef, and I soon found myself sandwiched between Tsuyu on one side and Ibara on the other. Pony and Monoma had the left-most seats, followed by Ibara and myself, then Tsuyu and Momo, and lastly Momo’s parents on the far right. “Just in time, Amegiri-dono was just about ready to start the omakase!”

“R-really!” I said, suddenly self-conscious. Momo’s dress was gorgeous, perfectly-tailored red silk hugging her body and emphasizing her figure in ways that made me feel completely inadequate. Ibara’s own, more conservative mode of dress made me feel somewhat more comfortable… until I looked at Monoma, and saw that he was wearing a three-piece suit, with a waitress coming by and taking the jacket to go hang up. A quick glance at Tsuyu wasn’t reassuring either, especially since her lily pad-green dress seemed to be of similar quality to Momo’s. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if Momo’d had it made specifically for Tsuyu, just so she’d have it ready for tonight… or if Momo had wolfed down one of her calorie bars and then made it for Tsuyu right on the spot.

“This is the nicest restaurant I’ve ever been to,” Tsuyu said, pink cheeks giving away the embarrassment her expression hid. The waitress, dressed in a fine silk kimono, came by and offered us warm towels to wash our hands. I took mine gingerly, as did Tsuyu and Ibara, but Momo simply shook hers out with aplomb and set about wiping and cleaning her hands with the towel before setting it in front of her. “I almost feel like I shouldn’t be eating here.”

“Oh come now!” Momo’s father, a tall, yet trim man dressed similarly to Monoma, spoke up. “Each and every one of you has every right to be here. We only get three chances to celebrate the closing of your Sports Festivals, and if we are to celebrate, it will be done properly.” He clapped his hands, and the immediately bustled over to him. “Whichever Junmai-Dai you would suggest… and eight glasses,” he said with a conspiratorial wink.

“F-father!” Momo gasped. “But we’re—”

“Celebrating!” He interrupted. “Assuming that’s okay with you, Amegiri-dono?”

“Officially Sushi Iwa is closed,” the chef said, fastidiously slicing and setting tuna out on the counter before us, starting with Momo’s mother and moving to his right. “If we’re closed, then we certainly aren’t serving alcohol to minors, now are we?” He looked up with a wink, and set the first course out on the counter: albacore sashimi, sliced nearly as thick as my thumb. Chef Amegiri hustled along the counter and placed fish out for everybody, and once all of us had our first course, he clapped his
hands. “Now then, eat, eat! Ayaka-chan will bring the sake by shortly, but please!”

At his gesture, all of us picked up our chopsticks and clapped our hands.

“Itadakimasu!”

I took the first bite of sashimi, and… and…

“Oh my god,” Ibara said next to me. I didn’t respond.

I was too busy experiencing heaven in food form.

I’d only just finished the second piece when the sake came around, and took the cup immediately. Now let me be frank: I know my sake. My first time around, it was my favorite alcohol. But this? This was the single best sake I’d ever tasted. It was smooth as silk, with a light, refreshing feel, and a hint of fruit in the taste. There were wide eyes from all of us teens, except Momo, who just smiled while drinking from her cup with closed eyes and an expression of content.

The meal continued apace, and the chef continued to surprise us with amazing creations, each and every one delicious: fresh squid with lime and salt. Abalone filled with sea urchin, sweet as sugar with a slight aftertaste similar to seaweed. Horse mackerel that the chef had fished up himself last week, on an expedition to find a fish that was not supposed to be properly in season until August. Tuna, swordfish, barracuda, crab, lobster, even the terrifying pufferfish found its way onto our plates, which most of us (myself, Momo, and her parents excluded) only ate once the chef and I pointed out the antivenin, kept in a case just behind us.

It was only as we neared the last courses that we found the one thing I wouldn’t eat.

“See how it’s still moving?” Chef Amegiri poked the tiger prawn on the bed of ice, and its antennae twitched, legs trying to move despite the chill. He picked the prawn up, snapped off its head, and got to work de-shelling the poor thing. Even while he worked to remove the exoskeleton, its legs still twitched, and the muscle that he handled and prepared for sushi actually moved on its own within his hands. He expertly removed the digestive tract, prepared the shrimp for consumption, and placed it on rice in front of Momo’s father. Then he began grabbing more tiger prawns and going down the line.

By the time he got to me, I’d pushed myself as far back as I could, not even caring if it was rude or not.

“Kanna-chan?” Momo asked, washing down her own ama-ebi with sake. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, right!” Pony piped up. “Kanna won’t eat shrimp. Like, at all. Ever.”

“Really?” Tsuyu asked. I shook my head, pushing away from the freshly-slain shrimp that sat on the counter before me.

“S-someone else can have it,” I said, voice weak.

“Kero.” Tsuyu just shrugged before her tongue shot out and grabbed the ama-ebi, which she ate with gusto. “So Kanna-chan will eat abalone, sea urchin, and all sorts of other shellfish and seafood, but not shrimp?”
“No.” I grabbed my sake and slammed it back, then set the little cup down on the table rather harshly. “More sake, please.”

“I think perhaps we should cut you off,” Momo’s mom said, voice lightly chiding. I fixed her with a look.

“Please.”

* * * * *

Okay. I’ll admit. I might have had a little too much to drink. In my defense, I haven’t had a chance to properly drink for nearly sixteen years, and haven’t had a chance to build up any sort of tolerance in this lifetime. Then again, I could probably have shifted my liver into one that was more effective at handling alcohol, like… uh… crap, whatever that shrew is that spends its entire life drunk off its gourd.

“Come on Kanna,” Pony coaxed. “Wake up, we’re here, out of the limo.”

“But it’s so comfy,” I groaned, burrowing further into Ibara’s shoulder. She sighed, and next thing I knew I was wrapped up in vines and bodily lifted out of the car. “Aww…”

“Rest well, Kanna-chan!” Momo called from inside the limo.

“If you have a hangover,” Tsuyu said, “I’ll bring some live shrimp over to snap you out of it.”

“Tsuyu?” I said, trying to glare at her through the limo’s windows. “You’re evil. Evil I say, evil. Say it with me now, eeeeeeecviciiiiiiiiil.”

“Alright Kanna, come on!” Pony nudged me in the side and tugged on my tail. “Let the nice driver take everyone else home. Night everybody!” She waved at the remaining three of our friends as the limo drove off, then steered me towards the stairs. “Alright Kanna, one at a time. Or two at a time I guess, if you’re seeing double.”

“Damn it Pony, I’m not drunk…” I stumbled on one of the steps, and caught myself with the handrail. I looked at Pony to see her stifling a laugh. “Oh shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“Whatever…”

We ascended the steps and headed over to our apartment. I rummaged around in my purse for the keys as we rounded the corner, but couldn’t seem to find them. Damn it, this purse isn’t even that big, how does it still manage to act like a damn black hole for—

“Kanna-chan.”

I froze, and looked up. There, standing in front of our apartment and leaning against the balcony—

“D-dad?” I stammered.
“I’m sorry for coming by so late,” he said. He… Dad’s voice sounded *dead*. I put a hand on the balcony and took a closer look, then had to keep myself from reacting. Dad looked *terrible*. “I need to talk to you two.”

“I-is everything alright, Uncle K?” Pony asked. “Are you okay?”

“I…” He sighed. “I’m sorry, you two. It’s been a long day.”

“It’s okay Dad.” I unlocked the apartment door and flicked on the light, then stood aside to let him in. Pony followed behind and shut the door. “What is it? What’s the matter?”

Dad came over and took one of my hands in his, and took one of Pony’s in his other.

“Dad? Y-you’re scaring me.”

“The Hero Killer attacked Ingenium.”

W-what?

“We got to him as soon as we could, but… we weren’t fast enough. When I left to come here, the prognosis was grim.” He looked away.

“Girls… Iida Tensei may not live through the night.”
Chapter Forty-Three

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the delay folks. Some shit IRL has been going on. Not going to get into it here; if you find this fic's thread on SpaceBattles or Sufficient Velocity forums, info is there. Not gonna go fishing for sympathy; that's not what y'all clicked here for.

[Earlier That Evening]

“Oh my God.”

It took all of Momo’s self-control to keep from gaping slightly at the exclamation. Not at the content, no; she’d heard far worse from Kanna, Pony, and Monoma in terms of expletives. Instead, her surprise came from the fact that of all the people to say that particular phrase, it was Ibara. The devout Catholic who, if Momo was being honest, had a tiny bit of a complex about people saying ‘god’ without reverence. It gave Momo some pause, and she looked between her friends’ rapturous expressions, Chef Amegiri’s smug smile, and the sashimi she still held in her chopsticks. With a mental shrug, she ate her own sashimi, and savored the taste with eyes closed. Times like these reminded her that, in some ways, she lived in a very different world than her friends.

“If heaven has a taste,” Pony whispered, “I think I know what it is now.”

“Delicious, isn’t it?” The chef continued his work even while talking, slicing and scoring tender pieces of squid before topping them with lemon juice and finely-chopped green onion.

“This doesn’t even need soy sauce,” Tsuyu said after eating her second piece. “It practically melts in my mouth. I don’t even need to chew.”

“Indeed.” Chef Amegiri placed the next course on the counter, then excused himself for a moment. Momo took her piece of squid with her fingers, dipped it flesh-first into her soy sauce, and then placed the entire piece of sushi into her mouth in one go. A quick glance at the rest of her friends showed Kanna and Monoma doing the same, while Ibara, Pony, and Tsuyu all resorted to using chopsticks. Monoma she wasn’t surprised about, he did come from money… but either Kanna well and truly enjoyed eating with her fingers when given the opportunity, or she knew her sushi etiquette. Yes, believe it or not, sushi was finger food. Not rolls, really, but proper sushi. The technically ‘correct’ way to eat sushi was by picking it up with your fingers, dipping it fish- or meat-side down in soy sauce (or not at all, in certain cases), and then placing the entire piece in your mouth in one go. If, however, your mouth is too small to fit it all, then it’s acceptable to split it into two bites. Momo needed two bites, and despite her valiant efforts to the contrary, Kanna did as well. Although when Monoma showed Pony the ‘more fun’ way to eat sushi, she only needed one. For such a small girl…

Momo took a sip of her sake, reveling in the taste. Her parents were of the idea that introducing her to the more ‘intoxicating’ substances earlier on would help her form a more accurate opinion of what they did, as well as her own ability to handle them. She’d been served alcohol at family dinners since her thirteenth birthday, and had partaken of enough ‘illicit’ mind-altering substances to know that she would much rather not do so again. Momo’s mind was her greatest tool, and anything that skewed her thoughts or perception of reality was enough to cause rather strange results… such as the time...
that she’d produced a set of matryoshka made entirely from different solidified animal fats.

Magic mushrooms was not something she ever intended to go near again.

“I return!” The chef announced, with a large fish carcass, sheathed in plastic sheeting, held in his arms. “Say hello to your first course, everybody!” Chef Amegiri turned the fish’s glassy eyes towards them and made snapping motions with its mouth, much to the delight of Momo and her friends. “My father fished this one up just this morning. It’s a particularly large specimen, forty-five kilos.”

“Wh-that’s heavier than I am!” Pony exclaimed.

“Really?” Momo turned to her father, who looked over at Pony curiously. “Tsunotori-san—”

“Just Pony’s fine,” she interrupted.

“In that case, you may call me Issun, if you wish.” Yaoyorozu Issun took a sip of his sake, and Momo took the opportunity to sneak the squid sushi into her mouth.

“Ack! Wasabi!” And if that exclamation was any indication, Kanna had as well. “I, uh, I’m sorry Chef!” She practically bowed in place, blushing madly. “C-coULD you make mine without wasabi from now on?”

“I can,” he confirmed, then handed the great big fish off to one of his sous-chefs to take into the back again. Kanna murmured her thanks and sat back down, then took a big sip of her sake, all while Pony had a hand over her mouth to stifle the giggles.

“Back to what I was saying,” Momo’s father continued, “Pony-san. For you to weigh less than that fish, and yet carry two of your classmates on your back with no strain, you must be quite strong, yes?”

“Wait,” Kanna interjected, “are we talking about the cavalry battle?”

“Right, we never watched that recording!” Pony exclaimed. “Too busy watching the interviews and planning… so!” She clapped her hands. “That kid from the general studies course? His Quirk also erases memories, so Kanna doesn’t even know what she did during the cavalry battle.” Kanna looked into her sake cup, but looked up when the chef brought out the next course, placing eight bowls on the counter, one for each diner. “Ooh, more—uh, what is this?” Pony poked the food, an expression of uncertainty on her face.

“Abalone, thinly sliced and wrapped around sea urchin,” the chef explained. Pony gulped, but picked the sashimi up and put it in her mouth, then chewed experimentally.

An instant later she was turning around with bowl in hand, and covered it with her napkin.

“I’m s-sorry,” she coughed, reaching for her water glass. “Oh jeeze, that must’ve been x0rude…”

“Not at all.” The chef waved off her complaints, expression still pleasant. “The purpose of an omakase is for me to put forth my best, determine what you do and don’t enjoy, and tailor it from there. You’ve put your trust in me for this evening, and I intend to earn it.” He bowed and took the bowl from Pony, and with a gesture, a waitress brought her a new napkin.

“Psst, Pony,” Kanna stage-whispered. “Next time? Big gulp of alcohol, then the unfamiliar food.”

“Kanna-chan, that sounds like something you’ve learned from experience,” Tsuyu added. “How
often have you had alcohol before, or high-quality sushi for that matter?”

“U-uh… I plead the fifth?”

“Kanna, for the last time, this isn’t the United States!” Pony pitched her voice as though it was a yell, but the volume stayed at a normal level.

“I reject your reality and substitute my own!” Kanna proclaimed. “But please, cavalry battle? Somebody fill me in? I feel like I missed something important!”

“You did,” Monoma piped up. “Pony-chan here told me to team with people whose Quirks I could use more easily, then went off and teamed up with Tsuyu, along with the last person I’d have ever expected her to.”

“Please don’t make me play a guessing game,” Kanna deadpanned. Monoma just gave her a look; she sighed. “Okay, okay. Was it Aoyama?” He shook his head. “Shishita?” Again, he shook his head. “Yanagi? Bondo?”

“It was Mineta,” Ibara revealed.

“Wh-seriously!?” Kanna rounded on Pony. “Please, please say he didn’t grope you either.”

“Either?” Pony asked.

“He climbed up Kanna-chan’s shoulders and used her as a steed during the obstacle race,” Momo revealed. “Very briefly, before the robots appeared… and he adhered himself to me instead.” She grimaced, rubbing at the small of her back. Carrying him along had been a rather exhausting endeavor, despite the fact that he’d absorbed many a hit for her, impeded other competitors rather handily, and actually been rather well-behaved during it all.

“He behaved,” Tsuyu continued. “I sat on Pony-chan’s back, he sat on my shoulders and occasionally hopped down to between Pony-chan’s horns.”

“It was a terrifying combination to behold,” Ibara added. “It was not until I intercepted one of Mineta-san’s grapes with my vines that we were able to take the headbands they’d amassed. He and Tsuyu-chan managed to pilfer so many, we could not see his eyes through them.”

“Remind me to do something nice for Mineta,” Kanna said. “Wow, a month ago I never thought I’d say that…”

“And who is this Mineta?” Momo’s mother, Yaoyorozu Kaguya, asked.

“He is one of Ibara-chan, Pony-chan, and Monoma-kun’s classmates in 1-B,” Momo answered. “Unfortunately, he seems to have some rather lewd tendencies, and while he is clearly intelligent, he applies himself more towards perversion than schoolwork.”

“Or at least that was the case,” Monoma added. “Not that you’d know, but he came to me in the locker room one day and asked how he could do better with the girls in our year.” He smirked. “I’m going to go out on a limb and say it helped?”

“Monoma.” Kanna stood from her seat, got up, walked over to Monoma, and bowed at the waist until she was perpendicular to the floor. “You have done this world a great service.”

“S-stop bowing!” He stammered, flushing. “It’s not like I did much!”
“Actually Monoma-kun—ooh, is this mackerel?” Momo interrupted herself to ask the chef when he set the next fish on the counter.

“Horse mackerel,” he revealed.

“But that’s not in season until August!” Issun exclaimed. Chef Amegiri simply smiled, reached below the counter, and produced a map of the Japanese coastline.

“There is a small cove in this relative area,” he brushed a small section of the eastern coastline with his finger, which the map’s scale said was approximately a ten-kilometer stretch, “where you can routinely find large ones all year round. Very small cove, exact location’s a trade secret.”

“But at least I know where to come when I’m craving it!” Kaguya added. “And I suppose we should probably make a reservation for when we celebrate Momo-chan’s internship offers?”

“Mother, those aren’t coming in until next week,” Momo said.

“Momo-chan, dear.” Her mother leaned in, sake cup held in one hand. “Your father and I received word from multiple high-ranked Pro Heroes that they intended to make internship offers based on your performance.”

“A-already?” She squeaked, hastily eating her mackerel as the chef came by with the next round, fatty tuna and tuna belly.

“Mhmm,” she confirmed. “In fact, I would wager most of you received at least one offer apiece just from your performances in the first event. Although given their matches in the finals, your friends Ibara-san and Kanna-san will be fielding a good many offers themselves.”

“Oh, we nearly forgot!” Momo raised her cup in Kanna’s direction, and her other friends followed suit. “A toast to Kanna-chan, for her third-place finish!” Kanna blushed, then sulked.

“Shouldn’t have stung him… Katsuki’s explosions hurt enough normally—”

“Kanna-chan,” Tsuyu interrupted, right as the chef brought out the next pair of fish: barracuda and swordfish. “When did you and Bakugou-san start calling each other by your first names?”

“U-uh.” Kanna took a look around and hid her deepening blush in her sake cup, then quickly ate her sushi to avoid answering. Momo continued to stare at her friend, as did the rest of them, until she finally ate her second piece of sushi, ran out of sake, and drained her water glass. Without any other distractions, she quailed. “Okay, okay! Fine! He, uh, he used my name first, and then, well…” She looked down to the side, hiding her face in her shoulder. “He said if he’s calling me Kanna then I should call him Katsuki.”

“And that’s not all!” Pony leapt in. “He asked her out on a date tomorrow!”

“Pony!” Kanna exclaimed. “It’s n-not a date! It’s just, uh, it’s—”

“Before I bring out the—oh, am I interrupting something?” Chef Amegiri held a box in one hand, and a sheathed knife in the other, which he set down on the table.

“No!” Kanna’s protests were met with some amusement from the chef, but all present deferred attention back to him.

“In that case. Before I prepare the next course, I am obligated by law to inform you that I have antivenin on the premises. With that out of the way…” Chef Amegiri opened the box, and Momo
marveled as he pulled out a fresh *puffer fish*, and began to prepare it in front of them. She looked to her parents, who merely smiled and gestured back at the chef’s display. It was a masterful bit of knife work, caution and care taken to prepare the fish in such a fashion that it remained safe to eat, but many minutes later, Chef Amegiri finished. He prepared the sushi, eschewing the wasabi for all this time, and served it up. Momo watched her mother and father eat first, chewing slowly and thoughtfully.

Of her friends, Tsuyu was first to take the plunge.

“Taste is a bit bland, but feels tingly,” she said. “It’s not something I ever expected to eat, and now that I have, I don’t think I need to again, kero.” At Tsuyu’s declaration, the rest of them ate theirs, and Momo couldn’t help but agree with Tsuyu’s judgment. Somewhat bland in terms of taste, but it left her mouth feeling somewhere between tingly and numb. Chef Amegiri looked over the lot of them, and satisfied with what he saw, he signaled his sous-chef.

“Now that the more sensitive palettes among you are slightly dulled, we should be able to attempt something somewhat more ‘interesting!’” The sous-chef brought out a plate covered with ice, and upon the ice sat a live tiger prawn. “See how it’s still moving?” He poked the tiger prawn, and its antennae twitched, legs trying to grip the slippery ice and push itself to safety. Momo watched the chef pick the prawn up and rip the head off with a quick twist, followed by removing the tail and stripping the chitinous exoskeleton from the meat. With a quick slice, he slit open the creature’s belly and removed the innards, added a dollop of wasabi, set it on rice, and placed the completed ama-ebi in front of Issun. Momo watched her father eat with gusto, and when the third prawn came to her, she ate hers eagerly, savoring the slightly-sweet flavor that earned ama-ebi its name. She washed it down with some sake, and turned to look at her friends… and frowned.

“Kanna-chan? Are you okay?” Kanna had scooted as far back as she could, and stared at the fresh shrimp in front of her like it was… Momo wasn’t sure what to equate that expression with. Chilled monkey brains? Fried cockroaches? She’d heard of many a strange and disgusting food eaten somewhere in the world, and that was definitely the expression on Kanna’s face.

“Oh, right!” Pony piped up. “Kanna won’t eat shrimp. Like, at all. Ever.”

“Really?” Tsuyu asked. Kanna shook her head.

“S-someone else can have it,” she practically whispered. Tsuyu shrugged, and with a ribbit, her tongue shot out to snatch the extra ama-ebi before Momo could offer herself as the recipient.

“So Kanna-chan will eat abalone, sea urchin, and all sorts of other shellfish and seafood, but not shrimp?”

“No.” Momo boggled as Kanna slammed her sake back like a drunkard at last call, and set it down hard on the table. “More sake, please.”

“I think perhaps we should cut you off,” Kaguya chided.

“Please,” Kanna pleaded. Momo looked to her mother, who seemed to ask her father… who shrugged.

“If she’s hung over,” Issun said lightly, “then she can take it as a learning experience.”

Momo wasn’t quite sure she agreed with her father’s judgment… but looking at it from his perspective, she had to admit it was certainly one way to teach that lesson.
The night continued apace, but eventually, all good things must come to an end. Once they’d finished dropping all of her friends off, Momo leaned back into the limousine, eyes closed with contentment. That had been a wonderful meal… and to share it with her friends made it all the better. At times, it was easy to fall into the bad habit of thinking she lived in a different world just because of her family’s wealth. In reality, it was simply another way of seeing the same world, and it was a perspective she could share with others.

“They’re good people.” Momo looked to her mother, who smiled at her. “Your friends, I mean.”

“Yes.” Momo smiled. “They are not perfect, not at all. Pony-chan is perhaps too informal, Monomakun’s competitive streak and Tsuyu-chan’s honesty can be bothersome, Kanna-chan can be incredibly rude, often intentionally, and I worry Ibara-chan focuses too much on her religion. But I have my own flaws.” She looked at her mother. “If they can accept me in spite of mine, then I can do the same, can I not?”

“Indeed.” Issun picked up the remote to the limo’s television and turned it on.

“Issun, dear, can you not wait until we get home?”

“I’ve been out of the loop for several hours now, Kaguya-hime,” he replied, flipping the channel to the news. “Money never sleeps, and the less—oh. Oh dear.”

“What?” Momo and her mother both asked, in unison. He pointed at the headline scrolling along the bottom of the screen.

“Iida Tensei, Pro Hero Ingenium, in critical condition,” Momo read aloud. “Hero Killer still at large in… Hosu…” She turned towards her parents, who looked between one another, expressions grave.

“Issun. Is there something we can do?”

“I don’t know,” he answered his wife honestly. “I’ll make some calls, but I don’t know.”

Momo pulled out her phone and immediately texted Pony and Kanna. The both of them were from Hosu, and were friends with Iida. Maybe they would know something. Maybe they’d know something she could do to help.

And warn their families to keep themselves safe.

* * * * *

*[Now]*

“Girls… Iida Tensei may not live through the night.”

I…


Dad took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. I took the opportunity to slide into a chair, not trusting
my legs to keep me upright for much longer. Whether it was the alcohol, or the shock, or maybe both of them together, I didn’t want to be standing for the rest of this conversation.

“The Hero Killer arrived in Hosu nearly two weeks ago,” he revealed. “He attacked and killed one of Manual’s former sidekicks, a man who’d decided to quit being a hero and open a small business, as far as we know. We’ve been putting out feelers and searching for him since, and today he attacked, but failed to kill, Safari.”

“What?” I asked.

“What? You don’t—right…” Dad pinched the bridge of his nose. “Keep forgetting to tell you… do you remember a few years ago, the teppanyaki restaurant incident?”

“Oh, that guy?” Pony asked. “Wait, you don’t mean that weird ‘vegan vigilante’ guy is a hero now, do you?”

“Not just that. I hired him as my sidekick,” Dad said.

“… you what.”

“Everyone deserves a second chance Kanna-chan,” Dad admonished. “I should know that more than anyone by now.” I winced, but stayed quiet to let Dad continue. “The Hero Killer attacked him, but was driven away from the alleyway he attacked in by a large enough sum of animals to fill it up and hide Safari. He sent out the call, and told him to rendezvous with me. We joined Ingenium, Manual, and their agencies in a grid search.” He looked down. “Ingenium found him first, deep downtown. We tried to get there in time, but it wasn’t enough. All we did was load him into an ambulance.”

Dad…

I got up and gave him a hug, which he returned gladly. Pony joined in, and soon the both of us were hugging him for dear life, hoping that maybe we could make the situation a tiny bit less shitty for him.

“They pulled your mother into surgery as soon as she got back,” he continued. “Too urgent to send someone out of the OR for pharmaceuticals, apparently. And when Tenya got there…” Dad gave a shuddering exhale. “He was inconsolable. They had to sedate Tenya to keep him from trying to barge into the operating theater directly instead of going to the observation area.”

I thought about Tenya, and how he hadn’t been at the awards ceremony. How he’d sent me a vague message that something had come up, and just left. I’m not sure he told anyone else other than Uraraka and Midoriya, because of course he would tell them, but… oh, Tenya.

“Is there anything we can do?” Pony asked.

“I don’t know,” Dad said, shaking his head. “I don’t think there’s anything you can do to help with this Stain business. Just… Tenya’s going to need his friends after this. Both of you, make sure you’re there for him, okay?”

“We will,” I said. “But Dad… what about you?”

“I’ve been thinking about that this whole evening,” he said. “And I… I’m not going to go after Stain. I made the mistake of trying to take down a serial killer by myself once already.” He laughed bitterly, looking at the replacement wedding band he still wore. “Look how far that got me, huh. Still can’t even call your mother.”
“Dad—”

“It’s nothing,” he interrupted. “Not your problem, Kanna-chan.” He looked at me, suddenly serious. “Pony-chan, could I have some time alone with my daughter? There’s something important I need to talk about with her.”

“O-okay,” she said, hesitant. “Uh, should I, like, put on my headphones or something?”

“That would be good of you,” he replied.

“Uh… alright, I guess.” Pony got up and gave me a hug, then walked into her room and closed the door. Dad held up a hand to keep me silent, and waited until we both heard Pony start to hum along with whatever music she had playing, a rather entertaining habit of hers that actually served some use right now.

“Before anything else,” Dad said, “I need to say this: I’m so sorry I wasn’t there to watch you, Kanna-chan. I wanted to, but… duty called.”

“And you’re still on a bit of thin ice,” I added, to which he nodded.

“I watched your matches online.” He pulled me into a hug, and I returned it happily, closing my eyes and burying my face into his shoulder. “I’m so proud of you. You did amazing out there.” He pulled back and put his hands on my shoulders. “But you also scared the living hell out of me in that last match. Kanna-chan, do you know what exactly it was that you used against that Bakugou boy?”

“Uh…” I faltered. “I… no. It was… it was weird,” I admitted, thinking back to the fight. “I wasn’t trying for anything specific, and then suddenly my totem was blue-grey, and I could actually touch things with it, and I was… angry,” I concluded. “There wasn’t really any reason for it. I just remember feeling really good, like I’d woken up from a really good night’s sleep good, but at the same time I was just pissed at everything.” And the more I thought about it, the more accurate that assessment seemed. I’d just been randomly mad at everything. I was suddenly pissed at Present Mic, annoyed with Midnight and Principal Nedzu, furious at the crowd, and was just seething at Katsuki. I think… I think I’d been in a rather literal berserker rage, maybe.

“What you experienced is something you got from my side of the family,” Dad said. “Specifically, from our Navajo side’s first Quirk-user, your many-times great grandfather.”

“Dad, that’s not an explanation,” I replied, both annoyed at the verbal circumlocution he was using and the hints he kept dropping. “If you know what this thing is, just tell me, please?”

“I’m getting there,” he said. “Please, just humor me. I’m explaining this the same way my father did to me.” I settled down into the chair and waited for dad to continue. “In most cases, as they’re passed from parent to child, Quirks tend to get stronger, or otherwise more potent. Ours is very much an exception to this rule: it started out incredibly powerful, and lost most of its power in exchange for versatility as it was passed down.” Dad lit up with ethereal green light for a brief instant. “Mine is terrestrial animals, and always my entire body. Yours is any animal, but covering your entire body is exhausting, and you can’t go corporeal without using what your mother’s Quirk brought to the table. This, though? In evolutionary terms…”

Dad thought for a moment before snapping his fingers in realization.

“This particular bit with our Quirk, it’s the evolutionary equivalent of a chicken with teeth. It’s a throwback, something that doesn’t seem to serve any purpose anymore, outside of very specific circumstances.”
“Wait,” I said. “Electricity?”

“Electricity,” he confirmed. “The very first Quirk-user in our Navajo line had exactly one totem. The Thunderbird.”

I gasped in realization. The Thunderbird is a creature of Native American myth, seen in much the same regard as the gods of ancient Sumeria were. Thunderbirds were creatures of immense power, responsible for creating great storm systems, and prone to anger and territorial outbursts over the smallest imagined slight. They occupied the particular religious niche of ‘creature you pray to in the hopes it doesn’t decide to smite you on an off day’.

“I’d shifted some electrical organs in my body,” I whispered. “That was enough for it?”

“The only way for us to use the Thunderbird totem is with some source of electricity to build the storm,” Dad explained. “It is incredibly fast and immensely strong, but it is dangerous,” he stressed. “It’s not something we were ever meant to be able to use. It just exists, buried there and waiting to come out, and when it does, it sweeps us along in its wake. You felt angry, yes? Furious even?” I nodded, questioning. “That was just the beginning. If you were to let it last long enough, you’d lose yourself to psychotic rage.”

“Shit…”

“There’s more,” Dad said. “You can’t feel pain while using the Thunderbird totem. This is not a good thing, because it means you can push yourself past your body’s limits without realizing it. That’s what you did to your knee.” He pointed at my right knee, and I winced.

“Is there any way to control it?” I asked. “Like, some way to keep from getting angry, or to not push myself too hard?”

“For the former, no,” Dad explained with a frown. “Believe me, I’ve tried. As for the latter?” He gave me a look. “You should know the answer to that one already.”

“Practice,” I mumbled. “But I… Dad, what if I don’t want to?” I asked. “What if I don’t want to use this, this…” I trailed off, at a loss for words.

“I will,” I said. “I promise.”

“Atta girl.” Dad ruffled my hair, and I swatted his hand away.

“It’s getting late,” I told him. “You should head back home before it gets too late.”

“Right,” Dad said, and got up. “Don’t want to be out alone too late around now.” He walked to Pony’s room and opened the door. I saw Pony take off her headphones and come back out to our little living area.

“Are you leaving?” She asked. He nodded, and Pony gave him a hug. “Give this to Tenya, you hear?”

“Think he’d rather you do it yourself,” he groaned. Pony loosened her grip, and dad sighed in relief before hugging her back. She let him go, and he came to give me one more hug before heading for the door. “I’ll text you once I’m home so you know I’m safe, alright?”
“Thank you,” I said, relieved. “Good night, Dad.”

“Call if you need me!”

Dad closed the door behind him, and we were alone.

“Is Tenya going to be okay?” Pony asked. “Is Tensei? Oh God, what about Rei?”

“I don’t know Pony,” I said, thoughts awhirl in my mind. “I… all we can do is hope, I think.”

“I hate this,” she whispered. “That whole thing with USJ was bad enough, and now this…” She sighed. “I’m going to bed. Night, Kanna.”

“Night,” I said. She closed her door and clicked the light off, but I still sat in the kitchenette. There was just… too much. Tensei, Stain, Tenya, the Thunderbird and how I’d used it against Katsuki…

… oh shit, Katsuki!

I nearly forgot about tomorrow!
Chapter Forty-Four | It's (Not?) A Date!

Morning came with a vengeance, and I woke up with the sun shining directly into my eyes. I swear, a hundred and fifty million kilometers away, and the damn sun still manages to land a perfect headshot. I grumbled, groaned, and grabbed a teddy bear to throw over my eyes. A glance at my clock told me it was nine in the morning, though the dry, ashen taste in my mouth had me feeling more like I’d slept for an entire day.

I rolled onto my side to try and fall back asleep, but now that I was awake, my bladder was making itself known. I lurched out of bed and stumbled a bit, but got my hooves more or less stable under me. A hand on the wall helped me guide myself without having to open my eyes all the way and let that damn sunlight in, and I pushed open the bathroom door. Then I blinked, because the door bounced off something and back towards me, closing itself. I pushed the door open again, and once more it bounced off of something and closed itself. So I tried to open it again, and then the door closed… again.

Then the door opened and Pony, toothbrush sticking out of her mouth, snuck her head around the door and gave me a glare.

“Hmmph yr mmrn,” she mumbled, then slammed the door shut. I looked at the door, then at the handle, then just resigned myself to waiting. I leaned back against the wall and slid down it, pulling my knees to my chest and resting my head on my legs, eyes closed to keep the light out. Why, why does it have to be so damn bright outside?

A rinse and a spit later, and Pony opened the bathroom door. She looked down at where I sat, hands on her hips and an expression I couldn’t quite read. It looked to be somewhere between perturbed and amused, maybe? She picked me up off the floor with one hand and shoved me into the bathroom, where I had to grab onto the towel rack with a hand and the sink with my tail to keep from losing my balance.

“You don’t have to wash your hair again, conditioner’s fine,” Pony commanded. “Get yourself cleaned up, wring your hair out enough to blow-dry, and get that alcohol smell off your breath!” I gave her a shaky nod, then stumbled over to the toilet. Pony mostly closed the door, but kept it open enough to keep talking through it. “I’ll make breakfast and set an outfit out for you, and don’t forget some makeup! And don’t even think about complaining; you’re the one who chose to get drunk the night before her date!”

“It’s not a—” Pony slammed the door shut. “... date.” I finished lamely. I groaned to myself, pressing the heel of my palms into my eyes. Damn it, I shouldn’t have had so much to drink, this was fucking miserable. Fifteen, almost sixteen years without a hangover is enough to make you forget how horrible they feel, but once again, my first time getting even slightly drunk left me feeling like I’d been run over by a freight train. A hot shower definitely helped matters, and brushing my teeth had me feeling human again, but I managed to fail at wrapping my hair in a towel three times before managing it. I brushed my teeth, flossed, and even used mouthwash for good measure, but thought better of trying to use an eyeliner pencil without poking an eye out quite yet. Foundation would probably be a good idea, but that really just wasn’t my thing, and if I was going to eat breakfast then I’d probably end up eating off any lip gloss I put on with it. So… we’ll wait on any of that until it’s just about time to walk out the door.

I mean, it’s not like using any makeup at all is really a necessity; why else would I shy away from
foundation? I just like the way eyeliner and lip gloss make me look. It’s a light touch, it’s really simple to apply, and it has a rather profound effect for such little work. Really, that’s the biggest misconception about makeup I’ve seen: it’s not necessarily to make us look pretty for boys. Hell, I couldn’t give two shits what any of the guys think about me. It’s more what I think about how I look, and if a little makeup gives me a small boost of self-confidence when I look in the mirror, then so be it!

I opened the bathroom door, and the smell hit me instantly. I know that smell. There is only one food, one great, glorious food, that could smell quite so heavenly. I followed the scent out of the bathroom, out of my room, out into the living room, and finally into the little nook our kitchenette occupied.

“You were supposed to get dressed,” Pony scolded.

I looked down at the towel I’d wrapped around myself, then looked at the wonderful, heavenly, glorious BACON Pony had cooling on some paper towels, and reached to grab a piece.

“Ah-ah-ah!” Pony slapped my hand with her spatula. “No food until you get dressed, young lady!”

“Y’re not my mom,” I mumbled, reaching for the bacon again, only to once again get slapped with a spatula.

“No, but I could tell Auntie K you’ve been drinking!~” Pony sing-songed, holding her phone in one hand.

I gave Pony a look. A good, long look.

“You. Evil.” I dragged my hooves back into my room and looked over the clothes Pony’d picked out for me. I couldn’t help the sigh of relief when I saw that she wasn’t insisting on a skirt. The damn things were mandatory for school days, and while they can be comfortable, I like wearing pants too. Underwear went first, obviously, then I shimmied into my jeans an inch at a time. These ones hung low enough that I didn’t have to negotiate a tail hole or other fastener to keep it up around that, which I was rather thankful for, since it’s really rather annoying trying to finagle it. Even still, trying to get skinny jeans on, even those with a good bit of stretch in them, can be a serious exercise in frustration. I had to pull up hard enough to practically jump a couple of times to get these ones on, but eventually I did.

Pony has an easier time with her tail; hers is small and mostly fluff, so she could squeeze it through most of the usual tail-hole sizes on the market and not need much more than a brush to get the fur laying naturally. Me? If something was high-waisted, it needed a trip to the tailor to work around my tail.

I let my hair out of the towel and put on the soft tee Pony had set out, one that clearly came from her closet if the Venice Beach decal was any indication, and picked up the light spring jacket she’d laid out next to it. Then I tossed the towel into the bathroom, walked back out to the kitchenette, and sat down to eat my amazing, wonderful, rapturous bacon. It tasted delicious. Think of any time you’ve been super hungry, and then imagine that to sate your hunger, you were given one of your favorite foods of all time. Imagine how that must taste.

Now make it five times better, because it’s bacon, and bacon tastes like concentrated wonderful.

“Make sure to eat the toast too!” Pony said. “Daddy told me you’ll want some carbs to go with the
fats and protein.”

“Fine…” I grabbed the first piece of toast, spread with butter as it was, put my bacon on it, then used the other piece of toast to make a rudimentary sandwich. Which I then ate. “Mm… hmph!?” I hastily swallowed my bite, Pony’s words finally filtering through my dulled senses. “You told your dad!?”

“Um, duh?” Pony gave me a look that clearly said she thought I was an idiot. “Kanna, you know my dad’s cool about this stuff!”

“Well, yeah, but still—”

“No buts!” She interrupted me and pushed my bacon on buttered toast sandwich back towards my mouth. “C’mon, hurry up with that so I can blow-dry your hair.”

“Pony, my hair doesn’t need to be blow-dried,” I protested. “Just let me put it up on a ponytail, and maybe grab a couple bobby pins, and—”

“Nope!” Next thing I knew, I had a mouthful of sandwich, and I reflexively started eating. “I’ve got two hours to get you looking great and not at all hungover, and unless you want me to start applying coats of makeup…”

“Mm hmmph!” I mumbled around my sandwich, utterly failing to say ‘no thanks’ in any recognizable form.

“Didn’t think so!” Pony waltzed off to the bathroom, and came back with blow dryer in one hand and brush in the other. “Now hold still, I’m gonna get started on this calamity mane of yours.”

“Mph!” I protested.

“Oh relax you big baby, I’m keeping it on low heat!”

* * * * *

It was just five minutes to noon, and I stood outside waiting for Katsuki, feeling like an idiot in the process. My jeans were riding up rather uncomfortably, I was fiddling with my purse strap, and had to keep resisting the urge to nervously eat away at my lip gloss and then have to touch it back up, and… damn it, why am I so anxious? It’s just a silly little thing!

And honestly, looking down the street to see if he was on his way was just… silly. I mean, I could always just call him, I have his number and all. Ugh, why am I even worrying? This is Katsuki I’m talking about. I usually show up early to stuff, but every single time I have, he’s been there before me. Say what you will about him, but that kind of devotion to being on time is downright commendable. That being said, it’s getting close to noon, where the fuck is he—

“Hey.” I nearly jumped out of my damn skin when the voice came from behind me. I whirled around on one hoof to see Katsuki, who had somehow managed to completely sneak up on me. “The fuck’re you all jumpy for?”

“But you—yesterday, you went that way,” I pointed down the street where I’d expected him to come, “and now you… but… where?”
“That way.” Katsuki pointed a thumb back over his shoulder. “Convenience store’s got an ATM.”

“... you mean to tell me that the convenience store two blocks that way,” I pointed, “has an ATM, and I’ve always been going to the bank, which is three blocks past UA, instead? But that—wait, I’ve been to that convenience store! Where’s the damn ATM!?” I demanded.

“... around the back?” Katsuki explained, like it was the simplest thing in the world.

“Urgh!” I groaned, burying my forehead into my hands, and probably started talking to myself and calling myself names. Probably, because I don’t always notice what I’m doing when I get frustrated at myself, and it could just as easily have all been me thinking at myself. “Okay, right, that’s good to know. So, uh...” I shifted from hoof to hoof, trying to not let the anxiety get to me. “Arcade, right?”

“Hn.” Katsuki tilted his head in the same direction he’d gone to get home yesterday, then started walking. “Come on.” I followed after him, taking the opportunity to well and truly look at what he’d chosen to wear today. Given the fact that he always had his pants practically hanging off his ass in school, I hadn’t been optimistic. But, well... I’m glad to see that I was maybe a little too hard on him over his fashion sense.

Katsuki had on a decent-looking burgundy v-neck tee-shirt, and over that he had a plaid button-up with various shades and thicknesses of red and black lines crossing on a white background. His jeans weren’t actually as baggy as I’d expected them to be, and he was actually wearing what looked to be somewhat nicer shoes than typical sneakers, if the lack of a white sole was any indication.

“What?”

“Huh?” I asked, somewhat confused.

“You’re staring,” he answered.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing!” I said, somewhat flustered. “It’s just, well, uh.” My hands were still playing with the strap of my purse, and I resisted the urge to brush a lock of hair back behind my shoulder again. Ugh, my hair’s getting a little longer than I usually like; I may be due for a haircut soon…

“Well,” I went back to answering Katsuki’s unasked question. “It’s just that, well, you look... nice.” I shook my head and tossed my hair back behind my shoulder that way. “I guess.”

“T-thanks,” he murmured, voice low. I’m pretty sure he was trying to tamp down a blush, since I saw him shove his hands deeper into his pockets and slouch further. I considered prodding. Then I thought it would be inconsiderate, and chose not to; if he wanted to say something, he would.

We kept going, but over the next block or so of walking, I kept catching Katsuki shooting his particularly adorable attempt at a furtive glance over in my direction. Oh, he wasn’t being subtle at all, I caught every single one of them, but it was the thought that counts.

“You too,” he said after another block or so had passed.

“Hm?” I looked to Katsuki questioningly. “Me too what?”

“You look good,” he said, grinning. “Nice ass.” My jaw dropped open, and I stopped short, gaping. Katsuki walked a few more steps forward before he noticed I wasn’t following, and turned to look at me. “What?”
“Katsuki, you can’t just say shit like that!” I scolded.

“Huh?” He gave me a look of utter confusion. It wasn’t even annoyed confusion, or tinged with anger at all. He was just perplexed. “Why the fuck not?”

“B-because you just don’t!” I stammered out, stamping my hoof.

“But it’s true,” he said, “and besides, it’s a fucking compliment.” I felt my cheeks burn, and stamped my hoof again, resisting the urge to use my Quirk in public (illegally, to boot) and throttle this, this… boy in front of me!

“Even if it’s true!” I argued. “I mean yes, it’s a compliment, but it’s just not something you should just…” I trailed off, realization hitting me. “Katsuki, do me a favor?”

“… uh.” Okay, maybe I’d broken him with that sudden one-eighty. I snapped my fingers in front of his face, and he grabbed my hand with his own rather roughly. “What?!”

“I need you to check out my butt again,” I said.

“W-what—”

“And while you’re looking,” I interrupted, already turning and lifting my tail out of the way, “tell me what brand jeans these are?”

“What,” he mocked, “did your mom get these for you?”

“Just do it,” I commanded.

“All right, all right,” he grumbled, leaning in closer to… check out my butt. Again. “Just a tiny little thing, got some romaji on it. ‘AG’,” he said.

“Why that devious little minx,” I murmured. I turned around so that Katsuki wasn’t looking at my butt anymore, and so he could see the surly expression on my face. “It’s no wonder these jeans were so tight… they’re not my jeans,” I explained. “They’re Pony’s.”

Katsuki didn’t react at first. Then he snickered, and then he started full-on laughing.

“It’s not funny, damn it!” I admonished. “These stupid jeans have been trying to give me a wedgie for hours!”

“Your own damn fault for being such an idiot,” he fired back.

“Oh, shut up!”

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“So…” I trailed off a moment later, suddenly feeling awkward that I started talking after we’d walked in relative silence for the past five to ten minutes.
“Yeah?” Katsuki asked.

“Oh, uh, n-nothing,” I stammered. This entire walk had been a pretty awkward affair, actually. I still caught him looking my way and about to say something, but the moment I actually made it obvious that I was watching, Katsuki’d clam up and look away. And any time I thought about maybe trying to start a conversation, well… this happened. I’d get flustered, forget what it was I was going to say, and quietly back down.

“Hn.” He looked my way, eyes creeping down towards my chest a bit before he caught himself and set his gaze back on my face; I felt the first hints of a blush heat my cheeks, though I definitely felt more flattered at the attention than embarrassed, and to be honest I’m not sure what that says about me. I mean, I’m definitely not angry, I still remember doing the same damn thing myself during my first go ‘round, so it’d be a wee bit hypocritical of me to even so much as think of getting on his case about that.

And hey, we’re only human.

“Oh right! Hey Katsuki?” I asked. “Remember that bit you said to Todoroki after knocking him out yesterday?”

“Yeah,” he said. “What about it?”

“Well, none of us actually heard it,” I replied. “The audience was, er, rather loud at the time.”

“Figures, those noisy bastards.” He shook his head and breathed out harshly. “Said he made me sick by giving up like that. Shouldn’t have been in the finals in the first place. Rather have fought Deku there.” He looked over, eyeing me. “Or rather our match have been the final.”

“Keep buttering me up like that and flattery won’t get you anywhere,” I deadpanned.

See, that kind of compliment I’m more used to. It’s one thing when he’s just talking about my performance or aptitude. It’s something else entirely when he starts going on about my appearance… and much as I enjoy the compliment, and it makes me feel all warm and tingly inside to hear him say that, none of those sensations can quite manage to relieve the sheer awkwardness of it.

“Where’s this arcade you mentioned anyway?” I asked.

“Stop,” he said.

“No, seriously.” I turned around to look at him, arms loosely crossed under my chest just so I was doing something with them. “Where is it?” Katsuki pointed up and to his left, my right. I turned to look… and suddenly felt a little foolish. Though that quickly turned to mild amazement as I got a real good look at the place in front of us. “Okay. I’ll bite.” I looked back to Katsuki, one eyebrow raised. “Where’s the rest of Akihabara?”

“Heh,” he chuckled, walking inside, and I followed.

The Sidious Business Musutafu Arcade is one heck of a spot. Sidiously… err, seriously, I wish I’d found this spot earlier. When I joked about looking for the rest of Akihabara, I wasn’t quite kidding. This arcade was the real fucking deal.
Crane games and gachapon machines filled just about every available nook and cranny on the first floor, with barely enough room between them for two people to walk side-by-side, or one person to walk past somebody fastidiously aiming the crane to acquire a prize. Some of them had plushies of whatever moe-blobs and waifus were popular right now, along with one that actually had super-deformed plush miniature heroes; there was one All Might left, eight Endeavors, and a couple of other ones I didn’t recognize at a glance between them. Others had cheap figurines in cardboard boxes, and one in the back corner, currently occupied by a kid with what looked like a giant wooden pencil for a head, had game consoles available to win.

Katsuki took one look at Pencil-Head, as I will hereby refer to that guy, and scoffed.

“Damn background characters,” he grumbled. I couldn’t help the look of surprise I sent his way, but then remembered him saying something similar on our first day of class, when he called Tenya an ‘extra’. I guess Katsuki just referred to people in terms he was sure everyone understood, and cast himself as the ‘main character’? I shrugged, and found myself led up a stairwell to the second floor.

This floor had a rather large crowd to it, all of whom huddled around fighting game arcade cabinets. There were myriad properties I didn’t recognize, some 3D, some pixel art, and of course there was that one ersatz Guilty Gear game that I’d seen at the Yodobashi Camera a few weeks back. There was pretty much a zero percent chance of playing any of these with Katsuki, though, since there seemed to be a tournament going on, if the guy holding a microphone was anything to go by. That, and the palpable sense of hype in the air. If you’ve ever been at a fighting game tournament, you know what I’m talking about. And if not… just think any super-close sporting event.

We passed through the amped-up fighters and up the stairwell to the third and final floor. This one was much more open than the other two, though once I got a good look at the machines populating it, I realized it was by necessity. The third floor was full of rhythm games, with the center of the floor being entirely taken up by a massive… you know what actually? I’m not surprised to see that “Dance Dance Revolution” is still a thing. It’s always been popular, and I doubt anything short of full nuclear armageddon is going to put a real damper on that.

A closer inspection revealed something rather intriguing as well: this arcade had some serious variety going for it. I’m not kidding when I say that every single one of the rhythm games on display was different. There were no repeats. Yes, some of them were similar, but they were a different title, a separate edition, or just used the same input device for an alternative song selection.

I… uh. I turned towards Katsuki.

“I have no idea where to begin,” I told him honestly. “I’m a JRPG type of girl myself, so you’re kinda going to have to guide me.”

“Over here,” he said, leading me towards a machine tucked away in the corner. It looked for all the world like… well, if that old guitar-sim game’s drum peripheral was the only instrument. “Wanna try it?”

“I’m gonna be completely honest here? I’ve never played one of these games,” I said. And it’s technically true! I’ve not played any of them in this lifetime! “Go first and show me what I’m dealing with?”

“Sure,” he shrugged. Katsuki slid in a fifty-yen coin and the game machine came to life. He selected the highest difficulty level, no surprise there… but then the track list came up.
“Whoa,” I said. “These are old songs.” I leaned in to take a closer look. “Wait, all of these are in English.”

“Nobody touches this thing,” Katsuki revealed. “Figured it’s cause those dumb fucks want a song they can actually understand. Shows what they know.” Katsuki picked his song, and twirled the provided drumsticks with an expert flair. “Easier to focus on the rhythm when you can’t tell what shit they’re singing.”

Then the song started, and Katsuki was off. He… wow. Okay, just wow. This was actually really, really impressive.

Alright, just so folks understand why I’m going gaga over this? A little background: my first time around, my brother and I picked up this old band and music sim game, I can’t even remember the name, but it got us interested in actually learning the real deals. I was horrible with a guitar pick, but had no trouble plucking, slapping, and popping the strings with my fingers when I experimented, so I picked up the bass. My brother, on the other hand?

Well, he taught himself to play drums with those games. He ended up with a few habits to unlearn, obviously, but a music sim game actually taught him to play drums fairly well.

And here was Katsuki, playing this drum sim game like… well, like he knew exactly what he was doing. All of this led me to one inescapable conclusion: Bakugou Katsuki is, if not an expert, then at the very least an accomplished amateur at playing the drums.

As the song went on, I caught myself humming along, and even singing it under my breath, nodding my head to the beat. Katsuki sent a quick look in my direction, taking his eyes completely off the screen to do so, and didn’t miss a single note in the time it took me to notice him watching and glare back in challenge. Hey, if I wanted to sing along, was that a problem? He just shrugged and went back to watching the screen.

A few minutes later, the song concluded, and the game tallied Katsuki’s score. He’d apparently managed a new high score, and the game asked him to input a name, six characters (in kana, so basically six syllables) maximum. Once he did so, the name he put in joined an entire list of identical names on the leaderboards.

“Bakusatsuou?” I needled. “Really, Katsuki? Most of us grew out of our chuuni phases in the first week of middle school.” He slumped and grumbled a bit. “Wait, please don’t tell me you actually wanted that to be your hero name.”

His silence was deafening.

“Katsuki, they’re not gonna let you call yourself ‘King Explosion Murder’,” I got out around my giggles. Oh my goodness, his face!

“W-whatever Kanna,” he groused, getting up from the machine. “Your turn.” He held the drumsticks out to me, and I looked from the sticks in his hand to the… foot… pedal.

“Katsuki.”

“Kanna.” I crossed my arms and gave him a look, then used my tail to point at the foot pedal, then at my hooves, then back at the foot pedal. For his part, Katsuki had the grace to blush. “… fuck.”
“Mhmm. Different machine then?” He grumbled a bit, but then pointed at the next one over. It looked to have the exact same aesthetics, but this one had a plastic guitar peripheral instead. That, and the user interface seemed to have identical… wait. I turned towards Katsuki and pointed at the both of them. “Are these two connected?”

“Well, yeah,” he admitted, “but nobody’s ever…” He trailed off. Next thing I knew he’d fished a coin out of his pocket, popped it into the guitar game, and then inserted another into his own. “Kay, pick a song.”

“I could’ve paid for my own play you know,” I pointed out, scrolling through the track list. “Your attempt at chivalry was very sweet, but it wasn’t needed.”

“And what if I just fucking felt like it, huh?” He asked. “Just pick a damn song.”

“Way ahead of you,” I said, and finished picking out a song to play. I was rusty as hell at this, but these games aren’t that hard, so I picked the medium difficulty with all five buttons.

I’m amazed I haven’t thought of doing something like this with Pony and the others before, because to be frank, Katsuki and I had a blast playing that song. I can’t believe I forgot just how fun these could be when playing with friends! Yeah, I screwed up constantly, and the game let me know by having the guitar track cut out or go weird when I made an error, but I still had plenty of fun!

When the song finally ended, Katsuki’s score was once again five stars, while mine sat at a paltry two, I was so bad.

“Your turn!” I said, sliding a coin into my cabinet.

“Just one more,” he said, scrolling through the menu. “There’s other shit to do here than just this one, y’know.”

“Yeah, but how many of them can we both do at once?”

“… whatever,” he said, picking out our next song. It started up, and then we were off.

Compared to the last song, this one was both more and less difficult. There were some sections that were downright braindead in terms of what it wanted us to play, but others had me flailing a bit and ruining the melody completely. It may have been a long time since I’d heard it, but I knew this song, and so it still surprised me when I failed as badly as I did.

“Wow.” Katsuki gave a low whistle when he saw my score. “Zero fucking stars.”

“N-not all of us have played these games, okay!” I fired back, tossing the plastic guitar controller back onto its little stand. “Come on, there’s gotta be something else we can both play, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Katsuki shrugged and led me out of that little nook in the arcade. We walked to the center of the third floor, and he stopped in front of…

Damn it.

“Problem,” I said. “I can’t play DDR.”

“The fuck you can’t!” He nearly yelled. “It’s not fucking rocket science!”
“Alright, fine!” I crossed my arms. “Let me clarify: I can’t, because I’m literally not allowed to play DDR.” I waggled a hoof in his general direction, and then grabbed my leg and showed Katsuki the fresh horseshoe on bottom. “I try to play DDR, these break the buttons.”

“Just… I don’t know.” He threw his arms up in frustration. “Use your Quirk or some shit!”

“Yes, I’m going to just go ahead and use my Quirk, which we both showed off just yesterday on national television, in a public place, without a license to let me do that,” I remarked, sarcasm dripping from every word. “Let me just make sure that oh wait, is that a security camera up there?” I pointed, and faux-gasped. Honestly, the whole thing was ridiculous, and the topic probably deserved a serious discussion, but we’d be standing here for an hour or two if I started to go in-depth on just how stupid I found Quirk law to be.

“Alright, I get it!” Katsuki grumbled. “We’ll just play something else instead, I guess.”

With that, the two of us began a small whirlwind tour of all the other rhythm games in the arcade. Katsuki held high scores on most of them, and as expected, I wasn’t able to come anywhere even remotely close to his scores. I still had a blast playing the games themselves, though, and the both of us worked up a bit of a sweat playing. The slight pangs of hunger in my stomach were also enough to tell me it was probably time to go get something to eat, so once I finished up my attempt at the last of the games I hadn’t played yet (a taiko drum game, which is tons of fun, ten of ten would recommend), we started heading out. A quick check on the second floor revealed the fighting game tournament was in the middle of grand finals, and that the player who’d been in losers’ had just won the set and reset the bracket, making it anyone’s game. I asked Katsuki if he wanted to watch, and he just shrugged. To be fair, I didn’t know which fighter it was, so I wasn’t all that interested. So we walked down to the first floor and out of the stairwell.

That’s when I saw it.

It was a crane game machine filled with teddy bear versions of superheroes. Similar to the super-deformed plushies right next to the stairs, yes… but this one was teddy bears.

And right there, smack dab in the center of them all, was an All Might teddy bear.

I rushed over to the machine and fed a thousand-yen bill into it, then examined it from every single possible angle I could to find the best approach. A test run with the crane showed me that I’d probably have to hold the button for an extra second on the X axis, but would have to let it go early for the Y axis.

“The fuck’s gotten into y—oh come the fuck on, really!?” Katsuki came over and saw what I was doing, or rather how I’d gotten into this one like a girl possessed.

“Yes Katsuki, really. Now,” I gestured for him to squeeze himself along the side of the crane game, between this one and the crappy figure game next to it. “Get in there and tell me when it’s far enough.”

“Kanna, you can just buy one of those online,” he grumbled. “You’re seriously gonna waste your money on that shitty thing?”

“Bakugou Katsuki.” I rounded upon him, and pressed my face as close to his as I dared. “We are not leaving this arcade until that bear,” I pointed at the All Might teddy, “is in my arms. Are we clear?”
He mumbled something unintelligible. “I said, are we fucking clear!?”

“Yes! Shit, we’re clear!”

“Good!” I chirped. “Now, be a dear and squeeze into that gap for me, would you?”

Katsuki’s mumbled curses fell on deaf ears, because I’d already turned back to the crane game and pressed my nose against the plexiglass. I had my mission… and I would succeed, come hell or high water.

… well, hell or empty wallet.

_Close enough!

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By the time we finally left the arcade, both of our pockets were a decent bit lighter, and I was carrying the newest addition to my teddy bear collection, which I hereby decree shall be known henceforth as _Bear Might_. Not the greatest name, I know, but still. I like it. Plus, I like naming my teddy bears to distinguish them from one another in a way other than appearance.

There’s chubby panda pillow bear, extra-fluffy polar bear, novel-tee tourism bear, Tokyo Tower bear… oh, there’s just so many of them. But my absolute favorite is one that Pony brought back from the States for me. It’s so big that she and Kihei had to shove it in a spare collapsible suitcase and send it on the plane as _checked baggage_. It’s so big that I had to leave it back with Mom in Hosu, cause it really wouldn’t fit in the apartment. It’s the centerpiece of my teddy bear collection.

I named it Theo-Bear Roosevelt.

“You know,” Katsuki grumbled, “when I started calling you Teddy, I didn’t think it’d be this damn accurate…” I didn’t bother to respond, and just hugged my new teddy bear to my chest, still smiling the dumb smile I’d had on my face since the bear finally came out of the crane game machine. “Oi, you even listening?”

“Don’t care~, teddy bear~,” I sing-songed. My new plushie would have to join the others I keep on my bed at night. There isn’t a single nightmare or bad dream that would _dare_ try to sneak past _Bear Might_, so great is his strength, so mighty his… well, not a smile really, but the teddy bear equivalent!

“Yeah? Well give a shit for a sec, cause we gotta eat.” He nudged me in the side, and I gave him a look. “You think I’m an idiot? I heard your stomach start with that stupid rumbling ten minutes ago.”

“What?” I said, affronted. “You did _not_—”

My stomach chose that moment to sing the song of its people, rumbling in such a way that it seemed like a high-pitched whine. I lifted _Bear Might_ up to cover my blush, and now it was Katsuki’s turn to give _me_ a look.

“The fuck did you do, skip breakfast?”
“N-no!” I stammered. “I mean, it wasn’t a big breakfast, true, but it was still breakfast!”

“Chicks and their fucking figures,” Katsuki grumbled.

“Hey!” I stepped in front of him, glaring as hard as I could… which, admittedly, was easier when I didn’t have to look up to see someone’s face. “Do I look like one of those prissy little fairies you see on TV?”

“No.” He gave me a once-over, and then his eyes settled right onto my newest plushie. “You look like a little kid with that shitty thing.”

“You leave Bear Might out of this!” I cried.

“You named that!? Fuck, you’re more of a brat than a preschooler!”

“Me? What about you, mister ‘baby’s first swear words’?”

“Ooooh, creative! I need to remember that one!”

“Fuck the both of y—grghk!” Seeing Katsuki freeze up like he’d just stepped on a landmine was a rather novel experience. Turning to see who’d said that, however, led me to somebody I’d never met before… and yet at the same time, I am absolutely certain that I’ve seen her around somewhere, but for the life of me I can’t place her.

She had blonde hair that appeared similar to—wait. I looked at Katsuki’s hair, then back to this new woman’s. Then at Katsuki’s again, and then the woman’s one more time. Yup… same exact shade of light blonde, even if the texture is wildly different. She had on jeans in a capri cut, a white blouse, a purple zip-up hoodie with orange accents over that, and white heeled sandals. As for her expression, I could only sum it up as being ‘the cat that caught the canary’. And once again, I had that nagging feeling of familiarity. I know I’ve seen this woman somewhere, but I just can’t figure it out! Ugh, this is going to drive me nuts!

“What’s the matter?” The woman slinked forward, every single motion drawing attention to her slim waist, and her wide hips, and her perfect hair, and I hate her already.

“You wish, damn ha—hurk!” In a flash, this new woman had managed to get around to Katsuki’s side, jab her elbow into his gut, and sling her arm around his neck in a perfect headlock. She moved so smoothly that this had to be a practiced motion, something she’d done over and over and over and over again —oh dear god.

“Is that any way to talk to a full-fledged superhero, you cocky little shit!” The woman ground out through a twitching rictus smile, entirely ignoring Katsuki’s struggles to escape. And the look in her eyes as she said it… oh yeah, no doubt about it.

“Alright,” I started saying, drawing both of the blondes’ attentions. “I’ll bite. Does your whole family come out of the womb swearing, or are curses just your first words?”

“Meh.” Blondie waved her hand in a so-so manner, still ignoring Katsuki’s renewed flailing. “We’ve all got the fire in us, sure, but the lil’ jackass here is the first one to not have a lid on it. At least the rest of us are halfway sub-t—agh!” She cut off in a pained yelp as Katsuki suddenly grabbed ahold of a dangling blonde lock and gave it a sharp yank, which she paid back by harshly grinding her
knuckles into the top of his skull as she growled at him. “You little brat, I will hang you from Tokyo Tower by your tighty-whities!” She hissed venomously.

“Uh-huh,” I said, cocking an eyebrow. “And how exactly would you propose to do… that…” I trailed off, realization dawning once more. I gave the blonde in front of me another look, squinting, turning my head… ah, that’s what was missing! The horns! “You’re Mt. Lady, aren’t you?”

“Why yes I am!” She threw her arms wide, flinging poor Katsuki face-first into the pavement in the process, to which he began cursing quite vociferously. “You’ve heard of me, then! A fan?!”

“Yup!” I chirped. On the ground, Katsuki snorted.

She gasped, the first hints of what I could only guess were the biggest smile she’d ever had turning up the corners of her pouty, ruby-red, bow-shaped lips, and oh my god I want to ruin her perfect fucking face so badly. She opened her mouth and took a breath before responding, and that’s when I went and ruined her whole day.

“It’s always fun watching the Adventures of Collateral Damage Barbie and the Running Tally! How much are you up to now, four million yen in damages?”

I wish I had a polaroid camera on me, because that would have been the best way to grab a picture of the face of abject horror she suddenly made. As it was, my phone sufficed.

“Haahahaha!” Katsuki laughed like a madman as he got up from the ground, then grabbed Mt. Lady in a headlock of his own. “She’s got you figured out, ya dumb bitch!”

“You little—Don’t make me bring out the baby pictures!” She managed to slip his chokehold by stomping the heel of her sandal into Katsuki’s foot, which was definitely painful enough to make him loosen his grip a bit; I couldn’t help but wince in sympathy, silently thanking any gods that might be listening that I can’t experience that particular brand of agony ever again. “Ugh!” she stuck her nose in the air with an arrogant sniff. “You’re the worst cousin ever!”

This… this was turning downright surreal. Mt. Lady is a Bakugou?

“What’re you even doing here, Yuu?” Katsuki growled. “Don’t you have a building to demolish somewhere? Or a camera to flash your tits at?”

“Kamui Woods to steal a job from?” I supplied.

“Oh no, my job is here.” She draped an arm around Katsuki’s shoulders, and nearly got the other one around me before I skipped out of reach. “I mean, what kind of cousin am I if I’m not giving little Moon-Moon here shit on his first date?”

“‘It’s not a date!’” Both of us yelled in unison. Then I looked at him, and he looked at me, and both of us looked away as quickly as we could.

“Aww…” Mt. Lady cooed, folded hands and cocked leg and everything. “You two are so adorable! But really, kiddo?” She turned towards me, then leveled a thumb in Katsuki’s direction with a sneer. “You had to pick this turd as your Prince Charming? I mean, I’ve heard of shit taste, but still.”

“H-hey!” I stammered, but she wasn’t done.
“Also, I gotta ask.” She clapped her hands, then pointed them both down at my legs. Or rather, my hooves. “Do you have to shave your legs every day, or is it just on the full moon?”

What a fucking bitch.

“H-Hey, at least I have to shapeshift if I want to be a toxic hag… fish!” I fired back, angry and embarrassed. “What’s your excuse, Mt. Blubberbutt?”

“Bitch, you could bounce a coin off my ass and everyone knows it,” she hummed in response, oh-so-casually examining her pristinely manicured fingernails.

“More like a friggin’ tank shell,” Katsuki mumbled in the background, which had his cousin’s eye twitching.

“But still, for now, you know what?” Mt. Lady—or wait, Katsuki called her ‘Yuu’, right? —Yuu looked towards Katsuki briefly, and made a dismissive little shooing motion with her hand. “All this back and forth has me oh so thirsty. Moon-Moon, be a good little cousin and go fetch me a soda, would you?”

“Get your own damn soda, you—”

“Remind me, does Auntie Mitsuki know you still owe me five thousand yen?” She leaned into Katsuki’s face, her smile so devilish I would’ve guessed her costume’s horns went over the real ones. “Or that you’re on a d-a-t-e?”

“I already fucking told you, it’s not a date!” Katsuki roared. Yuu rounded on him in an instant, leaning in close with a finger pressing hard into his sternum.

“You watch your tone you little shit,” she outright snarled. “You asked a girl to meet you, it’s a fucking date, and you better not act like a jackass and try to tell her otherwise, even if she says the same thing.” She grabbed him by his shoulder and spun him around, then nudged Katsuki forward. “Soda. You know which one I like. Now.”

“Damn it, Yuu, why’re—”

“Go, Moon-Moon.” She held up her phone, and I could see on the screen that it was open to her contacts. Specifically, one that I’d seen just yesterday on Katsuki’s phone: his mother. Apparently that threat was enough for him, because next thing I knew Katsuki had his hands shoved in his pockets and was hurrying down the block. He stopped at a vending machine at the corner, but a rather loud throat-clearing from his cousin had him turning the corner and out of sight in an instant.

“Huh,” I murmured, turning back to the woman with me, only to freeze at just how close she’d gotten in that brief instant I’d been looking away.

“Now let’s see what we’ve got…” She took hold of some of my hair, and I squeaked in shock and more-than-mild outrage. “Need to let the conditioner sit in your hair another minute or two before you rinse, but not bad, not bad at all.”

“H-hey!” I slapped her hand away, and skipped back a step. She seemed to take that as a challenge and just stepped forward, heels clicking on the pavement, a very disturbing smile on her face. “You may be a Pro Hero, but that does not mean you get to pull shit like this”
I froze when she put a hand on my chin and tilted my head to and fro, examining my features. “Fine bone structure, high cheekbones… particularly good facial symmetry…”

My brain jerked at that particular line and I promptly wrenched out of her grip. “Come near me with a meat cleaver and I will lodge my hoof up your ass, no Quirk necessary!”

Yuu blinked in shock for a second, and I actually considered apologizing… until she smirked, cocked her hip out, and rested her hand on it, “Don’t worry, I don’t have any mascara or lipgloss on me. And even if I did, I doubt any makeover I could give you would end in… what was it again? Oh, right!” She snapped her fingers, then held them up and started listing off items. “Four corpses, two attempted suicides and a near-miss bombing.”


“Uh, hello?” She flicked her wonderful, beautifully-coifed hair out proudly. “Most eligible bachelorette in Japan?”

“Yeah, right,” I scoffed. “And I’m the Emperor of Japan. Which still wouldn’t explain how you know a ye olde cult classic that took me three months to find.”

“Alright, alright.” Yuu’s beatific expression dropped into a more casual, very Katsuki-esque scowl as she rolled her eyes. “I’m from bumfuck nowhere Hokkaido, and our best hero school was even more in the boonies, and you couldn’t pay me enough to stay there. Had to work at a movie and game rental store to help save up so I could move to the city, make it big, you know? I mean yeah, I hated the job, but absolutely loved getting to take free shit home to watch, and still love all that random old ‘junk’.”

“Really?” I arched an eyebrow.

“Would I lie about that?” Yuu asked.

“Well, given I don’t believe for a second that any of those incidents with Kamui Woods were accidents…” I waffled.

“Fine!” She crossed her arms and leaned in, a petulant scowl on her face. “Hit me with your best shot.”

Mentally, I cracked my knuckles, opened up my vault of normally useless information, and set to work proving that this prissy little princess in front of me was nothing more than a poser wannabe.

“Rule number one,” I said, starting off with a softball question.

“Not even going to talk about it for a second!” She smirked, and gave a gesture with her hand to keep going on with it.

“Could he have gotten on the door?”

“Oh totally, there was plenty of room…” she then licked her lips salaciously. “But damn, you have to admit that DiCaprio leaves a fine corpse. And hey,” she shrugged. “At least he finally got what he was due for Revenant. When that happened, he went from holding the world’s curiosity to their attention! Boom, triple points!”
“Oh, you think you’re hot shit, huh?” I scowled. “Fine, tell me about the time they shot real arrows at Mifune Toshiro.”

“Kurosawa Akira was definitely one of the best directors out there… and probably crazy. I mean,” she pulled out her phone, and pulled up a picture, “look at these scripts!”

“Where’d they get the red Swingline stapler?” I asked next, confident she wouldn’t get this one.

“Didn’t actually exist at the time!” Mt. Lady answered. Damn, thought I had her.

“Opinion on Camelot?”

“Eh, let’s not go there, it’s a silly place anyway. And don’t even start,” she snapped her finger up intently, “on how they brought the coconuts over, because I can’t even.”

“Not bad, not bad,” I allowed. “Spoon.”

“Ooh, a trick question!” She clapped her hands excitedly. “Either there is no spoon, or damn it, you’re tearing me apart Lisa!”

“My name is…” I offered.

“Inigo Montoya, you killed my father, prepare to die, repeat as necessary.”

“All work and no play?”

“Makes me a dull girl.”

“The line is boy,” I glared.

“Either way, the appropriate reaction is to run. Seriously, Quirk or no Quirk and hero or not, psychoes are not something you want to deal with.”

“Mmh… Fine! You find a leathery egg-thing on a planetoid.”

“Not even going there,” she answered, crossing her arms over her torso. “I like my boobs the way they are: perky and perfect! Chestburster not allowed!” I leveled a glare at her chest, which I’d managed to successfully ignore up until this point, and damn if that blouse didn’t just perfectly accentuate her figure.

“Man in a bunny suit on the front lawn.”

“Nice try,” she said. “I know I didn’t get that movie, and you definitely didn’t either!”

“Oh really?” I leaned in, smiling now. “Let me guess, you thought it was about time travel, didn’t you?”

“Uhh… no?” Yuu hedged. “Like, uh, well, it’s pretty obvious that—”

“Here’s your fucking soda!” And suddenly Katsuki was there, pressing a slim glass bottle filled with dark liquid up against his cousin’s cheek. She pushed the bottle away with one perfectly-manicured
fingertip, took a quick look at the label, and flicked Katsuki in the forehead.

“That’s nice. Now,” she pointed right back in the direction he came from, “go and get me a soda that anyone other than you will actually drink this time.” She gave him a swift kick in the rear, aided by the heels she was wearing, and Katsuki yelped before opening up the soda, drinking, and heading back down the block. “And make sure to get one for your little girlfriend here too!”

“She’s not my girlfriend!” “He’s not my boyfriend!” Both of us yelled in unison. Then he blushed, and I blushed, and he turned back down the block, and I looked away, and oh lord I’m probably blushing super hard right now.

“You two are so cute,” Yuu said. I blushed even harder and buried my face into Bear Might’s snuggly plushie body. “Anyway, enough geeking out, though I have got to get you to join for movie night at some point. Look.” She crossed her arms under her chest, and actually put on a serious expression for the first time today. She sort of looked like a gender-flipped Katsuki deep in thought, actually… which made for a really weird mental image. “Katsuki’s a good kid but, and you might know this even better than I do, he’s got all the social graces of a hyena.”

“Well actually—” I began, but Yuu brought a hand up to interrupt me.

“It’s true and we all know it. You should hear how he and Aunt Mitsuki are, even though she gives as good as she gets. But while he may be a jackass most of the time, he’s not a bad person. He’s just, eh…” She waffled a bit, waving a hand to help her think, before ultimately sighing in defeat. “You know what, there’s no better way to describe it than this: Katsuki’s an arrogant little shitwaffle.” I gaped. “But he’s also the brat that’s idolized All Might for his entire life, and the only thing he’s ever wanted to be was a hero, just like All Might. Just… I guess what I’m saying is, give him a chance? He may just surprise you.”

“I mean, he already has, kind of,” I admitted. “And, like, he’s not that bad…”

“And now you’re making me feel like that whole bit was just wasted,” she groaned. But then the next thing I knew I had her bare millimeters away from my face, and I could feel her breath on me. “This part won’t be though, cause if you ever hurt Katsuki, I will crush you like a bug beneath my heel, do you understand me?” I opened my mouth to respond by telling her that she could probably do that and it wouldn’t even hurt… but then I thought better of it and just nodded.

Her face brightened up, and I was suddenly on the receiving end of a smile that had already sold countless magazines. “Good! Now I’ve done my duty as a good, respectable cousin, and mwehh bleh bluh!”

Katsuki had shown back up at that last second and taken the opportunity to shove the soda bottle into his cousin’s face again. He held out his other arm, the one still holding his own soda, and I saw a small bag dangling from it with what could only be a third bottle inside. Katsuki gave me a nod, then looked at the bag, and I retrieved the bottle from it while he continued to grind his cousin’s into her cheek.

“Here,” he growled. “Now take your damn soda and go away.”

“In a minute!” She fired back, snatching the bottle from his fist before turning back to me with The Smile™. “So, are we good?”

“I still hate how damn pretty you are,” I grumbled, then sipped at my soda… then blinked in
amazement, since Katsuki had somehow managed to pick out the one that I actually like. And without asking me first.

“That’s a more common sentiment than you’d think. And, well, I know you didn’t ask for advice, buuut...” Yuu leaned in and gave me another once-over, this one far less intrusive. “You could probably let your hair go another day between washes, and should let the conditioner sit in there for another minute or two before you rinse it out. Maybe find a more gentle face soap, that way you don’t need moisturizer to put the oils right back. And since it’s getting close to summer? Sunblock. I will swear by it.”

“T-thanks,” I smiled. “I’ll try that. Oh, one last thing!” She offered me a confused look. “I know you’ve probably already seen it, but try watching The Hidden Fortress, and immediately going to A New Hope once that’s done. Seriously, the similarities are striking.”

“I’ll have to do that, thanks!” She slung an arm around her cousin’s shoulders, and gave him a half-hug. “You know what? I like her, Katsuki.” She let him go before he grumbled too badly, then gave him a shove in my direction. “Alright, I’m gone. Go have fun, you dumb kids!” She turned around to walk away, but then seemed to forget something and turned right back around. “Oh, nearly forgot!”

“What!” Katsuki nearly yelled.

“Not you,” she waved at him, dismissive. “The rabbit. That had something to do with it, right? The meaning?”

“And now you’re overthinking it,” I said. “It doesn’t have to be a rabbit. It could be a crow, a taxi driver, a delivery truck driver, or anything like that.” Yeah, she probably wasn’t going to understand this one anytime soon.

“Uh-huh,” she nodded slowly, her expression carefully blank. “I’m just going to pretend I understood that, and let you two get back to your date. Bye!”

And then she was gone, for real this time. I turned towards Katsuki, who finished chugging the rest of his soda before giving me a look.

“What?”

“So… Moon-Moon, huh?” He choked. “I mean yeah, if we drop the first syllable of your name we get moon, but that’s really stretching it, Katsuki. How’d that one manage to stick anyway?” He shoved his empty soda bottle into the plastic bag he still held, and grumbled something unintelligible. “I can’t hear you~!”

“Thought m’name meant ‘fire moon’ before I knew kanji,” he grumbled. “Urgh! C’mon, we still gotta eat,” he said, changing the subject. “Ramen’s fine, yeah?”

“It’ll do,” I shrugged. We made it another block or so before I finally managed to put words to that nagging thought at the back of my mind. “Oh, right, before I forget! You know where your cousin lives, yeah? Visit her occasionally?”

“Haven’t yet, but yeah, I know where her sty is. What for?” Katsuki asked.

"Next time you get a chance,” I said, ignoring his word choice for his cousin’s home, “I need you to photograph the labels on every single cosmetic and personal care item she owns."
"The fuck?" He gave me a look that clearly said he thought I was nuts. "Why would you want her shit?"

"Katsuki, I know you probably haven’t realized, but your cousin is abso-fucking-lutely gorgeous!" I rounded on him, trying to raise myself up as much as I could, which was actually somewhat difficult without toes to go up on. "And damn it, I want to look that good, and to do that, I want to know what she’s using!"

"Like that’ll help," he mumbled. "Dumb bitch is cheap as shit. She uses whatever random crap she finds at the store."

I stopped, rocking back on my... well, not heels. I don't have heels. Rocking back on my hooves.

"... so you mean to tell me your cousin isn’t a beauty product connoisseur?"

“Nope.”

“And she’s just that much of a natural beauty."

"Fuck if I care," he mumbled.

"Next time you see Yuu?" I gave him a stern look. "Punch her in that stupid perfect face of hers. Nobody gets to be that naturally pretty, damn it! It's not fucking fair!" I heard snickering next to me, and turned to glare at Katsuki. “Think it’s funny do you?"

“Nah,” he said, smirking around his straw. “Just reminded me of her question.”

“Uh, what question?” I demanded. When his smirk turned victorious, I knew I’d stepped into a trap.

“Do you only shave on the full moon?”

“Oh fuck you, Katsuki!"

* * * *

Ramen was good. Simple, yes, but good. The name of the place was oddly familiar, but it was a chain, so that’s to be expected. There was an option to get your ramen spicy, and I leapt for that immediately, because spicy food is awesome.

Surprise, surprise, Katsuki chose the spicy option too.

We chatted about random little inanities in between slurping noodles, learning some interesting stuff about each other. Turns out Katsuki’s not just a good drummer, but he’s also damn skilled on a snowboard, and had some videos to prove it. That had me a little bummed that I’d probably never be able to ski or snowboard with how my lower legs are shaped now, or at least not comfortably anyway, but oh well. We swapped odd tidbits about ourselves (I’m allergic to coconut, Katsuki’s favorite fruit is durian), favorite animal (he likes lions, can’t say I’m surprised), and things our families do that annoy the crap out of us.
After we finished eating, the two of us just sort of roamed the Tatooine Station shops, browsing and occasionally stepping inside to take a closer look. I ended up buying two of a cute skirt they had for sale, one for myself and one for Pony, since it was already tailored with tails in mind; surprisingly rare, that. Katsuki eyed an All Might baseball shirt, and once I managed to pressure him into trying the thing on, he wound up buying it.

We did eventually run out of shops to check out though, and a quick look at my phone showed that it was... wow, half past four. I’d been out since noon, hanging out. Just me and... and a boy.

“Well,” I said, drawing his attention. “I uh… I should probably be heading home soon.”

“Yeah,” he said, checking the time on his phone. “Mom said she wanted me back not long after five… damn hag, that ain’t even fucking late.”

“Oh come on,” I hedged, “she’s probably just being protective, and—”

“Nah, bitch wants me back to vacuum the apartment and do some other shit for her,” he said.

“I stand corrected.” The two of us walked back to the beginning of the Tatooine Station shops, and I looked at the signs pointing into the train station proper. “You’ve gotta go here, huh?”

“Yeah.” We stopped in front of the doorway. He shuffled back and forth on his feet, hands deep in his pockets, and I found myself fiddling with my purse strap again.

“Hey...” I looked to Katsuki. “This, uh. This was, like, a date? Yeah?”

“U-uh.” Katsuki looked at me, shocked and obviously caught flat-footed. “Y-yeah,” he said, recovering quickly. “I, uh, shit. I guess so?” He brought a hand behind his head and looked away. “Fuck... never done this sort of shit before, you know?”

“I, uh, I have before, I guess?” I quickly waved my hands in front of me. “I mean, it wasn’t one that I actually wanted to do, it was just the fastest way to get this boy to stop crushing on me, so it didn’t even really count! Like, that wasn’t really a date, I guess, but... ugh, this is so...” I trailed off, and buried my face in my hands, feeling the heat in my cheeks.

“I had a damn good time,” Katsuki said suddenly. I looked up to see him smiling faintly. It wasn’t a grin, or a smirk, or a sneer. It was an actual, normal smile, not one of the bloodthirsty or confrontational ones I was so used to seeing in class. “So, uh... yeah. Guess I’ll see you around, then?”

“I... yeah!” I took a deep breath, and steeled my nerves.

Then I leaned forward and gave Katsuki a quick kiss on the lips.

“Bu... wha... you—” Katsuki stammered, shocked as can be. I giggled, gave him a hug, then lightly shoved him towards the station doors before turning around.

“Text me!” I yelled back as I walked away.

“Uh, uh-huh,” he mumbled back. At least, I think it was an affirmative. I waved goodbye to Katsuki as he turned towards the station, and then headed on my merry way.
Once I was well out of sight of him, I faced a nearby wall and rested my head against it, blushing madly. Holy shit, I’d just kissed a boy! On the lips! I… that...

“Oh my goodness, that was my first kiss!” I said aloud, more to myself than anyone else.

Beside me, a bush rustled.

I turned towards the bush that’d moved, and scanned it carefully. I looked, and I inspected… and then a stray cat emerged from the bush, meowing at me. I sighed in relief, then kneeled down to pet the cat.

“Damn, I must be going crazy,” I murmured to myself. Still, I thought… wow. That was my first kiss. I… does that mean I have a boyfriend now?

Shit, is Katsuki my boyfriend now? Am I Katsuki’s girlfriend now!?

Ugh, I am going to drive myself nuts with all this! Dating! Why must it be so damn complicated! I mean, my first ever sort-of-date in this life was nowhere near as much of a ridiculous mind screw. Then again, I didn’t really want to go on that one, since it was with Tenya and I’ve never liked him that way, and besides, I—

I stopped.

With all of the excitement of last night and today, it completely slipped my mind… but I haven’t heard anything from Tenya since hearing about his brother. And actually, now that I’m thinking about it, I haven’t even tried to contact Tenya since yesterday!

I… No. No self-recrimination. This isn’t the time for that. No, I have to be productive. I have to actually do something.

Okay. I grabbed my phone out of my purse, unlocked it, and pulled up the calendar app. There’s still three days left in Golden Week. While I walked home, I sent off a text to my mom, and one to Pony, and then another to the group chat with my friends (which we’ve preliminary named ‘The Frog & Pony Show’). Flipping to another app, I got myself a train ticket for tomorrow morning, and then sent a message to Dad.

I know it’s hard to blame myself given all the excitement and all the new people we’ve met, but since we arrived at UA, I’ve not been good to Tenya. Yes, he gravitated towards Midoriya and Uraraka, and Pony and I latched onto our own friends, but that didn’t excuse the fact that I’d spent literally zero time with him for the past month plus. I’ve been a terrible friend to Tenya lately. It’s time to change that.

Tomorrow, I’m going home to Hosu.
“You sure you don’t want to come?” I asked Pony, who’d flounced into the bathroom almost the instant she’d woken up. I’d barely had time to finish my own morning ablutions before being unceremoniously locked out. “I mean, even if you don’t I could still stop by your house and grab anything you might want.”

“I’m good!” I heard her say through the bathroom door. “Besides, I’ve got plans today! You and Sir Explodey aren’t the only ones allowed to have a date during Golden Week, you know!”

“Oh,” I said lamely. “Uh, well, have fun with Monoma then?”

“You hypocrite,” she said, lightly chiding.

“Um, what? How am I a hypocrite?” Behind the door, Pony sighed, and then next thing I knew I was looking at her, wrapped in a towel and giving me a look that clearly said that I’d been dumb again.

“Seriously Kanna, you tell everyone to call you by your first name, and you won’t call Neito by his?” She rolled her eyes, then opened the bathroom door wider and beckoned me inside. “If you’ve got time before your train leaves, mind giving me a hand actually? I, uh.” She blushed. “I think there’s a snarl in my tail fur and I can’t reach it.” I rolled my eyes, grabbed the wire-bristle brush Pony kept on the counter for exactly this purpose, and had her sit sideways on the closed toilet seat so I could better reach her tail.

“See,” I said, running my fingers through the fur to try and find the snarl, “this is why I’m glad my tail doesn’t have any fur. No tangles, no special fur shampoo, none of that.”

“But yours could have fur,” Pony pointed out. I found the snarl, then looked up at her. “Come on, you’ve never wanted to have a cat tail for a day? Or a fluffy fox tail?”

“No,” I deadpanned, then started working on that fur. “I really don’t want to fend off all the people whose first impulse is ‘pet fluffy tail’. I mean, Ojiro gets enough of that himself, and he’s just got a tuft of fur like a lion’s at the very end of his tail.” With a few more tugs of the brush, I managed to have it going clean through the fur on her tail. “Got it!”

“Yes, thank you!” Something dangled down in front of my nose, and I nearly went cross-eyed looking at it. “Could you tie this on while you’re back there? Please?”

“Fine,” I said, grabbing the green ribbon. “Halfway up, right?”

“Yup!” Pony chirped back. I looked up to see her pulling her hair back.

“I’m not braiding that,” I piped up, tying the green ribbon halfway down her tail’s short length, six inches out.

“Wasn’t going to ask you to.” She stood and went over to the counter, grabbed the blow dryer, and plugged it in. “So, when do you have to head out?”

“Uh…” I pulled out my phone and checked. “Five minutes from now, but I could just go early if you
want your privacy?” My phone chose that moment to buzz, and I saw it was a text from Katsuki. I read the message, and couldn’t help but laugh.

“What?” Pony asked. I turned my phone to show her, and she just fixed me with a look. “Remind me to change my password.”

“Oh come on,” I said, typing out a reply, “I’m not that bad.” Pony added a raised eyebrow and crossed arms to her look. “… okay fine, I am that bad. But not to you,” I finished.

“Uh-huh.” She made a shooing motion with her hand. ‘Go on, go on. You have to train to catch, and a boyfriend to chat with.” She closed her eyes and looked up triumphantly, but when I didn’t reply, her eyes shot wide. “Oh. My. God. You really aren’t denying it.”

“Pony,” I warned.

“Nope you gotta go and I have to prep, have a good day Kanna see you tomorrow bye!” And with that, I was unceremoniously shoved out of the bathroom, and had the door slammed shut in my face. I rolled my eyes, but figured now was as good a time as any to just head out. I went into my room to grab my earbuds. The train to Hosu was about a one hour ride north-northwest of Musutafu if you weren’t taking the bullet train, and that was just too expensive. The bullet train could make it a fifteen minute trip, but I didn’t need the expediency. A normal commuter train was enough.

Plus… I flipped my phone open to read Katsuki’s newest text.

> DAMN IT KANNA WHEN DID YOU TAKE THAT PHOTO.

This gave me plenty of time to chat!

* * * * *

> THAT DOESN’T ANSWER THE QUESTION

> I woke up before you in the infirmary on Tuesday, alright? It was a golden opportunity!

> Yeah, but where did you get my fucking password!?

> Katsuki?

Two words. Fingerprint. Scanner.

> ... FUCK
FUCK FUCK FUCK
IS THAT WHY MY PHONE’S NEVER WHERE I LEFT IT

> ?

> MY MOM
IS SHE OPENING MY PHONE AND READING MY SHIT?

> Just let me know when you’re heading to bed, and I’ll leave her a message on your phone, alright?
>But then she’ll start bugging me about shit, like bringing you over
Or shit like that
Oi
Kanna say something
DAMN IT SAY SOMETHING

>Something.

>THAT IS NOT WHAT I MEANT

“Attention all passengers,” I looked up at the voice coming over the train’s loudspeakers, “we will be arriving at Hosu City Station in two minutes. Thank you for choosing to ride with DantooineCommuter Rail today, and we hope you enjoy your day.”

>Train’s arriving, gotta go. I’ll say hi to my parents for you.

>FUCK
WAIT
PLEASE NO
DAMN IT WE’VE HAD ONE DATE

>Bye!

I put my phone in my purse (annoyingly, my jeans with pockets are in desperate need of a wash, so I’m stuck wearing the ones whose ‘pockets’ are purely decorative… who does that, really?) and set it to vibrate, then promptly ignored everything else Katsuki sent me. Was what I said evil? Yes. I was just teasing, though. I wasn’t really going to go and tell my dad that I had a boyfriend now, just to see his… actually, you know what? Forget everything I just said.

I’m definitely going to tell him I have a boyfriend now, just to see his reaction. Especially since I can follow it up with something funny, like “remember the boy that beat me to a pulp? Yeah, him,” and watch Dad’s face cycle through the whole damn rainbow.

The train pulled up to the station. I stood up and walked to the doors, putting my earbuds away in my purse so I didn’t lose this pair too, and headed out towards the shops. It was just about ten-thirty in the morning at this point, and if my dad was actually on time like he was supposed to be… oh, wait, there he is!

I saw Dad standing outside of a coffee shop at the bottom of the escalator, in full hero costume and everything, holding a pair of coffee cups. Next to him stood a younger, thinner person, also dressed in full costume, but not someone I’d ever seen before. He looked to be wearing… wow. Okay, there is exactly one easy way to describe this, and it is… yeesh. I really hope that costume design wasn’t my father’s idea, because whoever came up with that needs to be shot, hit with a shovel to make sure they’re dead, tied to cinderblocks, and then thrown into the Mariana Trench to ensure that they and their designs never see the light of day again. Okay, after that crazy bit, you ready for what this guy was wearing? You sure? Alright then, don’t say I didn’t warn you.

His outfit looked like a cross between an English ‘gentleman’ on safari in the nineteenth century and Steve Irwin, along with fanny packs surrounding the entire circumference of his waist, additional satchels hanging from his shoulders… and an honest-to-goodness bull whip. Yes, sort of like the one that Midnight has brought into class on occasion. Yes, he was wearing really ugly shorts. And yes,
he had the dumbest semi-conical hat I’ve ever seen.

Now take all of that and put it on top of a fresh-faced young man who had to be early- to mid-twenties at the oldest. A young man that… actually, now that I got a closer look…

“Kanna-chan!” Dad came forward to meet me and returned my hug with an awkward one-upper-arm-only hug of his own. Then he offered me one of the cups in his hand… then pulled it back, took a quick sniff, and held out the other cup instead. “Right, forgot which one was the tea. Did you have a good train ride?”

“Eh, it was fine,” I shrugged, taking the offered cup. “Listened to some music, chatted with friends, read some of a book. You know, the usual commute stuff.” I very carefully took a sip, and my eyes widened at the taste. “Chai latte?”

“Hey, I remember your favorites!” Dad said, tone affronted but smile joking.

“Yes, just like the time you remembered that pink is my favorite color,” I said. “Oh wait, it isn’t; teal is.” I pulled out my phone and held up its case as an example.

“How do you even remember that? You were four,” Dad protested. I shrugged.

“And on the topic of remembering,” I gestured at my father’s companion, “would this be the ‘new sidekick’ you mentioned?”

“Ah, yes!” Dad straightened up and cleared his throat, gesturing at the young man next to him. “Kanna-chan, this is Safari. He’s been working for me since you started at UA, actually…”

“B-boss, you forgot to say something about me for a month?”

“Well, er.” Dad floundered. I rolled my eyes and nudged him aside, then stood in front of Dad’s new sidekick… his very tall new sidekick, I thought as I looked up to meet his eyes, a whole head above mine.

“Nice to finally meet you,” I said to him. “Kanna. Though I’m going to take a wild guess and say my dad won’t shut up about me.”

“He made me watch the recordings of your Sports Fest matches with him,” Safari revealed. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Kanna-san. A-and…” He fell into a steep bow. “I deeply apologize for my actions three years hence! I’ve since been shown the error of my ways, but I must still repent for what I’ve done!”

“Repent?” I boggled. “What are you—wait just a… that’s why you looked familiar!” I snapped my fingers, and then pointed at him. “You’re that ‘Vegan Vigilante’ guy!” He stiffened, but nodded. “Wow, okay, uh… I mean, you weren’t exactly the most terrifying ‘wannabe villain’, so I can see why you’d be given a second chance. That said… have you seen the error of your ways?”

“Huh?” He looked befuddled. “Well, I’ve been following the law to the letter, and I even have a probationary hero license, so—”

“Not that!” I said. “Veganism!”

“… why would I change that?” Safari scratched his head. “There’s nothing wrong with eating
vegan. I mean, it makes me feel healthier, and there’s nothing inherently wrong with it, so…”

“You’re missing the problem,” I said, smiling. “Your problem is that being vegan is a huge missed steak.”

I lost the fight against my giggles at that last bit. Safari’s mouth fell open slightly, eye twitching. And Dad?

“What am I going to do with you?” I watched him pinch the bridge of his nose, and groan. “Of all the jokes in the world…”

“What, it had to be the one that makes you hungry? Sorry!” I said. “Anyways, um… hm.” I turned towards Safari. “Hey, could I get a minute alone with my dad real quick? Go snack on some tofu or something and come back?”

“Vegans eat more than just tofu you know,” Safari grumbled, but he did oblige. A moment later and Dad and I stood there, him in full costume and drawing the occasional stare, me with tail lashing nervously, prompting the occasional bit of recognition given that I’d been on national television two days ago.

“So…” Dad prompted. “What was the matter, kiddo?” I sighed.

“Dad, when was the last time you and Mom talked? Have you two spoken since you and I made up?” I asked. He froze. “Please say you’ve done something, Dad! Have you at least tried?” He stayed silent. “Oh come on!”

“I keep meaning to,” he said, defeated. “But every time I do, something comes up, or I miraculously remember some or other errand I need to do right then, or…” He deflated. “Or I just stand there, looking at the phone, and… I just can’t bring myself to call.”

“I’m sorry, Dad.” I gave Dad a hug, one he gladly returned. “I… do you want me to try and say something to Mom when I see her? Or, well, I’m stopping by the house. Did you…” I paused, reading his surly expression. “O-ooh. I… uh, I guess that’s a ‘no’ then.”

“I’m sorry too, Kanna-chan.” He sighed, and I hugged him tighter. “I know it’s hard to see your parents like this. Believe me, I do. But this is something your mother and I have to work through ourselves.” He pulled back from the hug and looked at me, hands on my shoulders. “Promise me you won’t try to do anything rash to force the issue. It would probably do more harm than good.”

“Mm…” I looked down.

“Kanna…”


“Thank you,” Dad said, giving me one more pat on the shoulder before pulling away. “Safari and I should probably get back on patrol. You okay to head to the hospital by yourself?”

“Dad, I’m fifteen,” I said. “Besides, I was going to stop by the house first. Grab something.” I shuffled from hoof to hoof. “For Tenya and Tensei.”

“Alright. Call if you need something, alright?”
“I will!” I held up my phone for emphasis, and it chose right then to vibrate, giving Dad a good look at my screen.

“Oh, you got a text from—wait. I know that name.” I turned my phone away from my dad’s face, but his frown had turned to recognition. “Kanna-chan, why is that Bakugou boy sending you text messages? How does he have your number?”

“Dad, the whole class is in a group chat,” I said, rolling my eyes. “And it’s none of your business if I’m texting my boyfriend or not. Anyway, bye!” I turned and started walking away, waving behind me.

“Texting your—no!” I heard Dad start to follow after me, and I picked up the pace, laughing all the way. “Yaseiki Kanna, you get back here this instant and explain yourself!”

“Hmm, nope!” I turned and blew Dad a raspberry, then waved at Safari, who’d come back over with the sudden commotion, and walked back away. “Have a good patrol!”

I tuned out whatever else Dad said as I left the station and exited out onto the street. Then I took a quick look at the photo I’d managed to capture on my phone, giggled a little bit, and sent it off to Pony, the group chat with our friends, and Katsuki, who (of course) was the first to respond.

>the fuck happened to him
that’s your shithead pops, right

I snorted, and typed out my response.

>One, not a ‘shithead’, just a bit of a doofus.

>he used you as bait for a villain
if that ain’t a shithead

I scowled. I mean, he wasn’t wrong…

>Okay fine, he’s made some mistakes, and they cost him, but he’s improving.
And two?
That’s the face he made when I told him I had a boyfriend.

>… FUCK
DAMN IT KANNA
WHY WOULD YOU SAY THAT

>What, are you ashamed to be my boyfriend?

>…

>Good boy. I’ll have you trained yet!

>FKCk YOU TOO

>Not until at least August 31, Katsuki. I’m still fifteen, remember?
>NOT WHAT I MEANT DAMN IT
... wait really

>Don’t push your luck. Anyway, heading to hospital. You heard about Ingenium, right?

>who hasn’t yet fuckin sucks to be him hope someone kills that hero killer fucker

>Yeah... Ingenium’s a family friend. I’ve known him since I was, what, four or five? Hate hospitals, but I should go see the guy. And I need to see Tenya. I don’t have any siblings, but if it were Pony that’d gotten attacked like that? Well... yeah. Wait why am I telling you this. Ugh, I’m sorry Katsuki. You don’t have to listen to me getting morose like this. Not what you signed up for.

>s’fine cya

>I’ll talk to you later.

>tell your mom thanks btw

>For?...

>YOU KNOW WHAT FOR DAMN IT

>Just teasing you. Bye.

I closed my phone, most of my good cheer gone from the suddenly somber turn the conversation took at the end there. I don’t know why I’d brought Tenya and Tensei up to him, or even gone into detail on what I was doing. Maybe I just felt like I wanted to share it with someone. It didn’t matter.

I made it home a tiny bit later and let myself in, dropped off anything I’d had in my purse that I didn’t need (earbuds, handheld game console, chargers and cords), and grabbed what I’d come home for. I put that in a shopping bag for easier transport, then headed out for the hospital. Time to go see Tenya.

Time to be there for my oldest friend.

* * * * *

Hosu City Memorial Hospital was just the same as I remembered it. That is to say the lights were too bright, the lobby stank of antiseptic, too many people that could really help themselves with a first aid kit milled about the waiting area, and whichever doctor was on clinic duty was trying very, very hard to keep a smile on.

Today, the poor harried doctor was Dr. Jakuzure, the woman with snakes growing out of her arms,
and someone I hadn’t seen for… what, a year and a half now? She had her hair pulled back in a low ponytail, reading glasses pushed up while her hand rubbed at her eyes, and the snakes sliding out of her white coat’s sleeves hissing in discontent as they sipped from a coffee cup. If that was coffee from the nurse’s station, then I couldn’t blame them.

“Jakuzure-sensei!” I called, waving as I came over.

“Sign-in sheet’s over there, put your name down and wait your… turn.” Apparently she finally managed to process who was talking, took off her reading glasses, and blinked over my way. “Oh, Kanna-chan!” She pressed a button on the laptop in front of her (probably saving the chart info, or locking it so nobody could see), then came out from behind the desk. I reached out a hand for her snakes to inspect, and one of them wound her way through my fingers, softly hissing with what had to be contentment when I crooked a finger down to rub the top of her head. Yes, the snakes are female. Dr. Jakuzure is female, and since her Quirk is basically a pair of live snakes with some unique properties growing from her arms, they’re also going to be female snakes. Are they sentient? Well, I’m pretty sure they are, and are also quite intelligent, given I’ve caught one of them hiss-laughing at a joke while the other fixed her with a glare.

“Busy day?” I looked out at the waiting room. A quick count put it at twenty people waiting, and though it was just a quick glance, only two of them actually seemed to have anything resembling an injury.

“It’s been crazy since Ingenium was… well.” She stopped before saying anything that could be troubling to the people around us, most of whom had turned to look at who was speaking with the doctor so familiarly. And at least one of them was holding up a camera, so I turned away from that. “Everyone’s worried they’re going to be next, even though they’re not Pro Heroes, and so any ache and pain has them coming in with the fear they won’t be able to get away or fight back because of it. It’s, ugh.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, and squeezed her eyes shut. Her snakes came up and rubbed against her cheeks, and the one on the right actually lightly nipped her ear, which had Dr. Jakuzure giving that snake a look. If you’ve ever wanted to see a sheepish snake, well… it’s definitely a sight to see, I’ll say that much. “Oh, I nearly forgot!”

“Huh?” Next thing I knew I was wrapped in a hug, with a pair of snakes licking at my ears with their tongues. Now, I’m a very ticklish person, so this had me collapsing into a fit of giggles from the unexpectedly light touch. Seem odd that something touching my ears would have me laughing? Please, you haven’t seen ticklish until you’ve seen me. I am ticklish everywhere on my body. A couple finger pokes in the side is enough to have me rolling on the floor while I try and fail to contain the laughter.

“You did so great during the Sports Fest!” One more squeeze, and a light nip on my left ear from Dr. Jakuzure’s right-hand snake (that one’s always been much more touchy-feely), and she took a step back. “Oh, did Chiyome nip you?” She brought her right arm up and stared the snake in the eyes again, and the snake promptly quailed. “Darn it Chiyome, why can’t you behave? Yamata doesn’t nip me or other people!”

“Erm…” I poked the good doctor, and pointed into the bag in my right hand. The bag that her left arm’s snake, Yamata, was currently busy exploring. “Maybe one’s clingy and one’s nosy?” Dr. Jakuzure sighed and pulled her arm back, and the snake along with it. “Thanks,” I said. “For the congratulations, I mean. It’s just, I don’t know.” I hedged, hopping from hoof to hoof. “Guess it’s just weird that so many people recognize me from seeing me on television, I guess?”

“You’re just going to have to get used to it,” Dr. Jakuzure said, smiling. Then a quick look at her
watch sent that smile fleeing immediately. “Darn it. I should probably get back to clinic, these patients aren’t going to see themselves. You came to see Iida, yes?”

“Mhmm,” I confirmed.

“Right.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out her prescription pad, along with a pen. “I can’t say aloud which room he’s in, too many fans and well-wishers.” She wrote a number on the pad and turned it towards me; I saw 415, nodded, and then she turned her pen around and… erased the numbers. There was no trace of it when she was done, and I looked at the pen.

“Which brand are those pens?” Next thing I knew it was extended towards my face. “Seriously?”

“I’ve got more,” she said. “Go on.” She waggled it in front of my nose, and I reached up to take it, then put it away in my purse.

“Thanks, Jakuzure-sensei.”

“I’m not your doctor anymore,” she said, tone lightly chiding. “That means you call me Keiko too. Understood?”

“Okay… Jakuzure-sensei.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, and exhaled hard. Her snakes, Yamata and Chiyome, just hiss-laughed.

“I swear, you and your mother,” she grumbled. “Always want to be called by your first names, but when anybody else asks for it…”

“I’m just kidding, Keiko-sensei,” I interrupted her before she went any deeper. I was rewarded for my efforts with a soft smile. “I’m gonna head up, leave you to it. Good luck with clinic.”

“See you kid. Say hi to Pony-chan for me when you see her, ‘kay?”

“Will do!” I waved goodbye, and then she turned around to call her next patient. The smile I had from seeing her faded once I started moving towards the stairs. I came upon the fourth floor too soon for comfort, and then it was time to face the reason I’d come here in the first place. My hooves landed on the linoleum, and…

I almost turned around. I’m ashamed to say it, but I nearly went right back down the stairs and left the hospital right then. I don’t mind hospitals, it’s a little hard to when I’d occasionally spend a day there just to not be at home alone when Mom and Dad were both working, but this wasn’t quite the same. It’s very different to visit somebody you know in a hospital, especially when that somebody is in bad shape. I… no. I have to do this.

Tenya would do it for me.

“Thought I’d find you here.” I looked up to see my mom walking towards me, hands in the pockets of her white coat and heels clicking on the floor. “Now’s a good time; it’s just Tenya and Tensei.” She put a hand on my shoulder and steered me down the hall towards Tensei’s hospital room. “I’ll be in my office once you’re done, okay?”

“Alright.” I turned and gave Mom a small hug… then bit the bullet. Down the hall I went, and stopped outside of room 415. A small piece of paper slipped inside the door placard indicated this room was for Iida Tensei. I took a deep breath, then knocked on the door.
“Ah, one moment,” I heard a voice from inside the room say. The door opened a crack, and I saw the hallway lights glint off of Tenya’s glasses as he peeked outside. Behind the rectangular lenses, his eyes widened. “Kanna?”

“H-hey.” I gestured with my hand, drawing attention to the bag I was carrying. “Can I come in?” He stood aside and opened the door, letting me into the hospital room before closing the door behind me. I set down the bag I was carrying and got my first look at post-Stain Tensei.

He was… he looked bad. Better than he had been, apparently, but he still resembled somebody who’d gotten blindsided by a bus. His head had apparently been shaved at least partly, and I could see stitches creeping up from his temple and back along the crown of his head. He was awake, and though he was looking right at me, it also seemed as though he was looking past me. I’d heard people talk about a ‘thousand-yard stare’, but I’d never actually seen it before… until now, that is. And to find it on somebody I knew was just… creepy.

Gauze and bandages ran along his body, some of it recently changed from the looks of it, and they’d inserted his IV into his hand, possibly because the gashes and cuts along his arms were too close to the vein for them to easily find without damage. But that wasn’t the part that had my skin crawling.

No, it was how still he was. He’d barely even registered my presence, and he didn’t move. Tensei just… sat there.

“He’s off the ventilator?” I whispered to Tenya.

“This morning,” he said back. We watched as Tensei blinked slowly, then finally turned to see us. He seemed to smile for a moment, but his face turned right back around to that frown.

“Tenya-kun. Your friend?”

“Ah! Yes, you remember Kanna, yes?”

“Hm…” He closed his eyes slowly, seeming to think. The sound of the heart-rate monitor and other sensors beeped through the room.

I wanted to get out of here.

“A-anyway! I, uh…” I went over to the bag I’d brought and picked it up. “Tenya, I’m not sure if you do or not but, do you remember when I was in the hospital ten years ago? When… well,” I raised one hoof, “this?”

“I… fail to see what that has to do with this,” he admitted, eyebrows knitting together.

“Well, you didn’t see it since I’d already given it to Mom to bring home, but Pony and her dad got me something to help me get through it.” I reached into the bag and pulled out a teddy bear. This one had on a white coat and a little fabric stethoscope hanging from its neck. The bottom of the little white coat and his ears were a little frayed, and one of his button eyes had to be sewn back on. “Dr. Bearsly here helped me through a tough time. And, well… I walked out of here.” I put him down on the table next to Tensei’s bed. “I figure… maybe he can help you do it too.”

Tensei… he reached up, took Dr. Bearsly, and just looked at the teddy bear. He closed his eyes, sighed… and let him fall to the bed, next to him.
I felt a hand on my elbow, and next thing I knew Tenya was pulling me outside of the room. The door clicked shut behind him, and he slumped down against it.

“… I’m missing something,” I realized. “Aren’t I?”

“It…” He frowned. "I know you meant well. You didn’t know.” Tenya wouldn’t look at me while he talked. “Aniki’s never going to walk out of here. The Hero Killer, he…” Tenya breathed out, voice ragged. “His spinal cord was severed, Kanna.”

“… oh. Oh gods.” I felt the bottom drop out of my stomach. “And… there’s nothing they can do?” Tenya shook his head.

“Maybe if the Hero Killer maintained his weapons better, but…” Tenya slammed a clenched fist on the wall. “Why? Why did it have to be Aniki?”

I reached forward and pulled Tenya into a hug. He grabbed onto me for dear life. We slid down the wall again, and I let him rest his head on my shoulder while his own shook.

“It’s not fair,” he got out through his sobs. “He didn’t deserve this!”

I didn’t say anything. I just held Tenya while he cried. I pulled him tight, and I thought about Tensei. About how dead he was to the world around him. He’d barely noticed I was there. He barely noticed Tenya was there.

Iida Tensei may have survived his encounter with the Hero Killer… but I see now that Ingenium never left that alleyway.

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“So he’s paraplegic then?” I asked my mom. We sat in her office one floor down, each nursing a cup of green tea. She’d switched the two chairs opposite the desk in her office to have a gap between the seat and the backrest not long after I grew my tail, something that’d taken me an embarrassingly long time to notice.

“Yes and no,” she said, sighing as she closed out of whatever chart she’d been working on. “It’s crueler than that.” She entered a few keystrokes on her computer, then turned the screen to face me. She had a diagram of the human spinal cord and surrounding vertebrae pulled up, and gestured with her pen. “Iida Tensei’s spinal cord was severed between the third and fourth lumbar vertebrae. He has sensation in his hips and some portions of his upper legs, and muscular control there. But he doesn’t have any sensation just above or below the knee.” Mom looked me in the eyes. “He had enough sensation for us to be hopeful, and just enough hope for it to be crushed.”

“Oh…” I looked down into my teacup. “And there’s nothing that can be done? At all?”

“We’re already exploring avenues to restore sensation and utility to his legs,” she said. “Your friend, Momo-chan? We received calls from her parents saying they were throwing all of their not-incorcesiderable wealth and clout behind this. But even with all that…” Mom seemed to deflate. She looked… I hate to say this, but my mother looked tired. “It could take up to five years just to restore sensation, and another several years after that before Tensei could reasonably be expected to walk
“So even if he were to get mobility back, he won’t ever be a hero again.” When I said it like that, it just seemed… too real. Too damn real. “But we’ve got healing Quirks, don’t we? And even with *allof* those, there’s nothing we can do?”

“The spinal cord doesn’t heal on its own, so Recovery Girl is out,” Mom said. “Her Quirk may allow some *very* limited regeneration, such as making sure bones set properly and torn muscles and ligaments aren’t knitted back together incorrectly, but the nervous system is just too complicated without an existing regenerative property to augment.”

“Well,” I hedged, “what about… I don’t know, somebody with a flesh sculpting or other Quirk that can directly affect and change human tissue?”

“Again, it’s not that simple.” Mom pointed back to that same diagram of the spinal column. “The spinal cord has *so many nerves* in it that just…” She made a smushing motion with her hands. “Just forcing the severed portions back together wouldn’t work. The nerves would need to be reattached, one by one, and you’d also need somebody who’s able to force a patient’s nervous system to fire signals and read where they’re supposed to go, *then* fuse the severed nerves back together. There isn’t a robot in existence with the kind of precision to single out one nerve out of the spinal cord at a time like that, and I’ve only heard of *one* Quirk that could actually fuse the severed ends back together seamlessly.”

“Why not a person instead of a robot, though?” I asked. “Surely *somebody* has a Quirk that could give them the kind of precision you’d need without a mechanical interface. Or what if there was a way to strengthen Recovery Girl’s Quirk, make it from speeding up natural healing into a sort of advanced regeneration?”

“Nothing exists that could let us do that,” Mom said, slumping down in her chair. “There’s an illegal drug that *temporarily* augments a Quirk’s strength, but it doesn’t last very long, and it also makes the adrenal glands dump everything into the user’s bloodstream. An operation like this would take hours, maybe even a full *day* of uninterrupted surgery.” She sipped at her tea, and sighed. “Quirks can get stronger with use, but not on that level.” She looked up at me. “You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I just… sorry Mom. I need to go clear my head.” I downed the rest of my tea and stood up from the chair, threading my tail back out from the hole in the back. “Want me to grab something for our dinner before I head home?”

“No cooking,” she fired back automatically. “I’m sorry Kanna-chan, I love you, but you’re not a good chef even with your head on straight. With how things are right now…”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I’d just burn the house down.” I walked over to the frosted glass door and put a hand on the handle. “See you tonight, Mom.”

“Enjoy the rest of your day, honey. See you tonight!”

I smiled back at Mom and left her office. Then I hightailed it out of the hospital as fast as I could, thoughts racing a mile a minute.

* * * * *
I spent most of the rest of the day just sort of… wandering around Hosu. I didn’t want to go home, because then I’d just sit there, or maybe ignore my mom’s warning and try something in the kitchen to get my mind off of things. I’d already bought my return ticket for tomorrow afternoon, so I couldn’t just head back to Musutafu without having to pay another non-refundable ticket price. And I didn’t want to go back to the hospital. I owe it to Tenya to be there for him, but… I don’t think I can sit in that room with him and his brother. Or rather, the shell of a man that hopefully wasn’t all that remained of Iida Tensei. And then there was the other reason I didn’t want to stay in the hospital. If I had to sit there one more moment, I’d keep thinking about just how fucked up the world was.

I’d keep thinking about how unfair it all was that the only Quirk that could be actively, permanently strengthened… was the Wendigo’s. And about the price that came with it. It’s not fair. The one person who gets stronger and stronger over time had to be a ravenous, bloodthirsty serial murderer with a bone to pick. It had to be him, didn’t it?

The more I actually thought about it, though… the less sense it made. The Wendigo… his Quirk was transformative. How in the world does eating people somehow translate into gradually growing with strength as he feeds? That… I mean, I could understand if some Quirks had a crazy creepy mechanic like that, like Mono—Neito’s Quirk, or Aizawa-sensei’s Quirk. But their Quirks specifically interacted with other Quirks, and for them to have some weird accretion as a result of that would make more sense.

But they don’t.

Which meant that there was some sort of X-factor at play here, something completely unique to Mason. Actually finding out what it was, though… that was the problem. I mean, it’s not like solutions to my problems just fall out of the sky or anything. No, that would be too—

“Ah, Frau Yaseiki! What a surprise to find you here!”

I recognized that voice immediately, and recoiled. I turned on a hoof to see none other than that same blonde, German bastard that had fondled my tail at the Sports Festival. He wore what looked to be business-casual attire underneath a white lab coat, which itself had some rather oddly colored stains along its length, and a small hole near the bottom of the right… edge, I guess? I don’t know the proper terminology for that kind of garment.

“I recognize that voice immediately, and recoiled. I turned on a hoof to see none other than that same blonde, German bastard that had fondled my tail at the Sports Festival. He wore what looked to be business-casual attire underneath a white lab coat, which itself had some rather oddly colored stains along its length, and a small hole near the bottom of the right… edge, I guess? I don’t know the proper terminology for that kind of garment.

“Are you following me?” I accused. He gave a slightly perplexed frown, but then pointed at the sign on the building behind and above him. “Wesenproduktion,” I read off. Wait… “That’s a… oh. Oh. You actually do work for a Support Company.”

“It is cheaper here in Hosu than in Tokyo proper, but we still consider this our Tokyo branch,” he said. “Ah, but I am getting ahead of myself!”

He extended a hand to me in greeting, which I looked at, and then looked up at him. Which was quite the neck-craning exercise, given that he had well over a foot in height on me. If I were to use metric units, he probably had thirty-three, thirty-four centimeters of height on me. Then I looked back at the hand he’d offered me.

“Gerhardt Schutz. At your service.”

“I’d say it was a pleasure,” I remarked, slapping the hand away, “but I think you had enough fun with just my tail.” I turned to walk away from the… well, creep, and his workplace too. Just my luck
that I had to stumble upon the one place in Hosu that—

“Oh, you did not want to know about this Wendigo character’s Quirk?”

I froze. Then I turned back towards… what’d he say, Gerhardt? I turned back towards Gerhardt and stomped right up to him, though it was a bit difficult to try and be imposing when he could use my head as an armrest.

“Tell me,” I demanded. “You know something about his Quirk. I need to know.”

“Perhaps I may suggest a trade?” He offered. I scowled, but motioned for him to keep going. “Your Quirk and its effects on your anatomy are fascinating. Allow me to scan the intersection of an arthropod limb and your own, and I will tell you what I know.”

“Mm…” I weighed my options. On the one hand, I’d probably need to let this guy take me to his lab. On the other… information about Mason. “Alright.”

In the end, I thought as he clapped his hands with delight and led me into the building, the choice was obvious. I needed information. And here somebody was, dangling it right in front of me like a carrot.

Now I just had to keep my eyes peeled for the stick.

-------

“How strange,” Gerhardt remarked as he inspected the results of the scan he’d taken of my arm. I’d since shifted it back to normal; maintaining arthropod morphs is very uncomfortable, like all of your skin is too tight and you’re wearing fifteen pairs of gloves. It’s rigid, it’s inflexible, and it’s just so wildly alien from what human is supposed to be. “At the point of transformation, there is a membrane. As blood and lymph flow into the changed limb, it becomes hemolymph, and when it flows back out, it is separated back into its components. That is not all; perhaps a deeper scan could—”


“Very well.” He pressed a few buttons on his keyboard and moused over something, then closed the windows he’d had open and pulled open new ones. “Vendigo—”

“Mason,” I interrupted. “His name is Alexander Mason.” I raised an eyebrow as I answered his annoyed gaze. “Probably easier for you to say without an accent.”

“If you insist,” he murmured. “Herr Mason’s Quirk is extraordinarily simple. Quirk Factor strengthens his muscles and bones, and allows him to consciously reshape them. Muscle cannot leave his body, but bone can, and so long as it remains connected to him, he maintains control over its growth and properties.

“That’s not what you offered,” I said testily. “You specifically said there was a chemical in his blood. What is it?”

“Hm.” Gerhardt pressed his fingers together over his mouth, eyes closed in thought. “Do you know
how insulin works?”

“Wha-huh?” I stuttered, taken off guard by the non-sequitur. “Uh… what does that have to do with anything?”

“Insulin,” he continued, “is what lets your body take in glucose. Und zhis?” He pressed a button on the top of his workstation, and a small, refrigerated compartment on its side opened with a hiss. He reached in to remove a vial, slid the compartment back closed, and placed the vial on the countertop. “Zhis is zhe aberrant chemical found in Mason’s blood. It acts much the same as insulin, but not for glucose.”

I picked the vial up and inspected the liquid inside. Its color was a deep, dull purple, and the liquid had an oily consistency to it, though it also stuck to the walls of the container like alcohol did.

“Well, what does it affect then?” I asked.

“Quirk Factor.” The vial dropped from my fingers, and straight into Gerhardt’s waiting hand. I looked back up at him, and he merely pointed at the screen. “Zhe more somebody’s Quirk is used, zhe more Quirk Factor zhey produce. By zhe same notion, if you vere to artificially increase zhe concentration of Quirk Factor in somebody’s body, zheir Quirk should grow in strength as wvell, and zhat is zhat it does. From tests conducted on Mason’s severed arm, retrieved two years ago, ve haff determined zhat it does not, however, serve to stockpile his own Quirk Factor.”

“So when he’s eating his victims, it’s not for sustenance,” I thought aloud. “Wait! Does this mean he’s eating their Quirks too!?”

“Yes, und no.” Another button press on his computer brought up three different models of DNA. The leftmost was labeled as being the Wendigo’s, the rightmost was Gerhardt’s own, apparently, and the middle was… an anonymous subject? I’m not sure. “How Quirk Factor affects our bodies is determined by genetics. Even if you injected Quirk Factor from zhe middle donor into Mason, it vould act on Mason’s Quirk. Und if you injected it into me?” He shrugged. “Nozhing. No Quirk to act on.”

“And that’s it?” I pointed at the vial. “You inject that into somebody, and then…” I waved my hands. “Suddenly their Quirk can get permanently stronger too!”

“Nein. It vould last for perhaps a day, two at zhe most, und then you vould need to inject more.” He held the vial up to the light. “Zhis is a byproduct of gene therapy, likely modifying zhe pancreas to make it secrete zhis substance alongside insulin. I vould need a sample to be certain, but—”

“Can’t you just look at his DNA?” I asked, pointing at the screen. “I mean, you have it right there!”

“Zhat,” he said slowly, “is only zhe after sample. I vould need one from before zhe gene therapy to isolate it.” He gave me another look. “Or his pancreas.”

I sighed, and pushed away from the workstation.

“I guess I owe you one,” I said slowly, eying the wall of occupied lab rat enclosures along the far wall of Gerhardt’s lab. Something is… off with those things, and I don’t know what. Not the white rats, the cages themselves.

“It vas no problem, Frau Yaseiki,” Gerhardt said, motioning to the scans of my shifted arm he’d
pulled back up. “I do apologize for my behavior two days hence. I can be, what was zhe word?” He started muttering to himself in both German and Japanese, but mostly German.


“Yes, yes!” He turned back towards his computer, and began typing away. “Feel free to let yourself out.”

“… what, you’re not going to escort an unauthorized guest out of the building?” I asked, trying (and failing) to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

“Nein!” He declared. “Not when zhere is WORK to be done!”

I sighed, and shook my head. I gave one last glance at the lab rat enclosures, but when I couldn’t figure out what it was that was bugging me about them, I just shrugged and left. It was easy enough to get back out onto the streets of Hosu, just a quick jaunt down the stairs and back across the lobby, and soon enough it was just me, my thoughts, and the throngs of people walking the streets.

As enlightening as this had been, it had raised just as many new questions as it had answered. Okay, so now I know why the Wendigo keeps getting stronger: some chemical in his blood acts as insulin to foreign Quirk Factor, pulling it into his cells and… well, processing it, I guess. Gerhardt hadn’t been very clear on that front. Or maybe storing it inside his muscles and bones, which would also give a larger amount of the stuff to act on his body, especially since his Quirk specifically affects those areas. It also neatly explained his enhanced regenerative abilities, since simply having more Quirk Factor would definitely make that faster and more effective.

Now that I thought about it, maybe a crazy Quirk Factor density is what made that Noumu thing’s regeneration so crazy fast. All those Quirks in one body, with each one producing its own Quirk Factor… it made some sense, but I felt like I was still missing something about it.

And you know the worst part? I’m probably never going to know what that missing ‘je ne sais quoi’ even is.

Unless, y’know. I somehow get my hands on the Wendigo’s pancreas.

Ew.

* * * * *

“Alright Safari, you’re good.” Kenta looked at his sidekick, and favored him with a smile. “Feel free to head on home, you’re done for the day.”

“But boss, what about you?” Safari, Doubutsushi Takumi, asked. “I mean, isn’t it wrong to leave work before your boss?”

“It’s just paperwork,” Kenta said. “Nothing you have to worry about until you go from a probationary license to a full one, and once that happens I’ll walk you through it. Until then, go on home, get some rest. Just,” he raised up a hand, “promise me you’ll stick to main streets.”
“I will,” Takumi promised. “Oh, did the maintenance people come?”

“Let me check!” Kenta walked over to his office and flicked the light switch on the wall. Unlike earlier this morning, the room lit up. “It did!” He called back.

“Oh good. Alright, I’ll see you tomorrow, boss!”

“Right.” Kenta waited until he heard the door close, then took the opportunity to change out of his own costume. What a day… far too much petty crime for comfort, and even an armed robbery with a possibly deadly Quirk. Takumi was surprisingly helpful for those; being able to create entire animals from nothing more than a single hair was impossibly useful, especially once he’d learned to turn the animals back into the original component he’d used. But all of that produces paperwork, and Kenta had to fill out an incident report for every single thing they’d done that day.

So he changed out of his costume, sat at his desk, and got to work. He’d save the Takeda Luxury Goods robbery for last, since it would probably take the longest. Purse snatcher paperwork was the easiest to submit, so he reached into his desk drawer, pulled out a bunch of the requisite form, and set them on top of the desk. He grabbed the first one from the stack, and set to filling out the information. Victim, Kurenai Tsubasa, seventeen years old; assailant, Kumon Ryu. Assailant used an invisibility Quirk to—

A droplet of something fell onto the back of Kenta’s neck. He reached around to feel for whatever it was, and his fingers came away sticky. That… was that paint? He brought his hand around to his front… and froze. The liquid was a deep red, almost black in color.

It wasn’t paint.

Kenta pushed away from his desk and leaned back in his chair. When he saw the ceiling, he froze.

**ONE HERO DOWN, INJUN.**
I apologize for the delay with this chapter. A number of things well outside my control all cascaded at once.

First, my uncle suddenly died of a literal one-in-a-million complication after his first round of chemotherapy for stage 4 colorectal cancer. If you thought attending an orthodox Jewish funeral was nasty... now make it during PASSOVER.

And these past two days, I've been doing campus visits to determine where I'll be going to law school.

I've decided on the George Washington University School of Law, in Washington D.C.

By the time I finally got home, it was close to evening, and I had way too much to think about. I wanted to relax after everything I’d seen and heard today, to just unwind, but… I couldn’t. My mind kept going right back to everything I’d learned. Tensei’s condition, what made Mason so different… even in my first life, I’d always had a bad habit of latching onto something and just refusing to let it drop. I was never as overt about it as my brother, he’d had all the subtlety of a barking dog, but I was always the more tenacious one. Roundabout and oblique, but always returning to the same point, that was me. It shouldn’t be any surprise then that once I got home, I made a beeline for my computer. I mean, I did still put on my hoof slippers to keep from damaging the floor before taking the stairs two at a time, I’m not that impatient. But I still sat myself down and hopped on the internet as soon as I could.

There was nothing to find on Mason other than his crimes. If I wanted any information about what made his Quirk the way it was, I’d have to find Dad’s office, hope he was there, and then try to slip into his personal files without him noticing. Yeah, that wasn’t very likely. Nor would it really have helped to research Quirks that get stronger, since theoretically speaking any Quirk can, just… not the way Mason’s does. Except for One For All. But that was the exception to end all exceptions, and didn’t apply to this situation. That wasn’t what I was looking for in any case. No, I was searching for something else.

I was looking into something, anything that could help Tensei. The way Mom had talked about his options, it sounded like she’d only been considering Quirks and how those could help the situation. That was… well. I love having a Quirk, don’t get me wrong, superpowers are awesome. But the fact that the whole idea of ‘use a Quirk to solve every problem’ has even started to infect me (and yes I’ve definitely caught myself thinking of Quirks as the first, last, and only solution to some issues) leads me to believe that Mom has a much more severe case. If that’s the case, and I’m going to assume it is, then I wouldn’t be at all surprised to hear that Mom only considered Quirks, and not conventional treatments.

Option one: replacing his damaged nerves with his own nerves. The spinal cord won’t heal itself, but other nerves can. Maybe with some help from Recovery Girl, they could harvest some of his nerves that would heal back, heal them, harvest more, and end up with enough to help? I mean, that one would require Recovery Girl, or somebody else with a Quirk that would allow this type of healing,
but it’s doable, maybe? I mean, it’d require a specialist definitely… hm. No, wait, he might not agree to it. Somebody with such massive nerve damage might not want to purposefully incur more nerve damage. Well, Tensei might… but unfortunately he’s not in his right mind at the moment. Which would make power of attorney revert to his wife, Rei. Who also might not be okay with it.

Option two: cybernetics or mechanical workarounds. And again, I run into the problem of Rei. That woman is one of the most incredible gadgeteers I’ve ever met, and if she’s any indication of what Mei will grow up to be… yeah. She knows she’s smart, she knows her creations are incredible, and she’s got some serious pride in it. I don’t think she’d be willing to let somebody else’s tech float around in her husband’s body. But the secondary problem is that, while Rei does make some human-machine interfaces, she’s not specialized in cybernetics. That said, while it wouldn’t take long for Rei to become a bit of an expert in that area… practice makes perfect, and she doesn’t have the luxury of practice. And again, I don’t think Tensei or Rei would want him using tech other than hers. The kind of trust they’ve fostered over the past nine years is… it’s strong. But it’s also private.

Option three: scraping off the weird scarring that stops the spinal cord from healing, then using stem cells? Maybe? Okay, this one’s a shot in the dark. It had just begun to be developed during my first life. Maybe it hadn’t advanced enough for use, maybe it hadn’t managed to, maybe the knowledge had been lost in the upheaval caused by the emergence of Quirks… I don’t know.

All of this was just a thought. I don’t know enough. I’m not a doctor. Mom is, and I could definitely run all of this past her, but that has to wait until she’s—

“I’m home!”

“Coming, Mom!”

Speak of the devil! Well, not really, I mean Mom could shapeshift to look like a demon, and I guess I could too actually, but that’s not the point! It’s just an idiom, why am I explaining it! Either way, I must have really zoned out or gotten into what I was doing. That, or Mom was home early. A quick check of the time on my computer, though, said that she wasn’t. And now that I actually thought about it, I was hungry. It was seven at night… and since Mom refuses to let me use the kitchen without her being in the next room?

“So you’re doing for dinner?” Yeah, that was the first question I asked. And in response?

“Thai!” She held out the bag in her hand, and I grabbed it from her, taking it to the table before hopping into the kitchen and grabbing bowls and chopsticks. Yes, I know that well and truly authentic Thai restaurants don’t actually give you chopsticks. I do prefer to use chopsticks for it though, and I know Mom actually brought chopsticks with her when we went to Guam, so I figured she’d want them too. Also, we both liked to put our rice in the bowl first, then pour our dish out over it.

“When did this become our go-to?” I asked, grabbing my food out of the bag.

“Oh, about the time I figured out it would make you eat your vegetables.” I grabbed one of the wrapped sets of plastic-ware out of the bag and tossed it at Mom, more joking than anything. “Please Kanna-chan, we both know how hard it is to get you to eat something that isn’t meat or grain.”

“Well it’d be easier if you didn’t insist on certain stuff all the time!” I said with a huff. “I swear, it’s always the same few things, and you know I’m not a fan of most of them. You know I don’t like leeks or negi onions, mushrooms make me sick, I can only handle so much daikon or bamboo
shoots, and why do you always insist on lettuce and cabbage!”

“You don’t seem to mind the cabbage when it’s in ramen or sukiyaki,” she said, opening up her own container of pad see ew and transferring it from the plastic container into her bowl. “Why is it such an issue anyways?”

“Because it, it’s—!” I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. “No… no, you’re right. It’s not important.” I slumped in my seat and grabbed my chopsticks, stirring everything into the rice. “Sorry.”

“Mhmm.” Mom pushed her bowl over to the side and leaned across the table at me. “Talk.”

“What about?” I mumbled, taking my first few bites of wonderful, spicy food.

“Kanna.” I stopped with my chopsticks halfway to my mouth. Mom isn’t like Pony and me; she uses honorifics almost religiously. When she doesn’t use an honorific? Well. That usually means that the conversation has turned serious. “I’m your mother, and I’m not blind. Something is bothering you, and it’s worse than at the hospital.” I winced at the reminder of Tensei’s condition, and looked down into my bowl. Mom reached across the table and put her left hand on my right, squeezing lightly. “You can talk to me, okay?”

I turned my hand over to hold onto Mom’s, and pushed my bowl away with the other.

“I spent most of the time after the hospital looking things up,” I said. “I’m not a doctor, I know, but… there has to be something that can be done for Tensei, something none of you have looked at yet!”

“Kanna-chan—”

“I mean, what about, I don’t know, somebody with a minor healing Quirk to let us harvest some of his nerves that will heal, grow them back, harvest again, and rebuild his spinal column that way?” I interrupted Mom, building up steam as I went. “Or maybe cybernetics? We have full-on cybernetic arms and legs, I know Ectoplasm-sensei at UA has a prosthetic leg, and if they’re good enough replacements that they can be controlled by somebody’s nervous system then we have to have the kind of man-machine interface needed for that, right?”

“We have—”

“Or what about just a flat-out transplant? They use cadaver transplants for tendons and ligaments and even bones and bone marrow all the time, so why wouldn’t that work for the spinal column? Or even just, I don’t know,” I waved my hands airily, “just shave off that ‘glial scarring’ or whatever the term was, slather on stem cells, and let that do the job for us! There… there has to be something! Maybe one of those treatments that Momo’s family offered to pay for?”

Mom sighed. She also closed her eyes and took a deep breath, the same way I always did to calm myself.

“If the situation were different, any or all of those might have worked,” she started. “I’m not dumb, Kanna: I know you looked for avenues of approach with minimal Quirk use involved.” I piped up to protest, but Mom just clicked her tongue at me and I fell silent. “It’s one of your favorite rants sweetie, of course I’d have thought of that. And I know you’re not going to like this, but the reason they won’t work circles back around to Quirks. Specifically, Tensei’s.”
“That…” I frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s the same reason why several medical textbooks needed an addendum in the past two or three decades, or were rewritten entirely.” I gave her a look of incredulity at this, because… well, that’s a little ridiculous. Two hundred years ago when Quirks first started showing, sure, I could imagine the textbooks needing to be revised for obvious reasons.

“But why would there need to be a change in the past few decades?” I asked, voicing the other half of my concern. “And what does that have to do with why apparently nothing will work on Tensei?”

“If Tensei’s Quirk had been an Emitter or Transformation-type of Quirk, like that Todoroki boy’s or yours respectively, we wouldn’t have an issue. But he’s not. He, his father, and his brother all have Mutation-type Quirks. And Mutation Quirks don’t like to play by the rules when it comes to biology or medicine,” she explained. “Depending on how their Quirk affects their physiology, some pharmaceuticals could have a magnified effect, or be no better than a placebo. Surgical procedures sometimes have to be modified entirely based on the results of imaging, and occasionally even the imaging doesn’t work, and an exploratory surgery is needed just to know what we’re supposed to do. As an example, take Jakuzure Keiko.” Mom reached into the pocket of a lab coat that wasn’t there, and floundered a bit at the lack of what she actually needed. She gave a slight sheepish look, then stood up to go get something to use. “Be right back. And please eat Kanna-chan, your food’s getting cold.”

“But now you’ve got me curious,” I half-whined, half-grumbled. I dug into my food anyway, though, and was finishing up another bite when Mom returned with her work laptop. She opened it up and folded it in half, then removed the stylus from its slot on the side of the computer, clicked a button on the implement, and set to work drawing on the screen.

“Keiko-chan’s two snakes, Yamata and Chiyome, grow from either clavicle, or at least that’s where their respective spines end. They’re also connected to her circulatory and lymphatic systems, and despite being snakes, they are endothermic like she is. However, they also serve a vital purpose for her continued health and well-being.” Mom tapped the screen again, this time pulling up a diagram of a standard human’s internal organs. “Keiko-chan has no kidneys.”

“Wait wait wait, time out!” I held up my hands in the universal T symbol, more than a little confused. “How does she not have kidneys? And if she doesn’t have kidneys, what does she do instead? How does she pee!?” Mom gave me an expectant look. “Wait… are you telling me her snakes do it instead?” That’s… “is their ‘venom’ her urine!?”

“She doesn’t urinate.” My jaw dropped. “Keiko doesn’t have kidneys or a urethra. Her water intake requirements are far lower than a normal person’s, and any contaminants in her blood are filtered by her serpents’ venom glands. Obviously there’s more to her Quirk, but that’s for her to tell, not me.”

“Mom, stop, stop.” I put my chopsticks back down and gave her a look. “This is fascinating and all, disgusting too, and I will never look at Keiko-sensei the same way again, thank you very much. But what does this have to do with Tensei?”

“Well, it was meant to illustrate an example,” she said airily, “but I may have gone too far with it. One sec…” Mom tapped the screen again, and this time she brought up Tensei’s chart. I leaned in to take a look, but she turned it away from me. “What I’m about to do is considered a violation of doctor-patient confidentiality. So long as you swear yourself to secrecy, though, it can simply be overlooked as me walking away from a bit of work I was doing at home and you getting curious. If it
ever comes up how you know this, that’s your answer.”

“Right.” I’ve done this song and dance before. The first time around, my father was a surgeon. I’d seen more than a few things I wasn’t meant to, and even knew about several celebrities’ medical conditions. “They won’t hear a peep from me.”

“Good.” She turned Tensei’s chart to face me, and pulled up his X-ray. “We can’t do an MRI on Tensei because his body has metal in it. And it’s not just from the mufflers on his shoulders, it’s also reinforcing his bones and muscles.” I leaned in to look at his X-ray and… that can’t be right.

“What in the world?” I’ve seen X-ray images before. Usually, the bones stand out in stark relief because they’re the only things that can fully obstruct the radiation before it hits the imaging plate, or the sensor, or whatever they’re using. Here… it wasn’t just the bones. I could see so much stuff that I couldn’t tell what was what. “I… Mom, explanation? Maybe?”

“Tensei’s Quirk also reinforced his body in multiple ways,” she told me. “Made it tougher, more durable, more capable of withstanding the kinds of forces that act on his body while using his Quirk. Unfortunately for us, one of the things it augmented was his nervous system.” She sighed. “We can’t just give him a transplant, or even a graft from his own body. Cybernetics would have to be rated to withstand the same pressure he puts his own body under, and that’s not the kind of thing you get right on the first try. And for stem cell treatment to work, they’d have to be from somebody born with a similar enough Mutation-type Quirk to Tensei’s own.”

I sat back down in my seat, and stared at my food. I’d only eaten maybe a third of what I had… but suddenly I wasn’t hungry. I tilted the contents of the bowl back into the tupperware container the prick khing had come in, and put the lid back on.

“You okay honey?” Mom asked as I headed towards the kitchen.

“Yeah,” I called back, putting my food in the fridge. “I’ll be fine. Just… need to think, I guess.” I headed back to the table and gave Mom a hug, which she returned gladly, though I wasn’t able to keep her from ruffling my hair in the process. “Mom, really?”

“What, I’m not allowed to tease my daughter?” I gave a good-natured huff and waited until she was done mussing up my hair. “You know, you’re probably due for a trim soon. You usually keep it around your shoulders, don’t you?”

“It’s fine for now, Mom! I’ll get a trim later, okay?” I hopped up the stairs, wincing when I smacked into the banister with my tail, so eager was I to get away from Mom’s normal parental ministrations. “Night!”

“I’m making pancakes tomorrow, so you’d better wake up before noon!”

* * * * *

[Elsewhere]

“Hey, kid.” Gerhardt looked up from his work to see his supervisor, Kagakkan Ensui, looking down at him with a disapproving expression. “You were supposed to be gone two hours ago.”
“There is too much vork to be done,” he replied, purposefully laying his accent on as thick as he could make it. “Arbeit macht frei, mein freund. Would you haff me ignore zhis?” Gerhardt looked up when Ensui’s hand slammed onto his desk, the mercury running through his veins shining even through his skin. “Where is zhe famous Japanese vork ezhic?”

“It is generally reserved for adults,” Ensui spat, reaching over and forcefully unplugging the monitor on Gerhardt’s work station. “I don’t care how precocious you are. I don’t care what the ‘uber’-boss back in Germany says. I don’t care what kind of pull your family has at this company.” He leaned in. “What I do care about is the fact that I’ve been saddled with an arrogant teen ‘vonderkid’—"

“Wunderkind,” Gerhardt interrupted.

“Don’t. Interrupt.” Ensui leveled a finger at Gerhardt. “I don’t know what kind of slapdash lab your folks ran in Kraut country, but here in Japan, we run a tight ship. We work on things that are actually useful to us, and this?” He waved a hand over the fruits of Gerhardt’s labors, scowling heavily. “This doesn’t even do anything to help you.”

“Nothing?” Gerhardt let his forced accent drop and stood to his full height, looming a full twenty-five centimeters over his supervisor, and glared. “Seamless interface between genetically incompatible biologies, useless? Imagine, Herr Kagakkan, a world where none of the host or graft rejections exist, where immunosuppressants are no longer needed for transplant surgeries, where organ and bone marrow transplants and even blood transfusions no longer need to meet any compatibility requirements. Or imagine a world where our greatest heroes can grow in strength without putting themselves through extremely rigorous training that could hurt or kill them, just for that little bit of an edge over the most dangerous villains. Is that not useful to you?” He ripped the cord to his workstation monitor from his supervisor’s hands. “Now, if zhat vill be all?” Gerhardt asked, affecting a heavy German accent once more.

“… tch!” Ensui turned and walked to the lab’s door. “You’re already on thin ice, getting yourself kicked out of the UA Sports Fest without anything more to show for it than that Hatsume ditz’s silly excuses ‘gadgets’. If you don’t have real, actionable results ready for clinical trials in one month, I’m transferring you.” He opened the door and walked out, pitching his voice so that Gerhardt would hear as he walked down the hall. “You know, I think I can understand why those Krauts kicked this cocky little shit to the curb. No sense, that one…"

He waited until the man’s footsteps had finished echoing down the hallway before getting up to lock his lab. Gerhardt leaned back against the door, eyes screwed shut, deep breaths the only thing calming the shaking of his white-knuckled fists. He counted backwards from ten in German, then up from one in English, then back down in Japanese, before finally finishing by returning to German to go back up. It was a simple meditative exercise. Sometimes he switched numbers for new words he’d learned and wanted to memorize, or the stages of a reaction, or the chemical composition of a complex molecule. It didn’t have to be anything specific. It just had to be something calming, something that would take his mind off… off—!

“Raagh!”

Gerhardt swept the paper off of his workbench with a wordless cry of frustration. They scattered to the floor, hopelessly mixed up were it not for the page numbers and little tabs denoting what went where and which pages were most important. But picking them up didn’t matter right now. Gerhardt stomped over to his workstation and depressed the small button on the countertop, sliding out the small refrigerated compartment on its side.
“Soon…” He reached in and plucked the dull purple vial he’d shown the Yaseiki girl earlier, along with another, similarly purple vial beneath that one, its dim glow casting an ethereal light on his hands. With swift, practiced movements, he placed a narrow beaker below an apparatus, twisting the clamp open before retrieving the other equipment he’d need. A one milliliter sample of the glowing purple serum found its way into the new beaker, an indicator solution joined it, and then a titration pipette containing a sample of the serum extracted from the Wendigo. He dropped a stir stick dropped into the beaker, and one drop at a time, Gerhardt mixed the two solutions. It was painstaking, patient work. One drop every ten seconds, that was the pace he’d set the pipette to drop. And it was only after twenty-five minutes of this did the solution’s color finally shift. The dimly lit purple deepened briefly before it illuminated further, shining a bright white.

“Them and their Quirks. Yes, soon they will see…” Gerhardt retrieved the apparatus and inspected the correct ratio: 0.76mL of Wendigo’s mystery serum to his own concoction. He transferred a full five mL of his personal creation into a new vessel, and very carefully measured out 3.8mL of Wendigo’s chemical to add to it.

When the two of them combined, without the color change of the indicator solution to dilute it, Gerhardt’s creation lit the room in eerie, eldritch purple light. He removed his eye protection and surveyed his magnum opus, its violet glow shining into his eyes.

“They will all see!”

* * * * *

It might seem obvious at first, but how you’re woken up in the morning has a huge effect on how the rest of your day goes. No, not how you wake up, how you are woken up. Obviously this doesn’t really apply to those days where you wake up on your own, but if any outside source of something wakes you from sleep, then the exact nature of it can be seriously impactful. Need an example? Think about how popular wake-up light alarms are. You know, the ones that simulate a sunrise? Those damn things work like a charm. Then there’s the other ways you can get woken up.

The most common, and my second least favorite, is sound. Audible alarms are super common, but damn if they aren’t annoying as all hell. Effective, yes, but that’s primarily because it’s incredibly difficult to sleep through a blaring, droning, toneless noise, buzzing away at high volume. Depending on who you are, death metal can work for this too; it’s also incredibly useful as a prank. It’s been… how old was I at the time? Thirteen years old on the first go-round? Yeah, which would make it… over twenty-five years ago. I did exactly that to my brother on a stupidly early morning when he, my dad, and I all had to get to the airport for an international flight. Man… those were good times. I miss my twin.

My absolute least favorite way to be woken up, with a very notable exception, is by having something or someone touch me. Rousing to feel somebody’s hands on you, whether on your back or your hand, is an oddly miserable experience. Maybe it’s because the physical sensation is grounding, and pulls you out of whatever half-asleep state you’re still in upon first waking? Or maybe that’s just me, I don’t know. Dad learned very quickly to not wake me up by playing with my hair or putting a hand on my back, though once the Titty Fairy paid enough visits it was more on my arm or shoulder. Mom, on the other hand, seemed to purposefully ignore that lesson, and continually winds up with my tail wrapped around her wrist and wrenching her towards the floor.

That was not how she woke me this morning. Nor was it by light or sound. No, what woke me up
this morning was something completely different.

What woke me was the scent of wonderful, freshly-cooked chocolate-chip pancakes hovering just under my nose.

I roused slowly, taking in the scent and trying to figure out what it was. I could sniff out chocolate a mile away, I love the stuff, but the other part… definitely bread, or pastry, or something. I couldn’t figure it out, and finally opened my eyes to take a look.

At which point Mom unceremoniously dumped the plate onto me, propped up on both my chest and Mr. Koala Not-Actually-A-Bear. (Yes, that is what I named this teddy bear, even though he’s a koala and not actually a bear. I grew up the first time calling them koala bears, okay? That stuck, and I still default to it occasionally.) I looked to Mom, blinking as she stabbed a fork into the stack of pancakes balancing precariously on top of me. My faculties finally came back to me enough to wrap my tail around the base of the plate, lift it off of me, and crawl out from under the covers.

Then Mom took the plate.

“Mmrgl,” I mumbled, not quite able to form complete words, much less sentences yet. My mouth was dry as a desert, and I grabbed the water bottle I kept next to the bed with my tail, then opened it and took a swig to get rid of the parched feeling. I reached for the pancake plate, and could only grumble when Mom pulled it further away from me. I reached again, slowly creeping further out from the bed, and she continued to pull it back, luring me further from the warm, fuzzy clutch of sleep. This actually continued for some time, all the way to the point that Mom had me sitting at the table, dressed in one of the various T-shirts I’d swiped from Dad over the years and a random pair of sleep pants I don’t remember buying, and swaddled in the extra blanket I had on top of my comforter when I wanted to be really toasty at night.

“Now you can eat,” Mom said, laughing at the venomous glare I shot her before digging in. I couldn’t help the slight moan from the first bite; Mom had used the mini chocolate chips, the ones that spread out so much that every single bit is fit to bursting with melty, chocolaty goodness. There was even a glass of milk to go with it, since everybody knows how well milk and chocolate go together, and I was so glad for it. And also a little bit surprised, because Mom’s Quirk made her lactose intolerant, and she doesn’t like the milk without lactose because, in her own words, ‘it doesn’t quite taste right’. I gave her a look, and because my mouth was still full of pancake, I just motioned at the milk. “What, I’m not allowed to do something for my daughter?”

“Mm,” I mumbled, swallowing before I tried to continue again. “I’m not going to become lactose intolerant later in life like you did, am I?”

“Later in life?” Mom leaned back, faux-affronted. “Why, I’m insulted! Do I look that old to you already? Oh, perhaps you should just chuck me into a nursing home and be done with me!”

“You’re forty-three,” I said with a somewhat deadpan glare. “And besides, you’d probably get one of the RN’s to let you out of that home in an instant.”

Mom had just about finished medical school when she got pregnant with me, and actually did her residency to specialize once I was weaned. Even before that, during her time as a Pro Hero, she’d already been the one to go to for exotic venoms and antivenins, but once she’d gotten all the schooling needed to use it in other ways, she concocted much more complex pharmaceuticals from nothing. It’s very hard for a patent to really affect Mom, given that the patent doesn’t just cover the drug, but it’s also specific down to the size of the molecule, its on-label use, and how it’s synthesized.
I don’t really have a good example for the latter, but if you want a good example of the first two, take a gander at Avastin, Lucentis, and Eylea.

Then look at the price differentials.

Now you might, just might, start to be getting a good understanding of just how many people see Mom, her Quirk, and her particular specialty as a great big ‘fuck you’.

It also meant I got a very healthy fear of injections, because why write a prescription when you can just cook up the exact concentration of the absolute best medication for the situation at hand, and then offer a quick stab with a hollowed-out porcupine quill, which needs half the force of a hypodermic needle to pierce human skin?

“Yes, yes, but I don’t want to talk about me, dear.” Mom went to the kitchen and grabbed the milk from the fridge, refilling my glass once she returned to the table. “I’d much rather talk about you.”

“Mom, you just saw me at the Sports Festival,” I argued, reaching for a sip of my milk.

“Yes, but!” She reached into her pocket and retrieved her cell phone, unlocked it, then turned it around to show me—

I choked on my milk. She looked on bemused when I started coughing, but didn’t so much as begin to rise and offer help. She knew the difference between a choke of surprise and one that was actually a threat to somebody’s health, and mine was definitely the former. But come on, you can’t blame me. I mean, how else was I supposed to react when she was showing me _a picture of my first kiss with Katsuki!?_

“H-how the hell,” I sputtered, “do you—who took that!?”

“I can’t go revealing _all_ my secrets,” Mom said, swiping her phone’s screen side to side to show more, and more, and _more_ photographs of my day with Katsuki. Some of them were taken from relatively normal angles, some were obviously zoomed in from the slightly grainier resolution, and others…

“Remind me to strangle Tsuyu,” I grumbled around another bite of pancake, sulking as much as I could possibly sulk. “With her own tongue.” Because really, there’s nobody else I know that can get photos from those angles. Maybe if Ibara’s vines actually worked with her phone’s touchscreen she could, but they don’t. Tsuyu’s _tongue_, on the other hand, does. She’d finagled photos from obscene angles with her tongue many times before, with both the front _and_ rear cameras. “Wait,” I stopped Mom as she scrolled past a picture, seeing something that shouldn’t have been there. “Go back one?”

“What, you want me to send it to you?” Mom obliged, though, and swiped back. I reached up to take the phone from her fingers, and she gave me a look that clearly said I’d regret it if I deleted anything. That wasn’t what I was after, though. This picture was from the moment where Yuu—Mt. Lady—inspected my appearance in uncomfortably close fashion. I wasn’t looking at that particular bit, though I couldn’t help but grimace at my own facial expression; I’d been completely and utterly poleaxed by that second bit of sudden uncomfortable touching in as many days. That wasn’t the important part.

What _was_ important was the riotously pink girl in the bottom left corner of the shot, hand over her mouth and yellow-on-black eyes bugging out way further from their sockets than was healthy, was
none other than Ashido Mina.

“Looks like Tsuyu wasn’t the only one on a spy mission,” I muttered darkly. “Seems Katsuki’s friends sent their own little sneak after us.” I pointed out the specific spot on the picture, and Mom frowned.

“I will say I’m not surprised that Tsuyu-chan slipped under the radar,” Mom said, “but for her to sneak past you so easily?” The smile on my mother’s face turned downright conniving. “You must have been even more enamored with that boy than I first thought, hm?”

“M-mom!” I stammered. “I-it’s not like that! It’s just, we only… urgh!” I dropped my fork onto my now nearly-empty plate, and laid my head down onto my crossed arms to hide the blush. “I didn’t even notice I had a crush. It just… crept up on me, I guess.” I looked up at Mom, scrunching my nose up in some combination of annoyance, dismay, and resignation. Oh, and a little bit of contentment, because troublesome as it may be to have crushed that hard on a classmate of mine and not even realize it, the results had definitely been worth it. I could feel my frown slide into a somewhat goofy, dreamy smile, but I didn’t even care at the moment. Oh, how worth it that all had been…

“Oh, no.” I snapped out of my reverie and looked to Mom. “I know that expression. You’re thinking about him, aren’t you.”

“Mmmmmaybe,” I teased. Mom gave me a knowing smirk.

“Honey, I’ve been in your seat before. You’re definitely thinking about him.” She waited until I’d finished off my two pancakes, then took my plate and headed to the sink. I grabbed my glass of milk and followed her, downing it as I walked after her. She set about rinsing the plate and getting it set for the dishwasher, and I did the same with my glass. “Just promise me you won’t get your expectations up too high, okay? High school sweethearts can and have ended up in happy, fulfilling relationships for the rest of their lives, but it’s incredibly rare, and he’s your first boyfriend.”

“Don’t settle for the first slab of beef that comes my way unless it turns out he really is the one,” I snarked. “Right, got it, I’ll keep a condom in my purse.”

“Kanna!” Mom gasped, somewhat affronted and lacking the usual -chan at the end of my name. “You are too young to be thinking of sex!”

“Yeah? Then please tell my uterus to stop spending every fourth week punching me in the gut, that’d be nice.” I stopped from putting my glass in the dishwasher just yet and filled it up with water, which I greedily drank. I am always so, so thirsty in the mornings. It’s not fun.

“No pill,” Mom said sharply. “I don’t care how bad it is, the problems it would cause your Quirk aren’t worth it.” I grimaced at that; learning that I couldn’t use birth control pills if I wanted to make active use of the shapeshifting part of my Quirk was… not fun.

“What about Pony though?” I asked.

“Mm…” Mom stopped for a moment, thinking. “I know Kihei-kun is usually opposed to anything that makes it seem like she’s growing up and won’t stay his baby girl anymore, but I’m surprised it hasn’t been brought up before.” She walked out of the kitchen and over to her combo office/lab, and I followed. A quick boot and login later, and Mom was looking at Pony’s chart. Then she scrolled down, and gave a moue of understanding. “Ah. Her particular mutation means that there’s a high
chance it wouldn’t actually work on her anyways.”


“Midol isn’t a carefully calibrated hormonal cocktail,” she responded. Then she closed her work laptop, brought her chair around to the side of the desk I was standing, and sat down, motioning for me to take the other chair. “So… I notice you still haven’t given me all the juicy little details.”

“On?” I asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Don’t be dense Kanna-chan,” Mom said, voice lightly chiding. “You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Alright, alright!” I leaned back in my chair, thinking back to two days ago. “So it turns out Katsuki lives in the Musutafu area, and knows it like the back of his hand. The first place he took me was this arcade that looked like it’d been ripped straight from Akihabara, and we go straight to the third floor.” I gestured for Mom’s phone, which she handed back over, and I swiped over to that particular photo from Tsuyu’s little bout of espionage. “Turns out he really, really likes rhythm games, and the third floor of the arcade had nothing but rhythm games. Katsuki had high scores on most of them—”

“Not surprised,” Mom interrupted. “Just from what I saw when he fought, he probably started doing it to train hand-eye coordination and pattern recognition, then just kept playing when he realized they were fun.”

“Mom, please, I’m trying to share here!” I half-whined. She gave me an obliging smile, and I continued. “There’s some games I can’t play because of footwork or other similar stuff; like, he wanted to play DDR and I had to say no,” I frowned. “Can’t go using my Quirk in public without a license, or I totally would have.”

“And the new bear?” Mom led.

“Bear Might!” I replied, clapping my hands happily. “I only saw it once we were on our way out a couple hours later, but one of the gachapon machines had Pro Hero teddy bears in it. And there was only one All Might left.” I frowned. “And, like, twelve Endeavors. So many Endeavors.”

“So you got your bear… and then where does Mt. Lady figure into this?”

“Katsuki’s cousin,” I said.

“… you’re kidding.”

“Nope.” I put one hand over my heart and raised the other high. “Swear it on a stack of whatever holy book you want, there’s two of them.”

“Mhmm.” Mom leaned in. “So when did you decide to kiss him?”

“I—” I stopped. “I’m… not sure, actually. I think, maybe it was once things started seeming like a normal date, and I realized I was really, really enjoying it? And I wanted to show it?”

“Or to be more specific, you were enjoying that it was with him,” Mom offered.

“Y-yeah…” Mom reached for my hand, and I took it gladly. “You know, I hadn’t ever really
thought about it? What I was into, I mean.” I shrugged. “Boys, girls, both, neither. Never devoted any thought to it, and yet here I am… going all sappy over a boy in class.” I couldn’t help the smile, the emotions associated with all of it making me feel happy even as my thoughts started going places I wasn’t sure I liked. My first time around, I was straight. My second time around, it would seem that once again, I’m straight.

The difference is which direction straight is pointing. And while I’d never been all that sure how easily I’d be able to accept where that went, it had just sort of… happened, completely without my noticing. Almost overnight, even.

“I’m happy for you honey.” Mom squeezed my hand, and when I got up from my chair to give her a hug, she did likewise. “Just make sure to be careful, okay? I would hate to see this go anywhere near the same way as my first relationship.”

“Oh?” I leaned in, suddenly curious. “On a scale from one to ‘feed the body to a snapping turtle for proper disposal’?”

“Let’s just say I wish I’d gone in for the snapping turtle,” Mom replied, “followed by a swarm of piranhas, then a whole seafood buffet’s worth of shrimp. Just to be extra sure.” I shuddered at the last mention, to which Mom laughed. I hugged her again, and she hugged me again. Then she pulled back with a sniff. “Kanna-chan, I love you, but go shower.”

“M-mom!”

“Fine, don’t shower, but at least change out of those pajamas!”

“Mom!”

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Kimiko gave her daughter a light nudge up the stairs to go shower, and then sat back down at her desk once she heard the shower start running. Honestly, that girl was far too happy to go a day without a shower if there wasn’t anything urgent on her agenda for the day, though she also liked to delay as long as possible so she seemed fresh for whatever she had planned. Of course, that wasn’t possible if she needed to wash her hair, and it was likely today was a hair-washing day, especially given the stress that yesterday had caused.

The events of yesterday still on her mind, Kimiko opened her work laptop and pulled up Tensei’s chart. What Kanna had said, both at the hospital and at dinner… most of the traditional methods wouldn’t work on Tensei, just by virtue of how his Quirk affected his physiology, moving it beyond the baseline. At the same time, Kimiko thought as she picked up the phone on her desk and dialed a number she’d long ago memorized, she never claimed to be the repository for everything there was to know about the current state of the medical profession.

“Ah, good morning Yaseiki-sensei. I’m afraid I don’t have overly much time; the Third Years’ first day starts in two hours, and where that year is concerned, I’m almost never fully prepared for what horrors they throw my way. Is there any update on Iida-kun?”

But in her opinion, there existed somebody who was.
“Good morning, Shuzenji-sensei.” She frowned. “I’m afraid none of our current methods will help Tensei-kun. At least…” Kimiko paused. Something was niggling at the back of her mind, some half-remembered tidbit. “I’ve spent a fair bit of time thinking about it, but no matter what kind of team I assemble, I still can’t find anybody who would be able to fuse his spinal nerves back together, given how so few of the Quirks that would work on it seem to work right on nonstandard biology.”

“Hmm…” On the other end line, Kimiko could hear Shuzenji Chiyome-sensei, Recovery Girl, seeming to wrestle with something. At last, she sighed, seeming to come to a conclusion that may as well have pained her to determine. “I hate to be the one to admit it, but there is somebody that might be capable of what you’re describing. Even so much as mentioning that, that… it sticks in my craw something awful, but…”

“Shuzenji-sensei?” Kimiko asked, confused.

“A long-time rival of mine from back in the day, I suppose,” Recovery Girl hedged. “Old Romanian curmudgeon by the name of Tzimisce…”
Chapter Forty-Seven

As we’ve all learned at some point in our lives, all vacations must eventually end. After all, if it were to go on forever, then it wouldn’t really be a vacation, would it? A little bit longer would’ve been nice, to be sure, but if I’m being completely honest we didn’t need more than the rest of Golden Week before getting right back into the thick of things. Besides, Pony had started to get bored.

And if there’s one thing I’ve learned in the past ten years, it’s that when Pony gets bored, you do everything in your power to give her something, anything to do, lest you find yourself wrapped up in some or other inane shenanigans. The last time a vacation went overly long was two years ago; somebody at Somei lost control of their Quirk, and somehow managed to irradiate the third year classrooms. They gave us two weeks off to find somebody whose Quirk let them absorb radiation and pay them an exorbitant sum, and I learned more about makeup, fashion, and blacksmithing than I ever thought I would in a two week period.

Like I said: when Pony gets bored, you’re probably getting dragged along for the ride.

I slid open the door to Class 1-A, and as per usual, I was not the first to arrive. Katsuki sat, feet propped up on his desk, some or other notebook or magazine or whatever hanging over his face while he slept. Surprisingly enough, he was snoring as opposed to grinding his teeth in his sleep, but it was softer than I’d expected it to be. Eh, whatever. I snapped a photo while I had the opportunity, then walked up to him and whacked him with my tail.

“Mm…” He shifted slightly, tilting his head to the side until the book he’d propped on his face fell off. His eyes blinked open, and the confusion gave way to mild annoyance when he saw me, hands on my hips and smile sardonic.

“Well don’t you just look comfortable,” I said, keeping my tone light. I reached down with my tail and grabbed his notebook off the floor, which I dropped into his waiting hand. “What’s the matter, not sleep well?”

“Nah.” He shrugged, doing his best to look disinterested. “Had to get away from the bitch.”

“What’s your mom up to this time?” I asked. He shot me a look of mild surprise. “Please Katsuki, you’re kind of predictable. You weren’t going to call anybody a bitch if you thought I’d object to it.”

“Yeah, cause you’d just hit me with that fucking tail of yours,” he shot back. And then I hit him with my tail. “Ow, mother—”

“Would you like me to do it again?” I asked. “Because I will. It’s kinda fun actually!” I whacked him over the head with my tail again, at which point he flailed, trying to knock my tail away when I brought it round for a third hit. “Ooh, swing and a miss!”

“Grr, damn it!” Katsuki actually managed to deflect my tail when I went for the fourth hit, and the fifth, and the sixth. And then every other hit after that. “Why the fuck’re we playing patty cake?”

“Kero.” Both of us froze and turned to look at Tsuyu, who was putting her phone away. She looked to be a little damp from the rain outside, but it didn’t seem to bother her, and if anything she looked more lively than normal. Of course, if you don’t know Tsuyu well, then she just looked like she always does. But there’s a bit more spring in her step, posture that little bit straighter. Behind Tsuyu,
more of our classmates filed in. Ojiro was wringing the water out of the tuft of fur on the end of his tail with a towel, and Jirou pulled her right jack out of her phone before slipping it back inside her blazer pocket. “You two looked like you were having fun,” Tsuyu continued, sitting down at her desk.

“You’d know, wouldn’t you?” I teased, pantomiming a camera. Katsuki shot me a look, which I waved off, waiting for Tsuyu’s reply.

It never came though, since right at that moment most of the class decided to all arrive in one great big stampede.

“Dude!” Kirishima, Sero, and Kaminari all made a beeline for Katsuki’s desk. Kirishima leaned in, Sero stood above and back, but Kaminari had an arm resting on Katsuki’s shoulder. “Nice going, man! Didn’t think that raw sewage attitude of yours would get anything, but hey, I’ve been wrong before!”

“The fuck you on about?” Katsuki groused. Kaminari pulled out his phone and pulled something up, then turned it towards Katsuki… who froze. I looked up to see Mina come through the door about to say something until she caught sight of Katsuki’s slowly darkening expression, at which point she clammed shut and ever so slowly edged her way towards her seat, trying to make herself small despite how much she stood out. Katsuki put the phone down, then looked up at Kirishima, Kaminari, and Sero’s expectant faces.

“Damn proud of ya, man!” Kirishima gave Katsuki a great big pat on the back, then threw his arm around Katsuki’s shoulders and pulled him in for a half-hug. “Got a real man right here!”

“Hn.” Katsuki extricated Kirishima’s arm from around his shoulders, then leaned back in his seat. “The fuck did these come from?”

“A little birdie told us!” Kaminari crowed, then seemed to realize what he said and began waving his hands. “It wasn’t Tokoyami, didn’t mean him, sorry, don’t go thinking that.”

“If that’s what I think it is,” I interjected, getting up from my seat to stand in front of Kaminari, arms crossed over my chest, “then you should probably just—”

“Oh wow, Kanna-chan!” Tohru of all people took that moment to bustle into the classroom, swoop up next to me, and tug me away from the boys by my arm. “You have to tell us everything! That was so, so—!” Tohru made an indecipherable squee-ing noise, her elation obvious by how her floating clothes hopped up and down. Interestingly, I could feel her hair on my arm, which had me asking myself some rather interesting questions about just how revealing her ‘costume’ actually is.

“U-uhm…” I looked at my fellow classmates, hoping for someone, anyone to give me an escape from the bubbly well of excitement and happiness that was Hagakure Tohru. I barely knew the girl, but she so damn friendly to everyone all the time. Normally that wouldn’t be a problem, but right now my blush is starting to go nuclear and I needed somebody else to take the attention off please stop looking at Katsuki and me—

“Iida-kun, Midoriya-kun!” Uraraka stood up and looked to the door, an expression of simultaneous concern and happiness on her face when Tenya walked in, Midoriya right behind him. I took the chance and rushed forward, intercepting Tenya before he had a chance to get too far into the classroom.
“Got a sec?” I asked. “Sorry Uraraka, Midoriya,” I said to them, “just need to borrow my friend for a moment.” The two of them nodded, and I pulled Tenya out of the classroom by his arm, then closed the door behind us. A quick glance over his shoulder showed me that Aizawa-sensei was coming down the hall, and I’m very glad he was looking, because a meaningful glance had him pausing where he was for a moment.

“Was something the matter, Kanna-chan?” Tenya asked, frowning. “If this is about…” He trailed off.

“It’s, uh.” I frowned, trying to think of how to phrase this. “Before I left to come back to Musutafu on Friday, I got a quick look at Mom’s work computer. She had your brother’s chart up.” He seemed to flinch, then closed his eyes.

“I should have expected as such,” he murmured. “I apologize for causing you unnecessary concern, Kanna-chan. You shouldn’t have to worry about our issues.”

“Mhmm.” I crossed my arms over my chest and gave him a reprimanding look. “Tenya, what’s your sister-in-law up to?”

“Hm? Ah,” Tenya pushed his glasses up. “Rei-san has been in her lab the last few days. I looked in on her, and there were very… esoteric calculations on her wall, as well as—”

“Optics,” I interrupted. “It wasn’t just Tenya’s chart she had up. She also had a ton of notes, and names.” I leaned in to give Tenya a hug, to which he stiffened ever so slightly. “They’re not giving up on him. So let’s not, either.”

“I…” He leaned in, returning the hug. “Thank you.”

“If you two are done,” Aizawa-sensei interrupted, to which we both leapt apart, “it’s time for class.” He gestured for us to go inside and take our seats, and once we’d crossed the threshold, he did as well. “Morning.”

“Good morning!” The call rang out from the class, masking the sound of everybody shuffling back into their desks and righting their posture.

“Aizawa-sensei, you were able to remove your bandages!” Tsuyu exclaimed, tone indicating just how overjoyed she really was.

“The old lady got over-dramatic with her treatment,” Aizawa-sensei said, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. “But let’s put that aside. Today we’re starting with Hero Informatics, and this period is a little special.”

The tension in the classroom ratcheted up about seven levels at that. Whenever Aizawa-sensei says ‘special’, it’s generally best to assume the worst, especially if our very first day at UA was any indication… which it was.

“It’s time to determine your codenames. Your hero names.”

“Oh my god yes!”

I don’t know who started the cheer, but pretty much all of us rose to join in with it, myself included. Does it sound silly? I mean, yeah, it kind of was, but… come on, hero names! These were
a huge step forward! We wouldn’t just be wannabes anymore; now it was time for the real deal! It’s time for—

A brief flash of Aizawa-sensei’s Erasure had us all sitting back down at our desks, perfectly behaved.

“This is related to the draft nominations by pros I mentioned the other day. The nominations will truly start mattering only after you’ve gained some experience and your adaptable fighting ability is judged during your second and third years. In other words, the offers you’re getting this year are more akin to ‘expressions of interest’ in your future potential, and it’s not rare that that interest dries up by graduation, or is simply unilaterally dropped.”

“So I guess the nominations we received are like personal hurdles, then!” Tohru piped up, excited.

“Yes,” Aizawa-sensei reached to pick up his favorite little remote, the slightest edgings of a grin on his face at his ability to actually do that again. “Now, the tally of nominations is as follows.” He pressed the button, and the projector above us warmed up. “I’d originally anticipated that the lion’s share of attention would have shifted towards Bakugou and Todoroki, to the detriment of everybody else, but it would seem I was wrong.”

And wrong he was indeed. While yes, Bakugou and Todoroki each received a massive amount of offers each, their two lines weren’t the only ones edging far outside the pack. Instead, it was a fairly defined ladder.

Five of us had great amounts, over five-hundred apiece. The most went to Katsuki, with over four thousand offers. Todoroki came next, at 3556 offers. That’s where things took a turn for the intriguing. Next up were my offers…and I had two thousand, three-hundred and ninety-two offers. Just below me came Midoriya, with just shy of two-thousand offers himself. But the last of the outliers?

“Fifteen hundred!?” I heard Momo exclaim behind me, voice a harsh whisper. “B-but I didn’t even pass the first round!”

“It’s obvious, both from viewership and number of offers received,” Aizawa-sensei said, looking at the five of us outliers, “that each of the tournament’s rounds had at least one major standout performance. Yaoyorozu’s cunning and dominance in her match against Tokoyami. Midoriya’s determination and ingenuity versus Todoroki. Yaseiki’s tenacity and resolve opposite Bakugou. And the two finalists’ performances should speak for themselves. That’s not to say the rest of you didn’t also do well, just that certain fights were better received.”

And he had a point. The five of us dominated, yes, but Tenya had five-hundred individual offers, Kirishima and Kaminari both hovered somewhere around the three hundreds, and Tokoyami had an amusingly even two-hundred and twenty-two. Uraraka, Sero, and Mina had a couple for themselves too, actually.

“Based on this…” Aizawa-sensei clicked off the projector. “Regardless of whether or not you received any nominations, I’ll be having all of you go out and get some so-called ‘work-place experience’.” He paused. “Well. You’ve all dipped a toe into the world of Pro Heroes already, unfortunate though it was. I do think experiencing the activities of a Pro firsthand will prove to be more fruitful training than before.”

“And that’s why we need hero names, huh!?” Satou burst out excitedly.
“Things’ve gotten so fun all of a sudden!” Uraraka cheered.

“Of course,” Aizawa-sensei continued, “placeholder names are fine too. Try to find something appropriate, though—”

“Because if not, it’ll be hell from there!” A new voice finished Aizawa-sensei’s sentence for him, and we all turned to see none other than Midnight strutting into the classroom. Most of the boys’ eyes were instantly glued to her outfit (or lack thereof, to be frank…), though I was simultaneously pleased and self-conscious that Katsuki’s weren’t. “The names you pick now, the names you come to be known by the world as now! In many cases, they stay that way after becoming pros!”

“Midnight!” One of the boys piped up, voice practically dripping with… you know what? No, let’s not think about that.

“Well, she is correct,” Aizawa-sensei added. “I’ll be having Midnight-sensei evaluate your naming sense.” Then, more quietly, “since I definitely can’t…” He cleared his throat, and with a glare he dared any of us to comment on that last bit. “The image projected by the names you choose here will help shape your futures. It’s all down to that old phrase: ‘names and natures often agree’. For example?” He looked straight at Midoriya here. “All Might.”

“Right then!” Midnight clapped her hands, and the separated handcuffs she wore as bangles clinked together when she did. “I’ll be passing out some dry erase boards and markers for you to brainstorm possible names. Come up with something good, but make sure it’s appropriate!”

I don’t know why, but that last word… for some reason, it stuck in my craw. Appropriate? From Midnight, who literally wears fetish outfits to work around underage high schoolers? Yes, she’s probably got the requisite knowledge base to actually know what she’s talking about when it comes to names… but really, Midnight?

**Appropriate?**

Wherever my train of thought was going, it very quickly found itself derailed once Midoriya passed the two remaining mini-whiteboards and markers back to me. I grabbed one set for myself and passed the last one back to Momo, who gladly took it, uncapped her pen, and started writing. I looked down at my whiteboard and the pen, and… I didn’t even have to think, actually. I think I’ve known for a while now what I want to do. I uncapped the pen, and wrote what I wanted.

Some time went by with all quiet in the class, and I spent that brief respite just screwing around on my phone. Katsuki’d fired off a text asking if I knew anything about those photos, and a brief response that I’d let him know later followed. And a reminder that he better not try to call himself what I think he was going to… which, worryingly, didn’t receive a reply. There was also a message from Tsuyu with a link to a private album of all the photos she’d taken, and a request to try and keep Katsuki from blowing up too badly at Mina if he chose to. I looked at her from across the room and smiled, to which she gave me a froggy grin back.

Eventually, Midnight decided we’d had enough time to prep. She stood front and center, her heels clicking on the floor, and clapped her hands to get everyone’s focus.

“Okay then! If you’re ready to present your name to the class, come on up!”

Almost immediately, Aoyama’s chair pushed back, and he made his way to the podium at the front
of the room. Despite the seeming calm he had, if you looked closely, there was the slightest tremor of his smile. And I thought I was good at hiding my stage fright!

“Here I go…” He took a deep breath to steady himself, then flipped the card upright. “Shining Hero: I Cannot Stop Twinkling! Which means, you can’t stop my sparkles!”

… oh dear lord that’s a whole sentence. Aoyama, you wonderful, magnificent person.

“It’ll be easier to use,” Midnight took the miniature whiteboard from his hands and went to work revising it, “if you take out the ‘I’, and shorten the ‘cannot’ to ‘can’t’.” She showed the modified placard to the class: ‘Can’t Stop Twinkling’. That… actually worked much better, if I was going to be frank. Okay. Maybe Midnight does know what she’s talking about.

“You’re quite right, mademoiselle!” Aoyama graciously stated.

“It’s okay!?!” About five or six people all spoke up at once, shocked beyond belief that an actual sentence was okay for a hero name.

“Anyway,” Satou continued, “English or French, pick one!” Aoyama looked at him, and seemed about to say something… but then I guess the stage fright well and truly took hold, because he started shaking a little and made his way back to his seat rather quickly.

“Alright, I’ll go next!” Mina leapt to her feet and rushed the podium, happily plunking her little placard down. “Ripley Hero: Alien Queen!” Ooh… having gone up against her, I have to say that’s actually rather—

“Are you aiming for the image of that thing with the acidic blood!?!” Midnight quailed. “I wouldn’t if I were you! Quit while you’re ahead and come up with something else!”

“Dang it…” Mina slunk back to her seat, shoulders slumped and rather dejected.

“Idiot!” Most of the class rang out at Mina. Honestly, I felt bad for her. I can tell she was going for an homage to Ellen Ripley. Not quite the right way to go about it, but… kudos for effort, I guess?

“Is it okay if I go next?” Tsuyu raised her hand, asking.

“Of course!” Midnight beckoned her up, and Tsuyu stood before us, confident and smiling.

“I’ve had this name in mind ever since I was in elementary school.” She turned the placard around, revealing the name in both katakana and romaji. “Rainy Season Hero: Froppy!”

“Oh, that’s adorable!” Midnight gushed. “It’s so friendly and cute! I love it!” Midnight turned towards the rest of us. “It’s a great example of a name that everyone will love!”

The class erupted into cheers of ‘Froppy!’ in thanks for Tsuyu bringing the names back to normalcy, especially after Aoyama’s full sentence and Mina’s… okay, I liked Mina’s, but I guess it probably wouldn’t have worked out. Now that things had gone back to some measure of normality, though, the names began to flow.

“Alright, my turn!” Kirishima stood in front, his sharp, angular handwriting standing out on the placard. “Sturdy Hero: Red Riot!” This one got a definite mark of approval, along with a warning that it had a bit of a legacy to live up to. And as the names kept flowing, Midnight kept giving out
her commentary, pretty much all approving by now.

“Hearing Hero: Earphone Jack!” “That’s good! Next!”

“Tentacle Hero: Tentacole.” “It’s like ‘tentacle’ with some octopus thrown in!” Yes, Midnight, I can see the pun for myself, ‘tako’ for octopus with tentacle, you don’t need to explain the joke.

“Taping Hero: Cellophane!” “Nice and simple! That’s important!”

“Martial Arts Hero: Tail Man.” “Your name reflects your body!”

“Sweets Hero: Sugar Man! Dammit Ojiro, took my name style!” “So sweet! I love it!”

“Pinky!” “Peachy pink complexion, perfectly fitting!” Mina’s second attempt seemed to go better… but I still liked the first one more.

“Stun Gun Hero: Chargebolt!” “Ooh, I feel tingly!”

“Stealth Hero: Invisible Girl!” “That’s great, so fitting!”

Okay, how is that one not taken already!?

“All right kids, excellent! Keep ’em coming, let’s go!” I moved to stand up, but heard Momo’s chair push back before I could make a move. She went up to the front, and put her placard down on the podium.

“It took longer than I wished to come up with this name,” she admitted somewhat sheepishly, turning over the placard. “Creation Hero: Alchemy!”

“Creative!” Midnight clapped her hands. “That extra time served you well then!” Momo blushed and smiled, and I made to get up, but once again found myself beaten to the punch.

“Shouto.”

“Your name?” Midnight asked Todoroki. “Are you okay with that? You might not be able to change it later if it gets too popular,” she warned.

“It’s fine,” he said, returning to his seat. And then once again I didn’t get my turn… but this time because I looked over at Tenya.

He hadn’t written anything yet.

“Jet Black Hero: Tsukuyomi.” “God of night!”

Kouda went up, displaying only his placard, but not speaking. ‘Petting Hero: Anima.’ “Mm, got it! That’s good!”

And then came the moment I’d been waiting for. The moment I’d been dreading. The moment Katsuki stood up… and made his way to the podium. I closed my eyes and prayed to any gods that would listen. Please Shinto gods, please all the Buddhas that have attained enlightenment, hell, maybe I’ll send some prayers Ibara’s way by proxy, just please, please, please, don’t let Katsuki say what I think he’s about to—
“Bakusatsuou!”

My head hit the desk so hard that I saw nonexistent stars.

“Oh my god Katsuki what is wrong with you.” The entire class fell completely silent, Midnight included.

“What’s wrong with it huh!?” I couldn’t keep the long-suffering groan of despair in, which caused quite a few snickers and laughs.

“You can’t go calling yourself ‘King Explosion Murder’,” I murmured, looking up. “Or ‘Lord Explosion Murder’!” I interjected, seeing him about to speak. “Or any variants thereof!”

“Yeah, why not!?”

I turned to Katsuki. And then, I gave him the look, the expression I’d perfected to let somebody know that I thought they were being so stupid that giving words to it was just a waste of precious time and air, to let him know that he’d crested a level of idiocy that I hadn’t quite thought possible. My dad was immune to the look.

Katsuki was not. He quailed under my gaze, literally freezing up and letting the placard drop before dropping his shoulders and looking away.

“Look, it’s obvious you want something suitably awesome enough to match your Quirk, I get it. But really? I’m having to tell you this a second time, Katsuki?” I leaned forward onto my table, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Seriously, if you want something related to explosions and spooky enough to project the image you want, why not… I dunno.” I waved a hand absently. “Warhead?”

You could’ve heard a pin drop in the classroom.

“Yaseiki,” Midnight started, “you should know better than to suggest something like that.” I offered her a quick glance, nothing more.

“What’s wrong with it?” I asked. “I mean, it’s not like you’re any better, Redlight.”

“Midnight,” she corrected rather testily. “And do I really have to explain why Warhead is not an acceptable—”

“I’ll take it!” Katsuki declared. He turned the placard around and erased it with his sleeve, quickly rewriting what he had on it before turning the board to face us. “Explosive Hero: Warhead!”

“I don’t think—”

“Warhead!” Katsuki repeated, interrupting Midnight before she could say anything, and then fixing her with a glare that dared her to say anything else. If it were anyone else in the class, I think she may have actually fought him on it. But this was Katsuki. And I have never met anybody quite so stubborn as he is, not with that kind of power to back it up.

“I-if you insist…” Katsuki smiled victoriously and gave me a nod of thanks, which I returned with a soft smile. “Yaseiki!” Now I was frowning, but paid attention to Midnight. “Get up here and show me what you have!”
“Thought this was volunteer order, Skintight,” I murmured, pushing my chair back and getting up.

“It’s Midnight!”

“What you’re in, where, and when, all the same to me,” I snarked back. Midnight looked about to respond, so I made my steps a little heavier than absolutely necessary, the sound of my hooves on the floor drowning out whatever it is she was about to say. I stood behind the podium with my placard, but kept it facing towards me for now. “I’ve had this one in mind for a long time. Not quite as long as Tsuyu has hers, but… well. It just fits.”

I turned it towards the class.

“Animorphic Hero: Chimera.”
Chapter Forty-Eight

Lamarckian

Chapter Forty-Eight

“Mm…” Midnight hemmed and hawed over my choice. “Are you certain? It is evocative of a monster…”

“You’re thinking of the Lycian Chimera,” I replied. “A chimera is really just something with genetically different tissue, like when I shapeshift. Besides,” I shrugged. “It suits me. Unless I only morph into cute, cuddly critters, I’m probably going to look like a monster at some point.” I saw Tokoyami nodding from the back of the classroom, shuddering slightly. “And if I want to be effective, I need to look like a monster. I’m not going to hamstring myself just to look cute and cuddly, so if people think that’s monstrous, fine!” I saw Katsuki’s vicious grin of approval, while Momo offered an encouraging smile and Tsuyu gave a thumbs-up. I looked to Midnight, challenging her to speak up again, but all she did was nod.

“So long as you understand the implications, then I suppose I can respect that.” She beckoned for me to step away from the podium and let the remaining few have their turns. “Next!”

I blinked at the lack of the expected disapproval, especially given how badly Mina’s name got shot down. That was about my only reaction though, so I sat down and waited for the remaining few to come up with their names. On the way back to my seat, though, I saw that Tenya still hadn’t written anything on his placard, and just sat there, staring at the blank space. I wanted to say something. I wanted to tell him something that would make him feel better about all of this. But what was there to say? I couldn’t make up his mind for him.

The only three who’d yet come up with their monikers were Midoriya, Uraraka, and Tenya. Uraraka chose ‘Uravity’, a great name given her Quirk, and it had a certain appeal to it. Midoriya’s selection of ‘Deku’ came as some surprise, especially to Katsuki, who only barely managed to restrain himself from whatever outburst he’d been preparing. And lastly…

“You’re going with just your name too, huh?” Midnight asked. “You’re sure?”

“It’s a placeholder,” he said. “I… I am not…” He fell silent again, looking down. Midnight came over and put a hand on his arm in an attempt to comfort him, but he simply shrugged her off and went back to his seat. Midnight looked like she was about to say something else, but Aizawa-sensei took that moment to wake up (I think?), unzip his sleeping bag, and take his spot again.

“Right, now that that’s out of the way…” He reached below the podium and brought out several large stacks of paper. “Your field training will be one week long. Those with nominations will receive personalized lists, as well as any additional materials that came with the offers.” He put those papers down and brought out another set of handouts, waving them. “Those without personal offers will receive a list of forty participating workplaces from across Japan. Choose one.” He handed the papers to the first student, who turned out to be Tohru, and they began to be passed around. “Their bases of operations and areas of expertise all vary, so put a lot of thought into it before you choose.”

“I wanna focus on urban counter-villainy!” Kirishima explained.

“Something flood- or water-related would be nice,” Tsuyu remarked.
"You have until the end of the week." Aizawa-sensei came out from behind the podium now, and handed the larger stacks to those of us with offers. Katsuki’s and Todoroki’s piles fell with a thud upon their desks, while mine, Midoriya’s, and Momo’s had a bit less ‘oomph’ to them. “Spend the rest of this period reviewing your offers. Don’t be afraid to compare with each other.” He looked to Midnight, who gave a tilt of her head and gestured. “Yaseiki. A word?”

I started a moment, then looked to Aizawa-sensei. He gave a mild frown, which, in Aizawa Speak, is profound disappointment… I think. I had a bit of a sinking feeling in my stomach, but got up anyway. He nodded at Midnight, who gestured for me to follow her outside. We walked out of the classroom and closed the door behind us, at which point I turned to face Midnight and crossed my arms over my chest. We stood there for a moment, her looking for something in my expression, me trying to keep as blank a poker face as I could.

“I’ve been called a lot of things,” Midnight began. Her posture was loose and open, her voice soft. “It comes with the costume and persona I’ve cultivated over the years. But I’ve never had a student call me these things.” I didn’t say anything. I just shuffled a bit and looked away, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “If you have an issue with my costume because you feel it inappropriate for a school setting, use your words to express that. Belittling me and implying that I’m a prostitute reflects on nobody but yourself.”

“Then why come in like…” I floundered, waving a hand at her. “That?”

“Like what, Kanna?” Midnight asked.

“You know what I’m talking about!” I fired back. “Exaggerated hip sway, chest thrust out, hands tangled up in your hair! You looked like a damn centerfold! And you don’t even normally wear your costume when teaching!” I took a deep breath to try and calm myself, but it didn’t seem to work. I still felt that… I don’t know. I was simultaneously annoyed with Midnight, angry with her, aghast at her actions, but also… there was something else I couldn’t quite put my finger on, something that I don’t know if I’ve ever experienced before.

“All of that is merely part of the persona,” she said calmly. “And my costume is hardly the only one that could be considered salacious. In fact, many members of Class 1-A wear skintight outfits, or show just as much as I do. Would you call them whores as well?”

“What—no!” I waved a hand at Midnight. “That’s not the same thing at all!”

“Yaoyorozu’s costume shows far more skin than mine,” she offered.

“That’s because her Quirk needs exposed skin to work!” I contended.

“Asui’s outfit is also skintight.”

“That’s a wetsuit,” I pointed out. “It has to be more or less skintight.”

“Your costume is skintight,” Midnight said. “Unnecessarily so, may I add.”

“Not the same way yours is!” I protested, wincing internally. I couldn’t deny that she had a point there, but damn it, her costume and mine are nothing alike! “Mine is because that’s the simplest way to not have anything for somebody to grab onto in a fight. Your costume has half a dozen fetishes readily visible just on a first glance!”
“Yes, it is!” Midnight exclaimed happily, which threw me for a bit of a loop. “And why might that
be, do you think? And before you answer,” she interrupted right as I began to speak, “it’s not merely
for sex appeal.”

“… uh.”

“I’ll give you a hint,” she offered. “Remember what your teacher said about names and the image
they project?” She crossed her arms under her chest and ever so slightly lifted them, doing things that
once would’ve had me enthralled, but now had me somewhere between mentally taking notes and
feeling a strange mix of annoyed and bitter. “I don’t normally wear my costume while teaching, or at
least I wear something over it. But something else that you have to keep in mind when deciding on
your name is your overall theme. Costumes figure into that.” She took a step forward, and I tried to
look her straight in the eyes. “But I sense this isn’t about that, is it? Tell me this: All Might’s costume
is every bit as skintight as mine, possibly even more tightly-fitting. Do you have an issue with his as
well?”

“All Might doesn’t wear a codpiece,” I responded instantly. And in that moment, when Midnight’s
smirk turned victorious, I realized I’d given her some crucial piece of information that I myself didn’t
realize.

“I think I understand now.” Midnight rubbed her eyes with one hand, resting it briefly on the bridge
of her nose. “It’s about sex.” I froze, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks, and hurriedly looked away
from Midnight. “Kanna, sex isn’t something bad. We eat, we sleep, we have sex.” I… I had no idea
what to say to this. Where the heck did this conversation go!? “But just because somebody projects
an image of sex, intentionally or otherwise, it does not make them an object or allow you to ridicule
them. The way I use sex appeal is meant to be empowering, but for many people it isn’t, especially
for the prostitutes you accused me of being. And when you say such things, it’s not just me or them
that you’re hurting. It’s also all of your classmates who may not enjoy that kind of attention, but do
anyway. Yaoyorozu, Uraraka, Asui, even Kirishima. You should consider their feelings as well.”


Midnight put a hand on my shoulder, and I looked up at her. She… it wasn’t a smile, but it wasn’t
exactly a frown, either. It was more an expectant expression.

“It’s something you’ll have to consider in the future. I know you enjoy sarcasm, but you need to
mind your words. And on that note, before I let you go.”

I suddenly had to look very, very far up to reach Midnight’s eyes, given just how tall she was
normally and how the heels she wore augmented her height. Her hands were on her hips, face set in
a reproachful glare.

“What you said in that classroom was completely unacceptable, especially given that you were
addressing a teacher. It was inappropriate, immature, and unconscionable from somebody intending
to become a Pro Hero.” She leaned in closer, and I found myself taking a step back. “If you have
problems with a teacher, you come and talk to us. You do not talk back to your teachers in front of
the class, you do not attempt to disparage us in front of your classmates. Are we clear?”

“Y-yes!” I said hurriedly. It was like she’d flipped a switch, and Midnight was suddenly terrifying
in a way I couldn’t begin to describe.
“Excellent!” And then in an instant she was back to her usual self, steering me back towards the classroom door. “I’ve taken enough of your time though. Back to class with you, go pick out an internship!”

“Um, before that?” I turned to Midnight, still feeling self-conscious. “Why did you object to Mina’s choice and not mine?”

“To be frank?” She sighed. “I would have liked to let that pass without incident, and perhaps overreacted a tad at the name. I only have a very cursory knowledge of what she was aiming for, and if I reacted like that, how do you think the general public would?”

“Mm.” I processed that bit of information, turning it over in my head. “And mine?”

“You said it yourself,” Midnight replied immediately. “You probably wouldn’t care that much. But Ashido likes to play for the crowd, and even a slightly wrong impression could seriously hurt what she’s after. And besides!” She winked. “Somebody was going to call her ‘Pinky’ anyways. Better to develop a positive connotation with the term as opposed to a negative reaction, no? Now! You, class, in!”

The next thing I knew, Midnight had opened the door and practically shoved me inside, at which point I began walking to my seat as if on autopilot. Tsuyu and Momo were both giving me looks of compassion, while Katsuki only gave a short look up before returning to the massive stack of paper in front of him, crossing out most of the names on the page with his right hand and searching through his phone with the left. Behind him though, where I’d expected to see Midoriya, was instead his empty desk. Instead, Midoriya was next to Todoroki.

“He’s not offering it because he wants you as a hero,” Todoroki explained, speaking slowly and clearly to edge around Midoriya’s anxious muttering. “He’s offering because he wants you as a training tool for me.”

“But how do I say no to an offer from Endeavor!?” Midoriya wailed, probably a bit louder than he wanted to. I looked to Momo and Katsuki for clarification, and both of them just shrugged. Seems this had been going on for the entire time I’d been outside.

I sat down at my own desk and began looking through my pile of offers. Some of the names were familiar, others were not. They weren’t the primary topic on my mind, though. No, what I kept coming back around to is what Midnight was saying, about how I apparently still have a few hangups over… well, over sex. And probably on her in general.

“Hey.” I looked up to see Katsuki sitting on Midoriya’s chair, turned around to face me. “You okay?”


“Heh.” He took a quick look at the current page I was working on “These guys are in bumfuck nowhere,” he said, crossing out a few. “What’d Striptease want with you anyway?”

“Huh? Oh,” I said, reaching further into my pile and pulling out the offers that had individualized messages. “She…” I paused, processing. “I think that, in a very roundabout manner… she called me a bitch.”

“Shouldn’t give a fuck what she says,” Katsuki said, checking out one of the envelopes I’d pulled.
“Therian Hero Office? Thought that old shit retired…” He handed me the envelope, and I set it aside to look at the one I’d been holding first, which I turned to face Katsuki. “Gang Orca?”

“Personal too,” I said, just as surprised. I set that one aside to look over in more detail later. “Katsuki?”

“Yeah?” He raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

“Am I a bitch?” I asked honestly.

“Yes,” he answered, just as honestly. “You better not fucking think that’s a bad thing. Just means you don’t take shit from anyone.”

“Even you?” I felt… not angry with him, surprisingly. Even though he literally just said that yes, I am a bitch.

“Especially me,” he replied. I smiled, and leaned over to give him a quick kiss. This one didn’t catch him by surprise, and we actually shared it. Just for an instant, though, because the bell took that chance to ring, sending us all back to our seats.

“Remember,” Aizawa-sensei said as he left the classroom to make way for Ectoplasm, “midterms are next week. Study hard.” With that, everybody returned to their seats, Midoriya once again serving as a buffer between me and Katsuki. I settled in for the long slog that was calculus.

And my thoughts kept returning to what Midnight said. Because… wow.

I really am a bitch, aren’t I?

* * * * *

“So…” Momo leaned in over the table, chopsticks pointing directly at me. “You and Bakugou, hm?”

“Yes, yes,” I waved off with my free hand, “get your jollies now. You wouldn’t be the only one, either.” My eyes wandered across the cafeteria to where Katsuki sat, flanked as he was by Kaminari, Kirishima, and Sero. While Mina usually sat with them, she’d gone and made herself scarce, sitting over with Tohru, Jirou, Ojiro, and Kouda. She was having a good time with those four, with Tohru hanging on her every word, and off of her shoulder. Well, I think. There is the imprint of something on Mina’s shoulder, so I’m just going to assume it’s Tohru’s hand.

“Budge over, you!” I found myself forcefully scooted over to the next chair by Pony as she sat down, while Ibara joined Tsuyu and Momo on the other side of the table.

“Come on Pony, you couldn’t have just taken the free seat?”

“Mm, let me think about that for a second!” She tapped a finger on her chin, pretending to think it through. “You’d already warmed this one up, so… nope!”

“Wow,” I deadpanned. “So now I’ve been reduced to ‘chair warmer’. Great. Thanks, Pony.” Then I blinked, noticing something. “Hey, where’s Monoma?”
“He is spending some time with Kendo,” Ibara answered. “The two of them have been friends for quite some time, apparently.”

“I also think he’d rather not be part of this conversation,” Tsuyu put in, holding up her phone so everybody could see The Picture. “Kanna-chan has a soft spot.”

“C-can we talk about literally anything else?” I asked, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice.

“Oh my,” Ibara murmured. “She’s really blushing, isn’t she?”

“Ooh, somebody go grab an egg from Lunch Rush!” Pony said excitedly. “Let’s crack it on her forehead and see if it fries!”

“No!” I declared, slamming a hand down on the table. “My love life is tabled for another time! New topic! Please!”

“How about ‘midterms are coming soon, please help’?” A new voice put in. All five of us turned to see Mineta pull a chair up. He sat down and very dutifully made sure he was looking at our eyes, not our chests. “They’re next week, right?”

“Don’t remind me,” Pony grumbled. “History is going to hurt.” She blinked, then looked at Mineta. “Help me with that and I’ll help you with English?”

“Deal!” He extended a hand, which Pony shook to seal the deal. Then he looked towards me. “Why’re you staring?”

“N-nothing!” I muttered. “Just, well…” I waved a hand in his direction. “You’re not being very… well, you.”

“There’s a good reason for that!” His eyes went wide, and he took on an oddly haunted look. “He scares me…” Mineta’s finger shook as he pointed towards Katsuki, eyes saying what his smile wouldn’t. Meanwhile, Katsuki chose that exact moment to look up, and upon seeing Mineta seated with us, pushed back from his table and stomped over, stormy expression promising pain.

“The fuck are you—”

“Say Katsuki,” I interrupted, interposing myself between him and Mineta, who took that opportunity to scurry to the other end of the table and behind both Tsuyu and Ibara, “you’re good at calculus, right?”

“Wh—yeah?” I’d caught him rather flatfooted, and his expression did a very quick one-eighty from furious to perplexed. “Why?”

“Good, cause I’m not, and you’re going to help me study for it!” I replied sweetly, all smiles and cheer. “Also, tone the protectiveness down. Please.”

“… tch, fine.” I reached out to turn Katsuki and shove him back towards his table, where Kaminari was making whipping motions while Sero laughed. Kirishima was actually not joining in, instead reprimanding Kaminari, which Katsuki joined in on the moment he sat back down.

“K-kanna-chan?” Mineta said, voice quavering. “Y-your boyfriend scares me.”
“Uh-huh?” I raised an eyebrow, looking at how he’d carefully hidden himself behind Ibara and Tsuyu. “So why didn’t you hide behind Pony?”

“Are you kidding!?” Mineta all but shouted. “Her boyfriend is even worse!”

* * * * *

“That’s all for today,” Aizawa-sensei announced right as the bell rang to signal the end of the school day. “Remember, work placements are due Friday at the end of school, and midterms start next week on Monday.” The lot of us began to shuffle our stuff around and into our bags, and Momo took the opportunity to pass me a copy of the study group schedule we’d worked out for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. “Yaseiki.” I looked up to see Aizawa-sensei standing in front of my desk, singling me out. “Come with me for a minute.”

“O-okay,” I said, suddenly feeling nervous. I offered Momo and Katsuki a look of reassurance, while Tsuyu gave me one of her own. Then I followed Aizawa-sensei out of the classroom. “Is this about the thing with Midnight-sensei this morning?” I asked, suddenly feeling nervous about where he was leading me.

He didn’t answer.

I followed Aizawa-sensei through the halls, and the two of us soon found ourselves in front of Principal Nedzu’s office, which sent my heart plummeting straight into my stomach. Without even pausing to knock, Aizawa-sensei pushed open the frosted glass doors into Nedzu’s office and walked inside. I stood outside, rooted to the spot as the familiar scent of Nedzu’s particular blend of chai tea wafted out into the waiting area. He’d been expecting me, I thought to myself, worried beyond belief now.

“Please come inside, Kanna-chan.” While his voice was still warm, Nedzu’s tone lacked the same friendliness and enthusiasm I’d come to associate with the rodent principal. My hooves felt like they’d suddenly been cast in lead, but I still walked inside and sat down in one of the chairs before his desk. And as if I’d needed any other indication that I was expected, the back of the chair had already been opened to accommodate my tail.

“I’m in trouble, aren’t I?” I asked as I sat, trying to keep the trepidation from showing. From the way I’d had to adjust my sitting so I was further back than just the very edge of the chair, I’m going to guess and say I wasn’t doing a very good job of it.

“‘Yes.” Aizawa-sensei didn’t bother mincing words, taking up position beside Nedzu behind his desk. “This makes two times that our teachers have felt they had to comment on your inappropriate behavior.”

“The first time we could understand.” Nedzu took over at this point, paws clasped seriously in front of him. “Just as with Tsunotori-chan, foreign language English serves no purpose for you. But your impropriety towards Midnight-sensei this morning crossed a line.” I looked down at my lap, hands balling up the hem of my skirt in frustration. “This is starting to look like a pattern of behavior that we would like to try and curb before it becomes problematic, both for you and for UA as a whole. To that end, I’m afraid to say that some measure of punishment is in order.”

“… yeah,” I murmured. “I… I deserve that.” I looked to the teacup in front of me, and at a gesture
from Nedzu, reached to pick it up and take a sip. The flavor of the tea and the scent of the spices that had been infused into the liquid calmed my nerves, but I still felt a little weary making eye contact. “So… what? Detention?” A sudden thought struck me. “W-wait, please say you’re not going to say I can’t do an internship!”

“That was never on the table,” Aizawa-sensei broke in. “Even for an extreme punishment, that would do more harm than good. After all, the performance evaluations from your internship coordinators serve as your Foundational Hero Studies midterm grade.”


“Oh, indeed,” Nedzu continued, some of the amusement leaking back into his voice. “Here at UA, we try to tailor our punishments to something that would best suit the student, especially where the Hero Course is concerned. While we do occasionally stick to the stock punishments of detention or suspension, it usually serves some ulterior purpose. For example,” he raised both paws up, “when Tsunotori-chan and Monoma-kun were given detention, for a week and a day respectively, that initial day was specifically so that the two could reconcile in relative privacy. The remainder of Tsunotori-chan’s detention was spent apologizing to her teachers for the deception, and ensuring that she wouldn’t try such a thing again.”

“… huh.” A number of little puzzle pieces all slotted together right then, with one very interesting conclusion at the end of it. “Wait, did you play matchmaker for them!”

“Oh, no no no!” Nedzu insisted. “That was all them. Though it did surprise more than a few of our staff.”

“Uh-huh.” I turned to Aizawa-sensei. “And when Katsuki tried to attack Midoriya that first day?”

“Any punishment we could conjure up here at UA would be wasted on Bakugou,” Aizawa-sensei answered. “It would be a grave misuse of both his time and ours.” He gave me a serious look. “Normally I wouldn’t be telling you this, but I get the feeling you would find out anyway, given…” He trailed off. I couldn’t help the sudden heat in my cheeks, and looked away somewhat bashfully. “For Bakugou, instead of bothering to give him some empty punishment here at UA, we do the one thing that does work.”

“We call his mother and let her handle it!” Nedzu supplied.

“Y-you… you tattle to his mom?” I asked, unable to hide the incredulity. That was… I barely knew anything about Katsuki’s mom other than what I’d gleaned from our conversations and a brief text thread between the two of them. And yet, even with just that, I just knew that essentially telling on him to his mother was the single worst punishment that anyone could possibly devise for him. “That’s… that’s brilliant.”

“Indeed.” Aizawa-sensei took over once again. “Now, as for your punishment.” I froze in my seat, the sudden return to our meeting’s actual purpose putting me off-guard for a second. “You are going to be helping Present Mic write the English midterms, and help administer the oral portion of the exam. Originally it was just going to be Tsunotori, who volunteered to help, but in light of your recent behavior we’re pulling your automatic pass.” I couldn’t help but gape at Aizawa-sensei. “Present Mic will be grading you. I will ensure that he is eminently fair, but it is up to you to make a good impression.”

“Uh, but, what…” I couldn’t even get out a coherent sentence, much less string two words
together. *This* was my punishment? It… it was… I slumped in my seat. “N-nevermind. No use complaining.” I sighed. “I deserve this.”

“Yes you do,” Nedzu said. “Take this for the valuable lesson that it is, Kanna-chan. While we encourage our students to speak their minds, there is a clear delineation between that and unnecessary rudeness, verging on cruelty. You crossed that line today.” He gave me a look of disappointment. “I did not expect such conduct from somebody as mature as you are. I expect it will not happen again.”

“It won’t,” I said. “I promise.” I finished my tea, then looked at Aizawa-sensei and Principal Nedzu. “Am I free to go?”

“Yes,” Nedzu said. “Have a good evening, Kanna-chan.”

I nodded, then stood up from the chair, pushed it back forward, and replaced the back section that Nedzu had lowered for my tail before I left the office. I stopped in the hallway and rested my head against the cool surface, breathing deeply to try and rid myself of the annoyance I felt at myself. Damn it Kanna, you’re *smarter* than this! If mouthing off to teachers wasn’t acceptable the first time around, what made you think it was okay to do here, huh? Ugh, I was such an *idiot*!

I took another deep breath to help center myself, then marshaled my thoughts. Okay. Fine. I was a stupid little bitch this morning, and now I was paying the price for it. Nothing to do but suck it up and *deal*.

I headed for the entrance, ready to put this day behind me. When I got there though, I was surprised to find that I wasn’t alone. Somebody had been waiting for me.

“Took you long enough,” Katsuki groused, putting his phone away and walking over to meet me. “You didn’t have to wait for me,” I mumbled, though privately I was actually… well, really glad that he did.

“Yeah? I felt like it, there a problem with that?” There was the vitriol I’d expected. If it had been anyone else, I probably would have bristled and gotten angry, but from Katsuki… well, it was really more just how he preferred to interact with people. If they were willing to be around him in spite of how coarse he was, then they were probably somebody he’d get along with.

“Not really,” I said, eyeing the rainy weather outside. “Unless, of course, it’s just because you forgot your umbrella and want to mooch off mine.”

“I don’t need a fucking umbrella!” Katsuki half-yelled, reaching beside him to grab his umbrella from the holder by the door. I picked mine up but didn’t open it, instead opting to join Katsuki under his, since it was large enough for the both of us. “You wanted calculus help, yeah?”

“Always,” I whined. “I swear, calculus just has it in for me.”

“Nah, you just suck at that shit,” he said, laughing at my predicament.

“Hey!” I swatted him on the chest. “It’s not funny! Derivatives are the root of all evil!”

“Pfft, you’re just ass at math.” I grumbled under my breath a bit at that. “When were you thinking.”
“I dunno,” I shrugged. “After school one day? Go to the library and study there, maybe.”

“Just come over to my place,” Katsuki said, surprising me.

“Uh.” He looked down at me, eyebrow raised. “You do realize that means you’d be introducing me to your mom, right?”

“I’ve met yours. S’only fair,” he said, voice quiet. “Besides, the fuck she gonna do, say no?”

I could only shake my head in amusement. Oh you poor boy, you have no idea what you’re getting yourself into.

“Hey, Katsuki?” I looped my tail around his wrist, which caught him by surprise for a moment before he relaxed. “Thanks for waiting for me. Really.”

“S’nothing,” he mumbled quietly. A quick look up showed a few spots of pink on his cheeks.

I just smiled, leaning into him.

A shame the walk was so short.
Chapter Forty-Nine, Part One

Chapter Notes

So, the mother of all writer's blocks happened, combined with a bunch of shit that pulled me away from writing. This bit before the internship arc has been fighting me tooth and nail I swear, but we are SO DAMN CLOSE to Extra Guidance that I just need to get through it.

I don't actually have the time I needed to finish off the rest of this chapter before other shit's going to pull me away for all of tomorrow and most of Friday, and I've already gone well over my usual time between updates, so I figure y'all can have this for now while I finish off the rest of the chapter. And it's 'part one' since it's... well, not really a full chapter, in my opinion.

Anyway. Sorry for the wait. Hopefully next bit on either Saturday or Sunday.

Additionally, a week from today (currently Wednesday), I am leaving town for a bit. Specifically I'm going to... well?

See Chapter Six.

[Six Days Ago]

“Um, B-boss?”

Sakamata Kuugo looked up from the paperwork in front of him, which he intended to fill out by the end of this evening, and eyed his secretary. Taiki was a good kid; he wouldn’t be bothering Kuugo without due purpose.

“I’m busy,” he replied anyway, just to gauge how strongly the young man felt about the matter at hand. If he was right…

“I know! It’s just, i-it’s about that letter you wrote? For the UA student offer?” Taiki stepped forward, brandishing a printed copy of the letter in hand. “I just… are you sure this is what you want to be saying? It’s a little—”

“Yes, Taiki-kun. I’m absolutely certain.” Kuugo stood from his desk and surveyed the great, expansive aquarium housed alongside his headquarters. “You get a certain feel for somebody when watching them fight. What makes them tick. What pulls them in.” He turned to look at his secretary. “Would this work on the rest of the contestants? Perhaps for one other. But for this child?”

He shrugged.

“Send the letter. I believe she already recognizes her own need for extra guidance. She will come to us.”
“This is… wow.” I let out a low whistle as I read the first of my two personal letter offers, this one from Gang Orca, who was currently ranked as the number twelve Pro Hero. “Let’s see here. ‘You have power, you have some skill. But your movements are wasteful, your style melodramatic, and if I have to listen to one more second of you shrieking like a tone-deaf porpoise I will break something. You need guidance. Only seek and you shall find.’” I set the letter down and looked at the computer screen, which showed Mom sitting in her office at the hospital, hair up in a messy bun and lab coat perched on the back of her chair. “There’s a bit more here, some scheduling specifics and even a packing list.” I turned the paper around to show it to the webcam, and on the other end, Mom leaned in to try and see it better.

We’d spent the past half hour or so on a video call, going through the various offers and recruitment attempts that had resulted from my performance at the Sports Fest. I’d kept the two personalized ones for last, and with Mom’s help, had managed to whittle my pile down to about ten or so offers. A good number of them had been all flash and no substance, just somebody wanting to parade around a UA student for publicity and the like. But occasionally?

Well. Some of them were genuine, sincere offers. Like this one.

“Well, he was definitely at the Sports Festival,” Mom said. “I remember seeing him get up a few times and return sopping wet.”

“You know anything specific?” I asked. “I mean, it’s a personal offer… I feel like I need to really consider what he’s putting forward.”

“Obviously very good at aquatic and marine heroics,” she replied. Mom’s voice sounded tired. “Works out of Shinagawa Aquarium, so by the water. Not very many sidekicks, a real quality over quantity type of person, you know?”

“Well when you put it that way, I’m seriously considering taking his offer!” I put the papers from Gang Orca aside, and picked up the other envelope. “Right, so the other personal letter.”

“Who’s this one from?” Mom asked. “Do you know the name?”

“No,” I admitted, “though apparently Katsuki does. Some old guy calling himself ‘Therian’.” I turned the letter over, feeling the contents to try and get an idea of what was inside before opening it.

“For some reason, Katsuki thought he was supposed to be retired, so I’m a little—”

“Kanna.” I froze where I sat and looked at Mom’s image on the screen. Any trace of mirth on her face had fled, replaced by stone-cold seriousness. “I need you to listen to me very carefully. Go to the kitchen and get the paring knife.”

“Mom?” I asked. “What’re you talking about?”

“Now, Kanna.” A chill ran up my spine, and I bolted out of my seat to grab the paring knife from the kitchen. I was back seated maybe a moment later, and showed the knife to my mother. “Good. Now get out your phone and set it to record, then prop it up so it has a good view of what you’re doing. You’re going to need both hands for this.”
“Okay…” I did what Mom asked and propped my phone against the monitor, flipping the camera to the front so I could see what was recording, then got it started. I had no idea what Mom was having me do… but I was going to trust her. Also, the oddly specific nature of the instructions was giving me a very bad feeling. “Alright, recording. What now?”

“Open the letter, then remove and unfold all the pages, and lay them flat against the table, face-down.” I used the paring knife as a letter opener (may as well, it’s already right there), pulled the three pages of the letter out, and set them on my desk so I could see the back. “Now, with the edge of the knife parallel to the bottom edge, drag the knife from bottom to top.”

“Uh, okay?” I grabbed the knife and laid it flat along the paper, pausing for a moment when I saw that the knife was much smaller than the paper was wide. “Does it matter where on the back of the paper it is? And what am I looking for, exactly?”

“No.” Her reply was succinct. “And trust me, you’ll know it when you see it. Now, do it.”

“Right, okay.” I ran the knife’s edge up the back of the first sheet, making sure to take it slow. “Nothing on paper one. Moving to the second.” And it was right at what I assumed was the beginning of the top margin that I saw it: the blade of the paring knife caught on a whisper-thin strip of paper, almost translucent from how small it was. “I found something!”

“Alright. Use your knife to get that strip off. You’ll have to sever a ribbon connector at the top edge of the paper.” I frowned at that. Ribbon connectors implied electronics. If so, then this thing…

I used the knife to pull the thin extra section free from the back of the paper, and once it was hanging mostly loose from the top edge, I saw the ribbon connector Mom was talking about. The paring knife met a bit of resistance as it cut through, and looking closely, I could see something unmistakably electronic inside of it.

“Okay, that extra strip is off,” I told Mom, showing both her and my phone camera.

“Good, last step: take that to the microwave, and set it for exactly eleven seconds.” I boggled, but a gesture from Mom had me grabbing my phone and doing what she said. I placed the little strip in the microwave, set it for eleven seconds. The little bit of tech had just begun sparking when the timer went off, and I gave it a quick tap to see if it was safe to touch before picking it up and bringing it back. “Done?”

“Yeah,” I said, showing her the little paper-thin chip, crispy around the edges as it was. “Mom, what is this thing?” I thought for a moment. “Wait, how did you know it was there? How did you know how to find it?”

“Stop recording and send the video to me first,” she said. I obliged, showing Mom our text thread as the video went through. “Alright, I have it. As for what that is?” She nodded at the once-hidden little chip in my hand. “That is a GPS tracker and audio transmitter. And it’s going to be proof to extend my restraining order against Therian to cover you as well, which it should have already.”

“Restraining—Mom, you’re not making any sense,” I protested. “Who is Therian, and why do you have a restraining order against him?” I held up the chip. “And what does he want with me?”

“I’m sorry Kanna-chan,” Mom said, picking up her desk phone, “the answers to those questions would take a lot more time than either of us currently have, and I need to make this call. Suffice to
“My parents were a Quirk marriage; my father bought my mother. They’re supposed to be illegal now, but that didn’t stop him from trying to sell me into one as well.” Mom sighed. “I’ll be calling your Principal to have him block all further communication from Therian. Kanna-chan… all I need you to know right now is that your grandfather is a truly terrible person, and to not trust anything that comes from him. There’s a lot more to this story, and I promise I’ll tell you, but… just not today.”

Mom ended the call. I was left staring at the blank screen in front of me, and at the letter laid out on the table before me, question after awful question flowing through my mind. This… this is the first I’m hearing about any of my grandparents. And if, like my luck will probably have it, all of them follow this particular trend?

I don’t think I want to know about the rest…

***

I spent most of the next day in a bit of a funk. I couldn’t even blame myself for it; I mean, how often is it that you learn your grandfather is an absolute monster, and the type of person who had zero problems essentially selling another person into slavery? And this is all before I point out the spy thriller bug that had been hidden inside of a letter addressed to me. What, had he decided that since he couldn’t get Mom, then her erstwhile daughter was a good enough consolation prize? Something messed up like that?

Prying the information on this out of Mom was going to be near impossible, especially since she’d been genuinely scared on that call. I’d been too surprised at the time to really pay much attention, but when Mom gets severe like that, she’s trying to hide whatever it is she’s actually feeling. From how she’d been so quick about ending the call and going elsewhere, she was clearly trying to get away from in front of me before a bit of a breakdown. Mom… she puts on a brave face. But I know when she’s scared.

And she was terrified of her father.

I needed more information on this. I couldn’t get it from Mom; she was too shaken up by this to be responsive. I wasn’t going to ask Dad; he might not know the full story, and even then, he has other things to worry about. That was the two chief sources I could have asked, unavailable. But this was UA.

“Hey, Katsuki.” I sat down next to him at the table he shared with Kaminari, Kirishima, Sero, and Mina.

“Still on for after school, yeah?” His voice was very matter-of-fact, but what he actually said sent Mina into a bit of a tizzy. Well, until the two of us shot simultaneous glares her way.

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” I snarked. “Not important, got a question.” He raised an eyebrow instead of asking what it was. “You remember how I got a letter from that Therian guy, right? The one you thought was retired?”

“What about it?”

“I need more in-depth information than the internet has,” I said, scanning the lunch room. “And I
hate to ask you this… but do you know if Midoriya’s got him in one of those notebooks he’s always writing in?”

Katsuki’s eyes widened. The next thing I knew, he’d dropped his chopsticks, shoved his chair back from the table, and begun stomping across the cafeteria to where Midoriya sat, flanked by Uraraka, Tokoyami, and Tenya. I followed after him after sending a glance at Pony and Tsuyu to let the rest of our friends know it was fine, and resolved myself to deescalating the situation once Katsuki inevitably made it blow up.

“Oi, Deku!” Midoriya immediately stiffened at his seat, and Tenya looked up, frowning heavily at Katsuki. I shot him a placating look, though I imagine it probably turned into one of distress once Katsuki leaned over Midoriya, one hand heavy on the smaller boy’s shoulder, the other on the table.

“Y-yes, K-k-kacchan?” Midoriya stammered, barely able to meet Katsuki’s eyes. From the way he started sweating, I gathered that this was very much not an irregular occurrence… and not in a good way. I… may have to talk with Katsuki about what is and isn’t appropriate to do to your classmates.

“You got shit on that old fuck Therian in notebook eight, yeah?” Katsuki pointed over his shoulder back where I was standing. “She needs it. Send me that shit once you get your dumb ass home, got it!?” I whacked him over the head with my tail. “… please.”

“Y-yes! I mean, of course! R-right away!” Midoriya got up and began making what could only be placating gestures, and I took that as my cue to drag Katsuki away before he could make more of a fuss. By the time we got back to his table and I unwound my tail from his wrist, Kaminari had already started up with the whip gestures.

So I whacked him over the head too.

“Ow!”

“Serves you right!” Jirou called from across the cafeteria, which had Kaminari in a slump.

“Dude, just ask her out already!” Sero suggested, leaning on Kaminari’s shoulder. “Everyone knows you like her!”

“And if he,” Mina pointed at Katsuki, “can lift her,” and now she pointed at me, “in a princess carry on national television, you can ask Jirou out.”

“Alright, I’ve had my fill of your friends for the day,” I told Katsuki. “See you back in class.”

“Mm,” he mumbled his assent, having resumed shoveling food into his mouth. I stood up and made my way back to my usual table, only to find my seat occupied.

“Really?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at Tsuyu.

“He’s helping me with chemistry,” she said, pointing at Mineta, that little chair thief. “His explanations are simpler than Momo-chan’s.”

Momo, with her mouth full of udon, merely shot a glare Tsuyu’s way.

* * * * *
The end of the school day finally came, and with it came Katsuki waiting for me at the entrance again. It wasn’t raining today, so I didn’t have a convenient excuse to get close to him… but screw that, we’re together, I’m going to do it anyway. He jumped a little when I wrapped my tail around his wrist, but didn’t really react other than that.

“What, you don’t mind that do you?” I asked, giving him a look. “Cause if you do mind… actually, nah, I’d keep doing it.”

“Heh.” He reached with his other hand to give a slight tug on my tail, at which I shot him a nasty glare. “Like a bear on a leash.”

“Yes, because that works out so well for the person holding the leash,” I replied, rolling my eyes. “So, where to?”

“Station.” Katsuki started walking, and I followed next to him, flipping the bird at where Pony and Tsuyu sat taking photos of us, because of course they would. I’m fairly certain that one’s going to find its way into my mom’s possession, and it would definitely give Dad an aneurysm if he saw it. The idea of his baby girl doing anything with a boy… yeah. Teasing him with this is going to be fun.

The walk to the station was mostly uneventful, save for a couple of kids in the local, not-UA high school’s uniform remarking at seeing Katsuki with… well, me. I guess. There was a bit of a kerfuffle at the station when I couldn’t find my metro card, and Katsuki couldn’t stop snickering when we realized I’d slipped it into my jacket’s pocket in preparation for having to use it… and completely forgotten I’d put it there. Because of course I did that. Let me tell you, I am very bad about misplacing things. If Pony and I didn’t keep our keys on a coat hanger by the door to our apartment, they’d have been gone already. No, I’m not exaggerating, I am that bad about losing things.

Except my phone. I’ve never lost that. Pony on the other hand…

Eventually we arrived at a surprisingly large home, probably larger than mine back in Hosu. There was a video doorbell on the wall surrounding the property, along with a placard that read “Bakugou” in both kanji and romaji, probably just in case somebody who couldn’t read Japanese had to visit for business. Though what that business is, I don’t… wait, why don’t I just ask?

“So…” I waved at the house. “What do your parents do for a living, anyway?”

“Fashion shit,” Katsuki grumbled, shoulders tightening up as though in anticipation. He shook his left hand out of his pocket, and I took the cue to unravel my tail from around his wrist. “You’re gonna want to step away from the door.”

“… um, what?” I boggled. Katsuki fished the key out of his pocket and unlocked the top deadbolt, then moved on to the lower lock. “Why would I want to—”

Katsuki threw the door open, and immediately ducked. Whatever he’d been trying to do had apparently been anticipated though, since what could only be a house slipper flew through the open door and straight into his face.

“Oi, Katsuki!” He reached up and grabbed the slipper from his face while the woman’s voice yelled at him from inside. “You forgot to put the laundry in the dryer, you little shit!”

“Stop throwing your slippers at me, you old bat!” Katsuki roared, tossing said slipper right back at
whoever was yelling. “And it’s your week for laundry!” I heard the slipper hit something, and then next thing I know there’s a woman who looks a lot like Katsuki in the doorway, slapping him over the head with what could only be the very same slipper that had just completed a round trip to her hand.

“It was, but you’ve got midterms, and I’ll be damned if you’re wasting time on chores when you could be studying, got it?”

“Oh my god,” I found myself murmuring. “It really is genetic, isn’t it?”

Both Katsuki and his mother stopped right then, faces instantly going as blank as possible as they both turned to face me in unison.

“You’re supposed to tell me when someone’s coming over,” Bakugou Mitsuki said, clearly addressing her son despite looking me in the eye.

“I sent you a text,” Katsuki replied. “And to not make that shit with coconut in it tonight.”

“Yeah, I’m allergic,” I supplied.

“Uh-huh,” Mitsuki muttered. Then the next thing I knew, I had yet another member of Katsuki’s family inspecting me head to tail. “So you’re her, huh?” Mitsuki suddenly had her arm slung around my shoulder, leading me into the house.

“Wait!” I cried. “I need to put on—”

“You won’t tear the floors up,” she said, pointing out the stone flooring just inside. “Now get your ass in here while Katsuki does the fucking laundry!”

And with that, I was dragged inside of Casa Bakugou by my boyfriend’s smiling, over-eager mother.

Someone just shoot me now.
“You’re kidding.” I had to look again. And yet the more I stared at the picture in the Bakugou family’s photo album, the more insane it seemed. And yet, it was totally real.

“Nope!” Mitsuki said. “Katsuki really did beat the shit out of a Mall Might!” She paused for a moment, thinking. “You know, I should’ve seen it coming when he asked for a punching bag.” She shrugged and went back to the photo album, and I continued to take in the glorious, glorious sight of Bakugou Katsuki, age five, punching a random man dressed as All Might right in the kisser.

You know those mall Santa’s, the ones that have kids sit on their laps and then get told what the kids want for Christmas? Yeah, well, those were more or less supplanted, in Japan at least, by Mall Mights. Yes, you heard that right, and it’s exactly what it sounds like: people dressed as All Might and listening to the wishes of the kids and what they wanted, and offering ‘sagely advice from the Top Hero’ on how to get it. This usually isn’t a problem, and it’s just one of those things that lets All Might be everywhere at once, especially with just how much everybody looks up to the man.

And then you have Bakugou Katsuki, who sees All Might and wants to fight him, right there and then. Honestly, it was pretty hilarious, and absolutely in character for him to do. But this was the fourth such story of Katsuki being a little shit, whether in public or in private, and the second photo album.

“Dishes are done,” Katsuki grumbled as he walked into the den, glaring at his mother.

“About time!” She set the photo album down, and looked at Katsuki with a serious shit-eating grin. “Now—”

“Actually,” I interjected, leaping to my hooves before Mitsuki could get going. “We really need to get that studying and stuff done, right Katsuki?”

“Mhmm,” he grunted in affirmation. Mitsuki looked to her son. Then she looked at me… and smiled.

“Well I’ll be damned. Yuu-chan was right; you can make him behave!” Mitsuki leaned over the back of the sofa. “Hey! Masaru! Looks like he is your son after all!”

“That’s nice dear,” the softer, placid voice of Katsuki’s father floated in from the kitchen. “Could you come help me prepare the vegetables?”

“Mhmm,” he grunted in affirmation. Mitsuki looked to her son. Then she looked at me… and smiled.

“Finally.” Katsuki grabbed my hand with his, and led me back towards his room. Looking inside, I saw… actually, a relatively normal room. A great big All Might poster, one of an action shot against some or other large, bulky villain he’d fought over the years. Next to it was actually a framed article
about, of all things, his and Midoriya’s encounter with the sludge villain, which I hadn’t even noticed or paid much attention to when it happened, though apparently it’s something that Katsuki doesn’t let himself forget, and uses it as a motivator to push him forward. Along the rest of the walls were the standard accoutrements that I’d been expecting: a game console, a small television, bookshelves filled with what I’m going to guess are various books, manga, and old textbooks, and a bed. The overall color scheme did lean towards some combination of dark reds and army green, and… sorry Katsuki, but it’s really not the best color combination there. Or at least that’s my opinion.

He walked in first, and held the door for me. Once we were both inside, he closed the door, sat down at his desk chair, leaned back as far as it would go, and groaned. “Fuck. It’s always something with that damn hag, I swear!”

“And yet she has you doing it now so you’re free during midterms,” I pointed out. “Besides, week after midterms we’re doing those work placements, right? So if you have midterms next week, and are away the week after, it sort of has to be your turn this week, doesn’t it?”

“… get your damn books out.” He completely ignored what I just said, or didn’t want to acknowledge it, and I basked in the small victory that this represented. I got my calculus notebook out of my bag and flipped to the page I wanted a hand with. Katsuki took a look, and then looked back at me. “Seriously Kanna? Limits?”

“I’m bad at calculus!” I protested. Katsuki was having none of it, and leaned in closer, his deadpan expression rivaling my own usual one.

“You were at that elite fucking prep school! You should’ve done this shit last year!”

“… I’m really bad at calculus,” I amended. Katsuki just groaned and pulled out some scratch paper.

“Alright. Now pay attention…”

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I don’t know how he did it, but Katsuki managed to get me through the entirety of what Ectoplasm had taught us in calculus so far in a rather short amount of time. To be exact, it had only been an hour and fifteen minutes since we started, and I was already starting to get some of this. He managed to explain it in ways that were relatively simple to grasp, and the useful tricks were nothing like anything that any of my calculus teachers, from this life or the last, ever taught me.

“If I didn’t know better,” I thought aloud, “I’d say you taught yourself this stuff.”

“Huh?” Katsuki looked up. “I learned this shit three years ago.”

The tip of my pencil broke.

“Katsuki,” I began, trying to keep my voice calm. “Three years ago, you were thirteen, and even at Somei we were just being taught algebra. So do you mean to tell me that when you were thirteen, you taught yourself calculus?”

“Yeah?” Katsuki shrugged. “Not a big deal, really.”
“… this is my worst class,” I said. “And you taught it to yourself. Three years ago. For what, shits and giggles?”

“What? No,” he scoffed, pointing at some of the textbooks on his wall. “So I could get physics better.”

“Wh—okay. Okay.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to keep from lashing my tail and hitting it against the edge of his desk or bookshelf. “So. You taught yourself calculus, so you could teach yourself physics.” I looked at him. “Let me guess: so you use your Quirk better.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” He held up a hand and let off several small explosions, nothing much, just firecracker-level pops. “You try getting propulsion right without knowing how it works!”

I couldn’t help it. I started giggling first, then it grew into chuckles, until finally I was sitting on Katsuki’s bed and trying desperately to remember how to breathe between peals of laughter.

“What?”

“Y—you taught yourself rocket science!” I got out through the laughs. “I mean, y—you keep hearing ‘oh, it’s n-not that hard, it’s not rocket science’, a-a-and here you are, and, and—!” I couldn’t keep talking, it was too much. If I was being honest, it probably wasn’t all that funny overall. If I was just being told that Katsuki’d taught himself calculus to teach himself physics to teach himself to better use his powers, I probably wouldn’t think too much of it. But the humor that was really setting me off was all of this in combination with the fact that Bakugou Katsuki is one of the biggest sourpusses you’ve ever met, and was probably just cursing out the book and banging his head against the wall until he figured this stuff out. And the mental image of Katsuki telling his textbook to go die was too damn silly to not think about, since I can just tell it actually happened.

“It’s not that funny,” he murmured. I didn’t really notice, still sitting on the edge of his bed and leaning forward with my arms around my waist, trying to calm the giggle fit that’d taken over. “Oi, quit laughing!” I looked at him and put on a straight face… and it instantly fell apart when I tried to imagine his training, and as a result thought about Katsuki with a calculus book hanging from the ceiling, pencil in his mouth, and using his hands to propel himself high enough to reach it. “Don’t make me—”

A few things happened all at the same time. Katsuki stood up from his chair. I lashed my tail to the side, right in front of Katsuki’s foot, and tried to pull myself back upright. So of course he would happen to trip over my tail, fall forward, and pin me to his bed, one of his legs in between mine. We both just… stood there for a moment. Or I guess I lay there, and he half-stood, half… I don’t know, actually. Doesn’t matter. We both just sort of stared at each other, the suddenness of it all stopping my giggles.

And then he kissed me. It was short, it was clumsy, and really it wasn’t anything more than a small peck that didn’t know when to end. It was absolutely obvious that Katsuki didn’t know what he was doing. I gently pushed him up, smiling softly at his confusion, and sat up on the bed so we were sitting next to each other.

“Here. Let me show you.” I leaned up and kissed him.

I showed him what to do, and soon, he was showing me just how quick of a learner he was.
I wrapped my arms around his neck, and his went around my waist. I very quickly found myself with my back against his mattress once more, and both of our hands began to wander, just the tiniest bit. I trailed down across his back, and he went around to my front, slowly climbing my midriff, almost to—

“Katsuki!” The door to his room slammed open, and a full trash bag flew across the open space, knocking Katsuki off of me and onto the floor. Mitsuki stomped in after the bag, then tossed another on top of where Katsuki lay. “You forgot to take out the fucking trash, you lazy ass!” I let my face fall into my hands, sighing loudly at all that pent-up tension going absolutely nowhere, simultaneously thanking and cursing Mitsuki in my head, but mostly cursing, because holy shit.

“You know?” I said, pulling Katsuki up from the floor and completely ignoring Mitsuki. “I used to think that you were the angriest person I know. But now that I’ve met your mother, I really have to compliment you on your self-restraint and how well you keep a lid on your temper, Katsuki.” I kissed him on the cheek, gave him a winning smile, and picked up the other trash bag. “So, where do these go?”

“… this way.” Katsuki led me out of his room and out of his house’s back door, to where they kept the garbage and recycling.

If it took us a little longer to actually get back inside than properly sorting and tossing everything would have required, then Masaru didn’t say anything, and my glare just dared Mitsuki to.

I kinda wish she had.

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Dinner with the Bakugou family was an experience. You’re constantly on tenterhooks, waiting for somebody to say something disagreeable and for a fight to break out between Katsuki and his mom, and whenever it doesn’t, that just ratchets the tension even higher. That said, their propensity towards spicy food is something I share, and the four of us actually got into a bit of a competition on who could make their curry too spicy for anyone else to handle. Needless to say I won.

None of them could just turn off their ability to sense capsaicin.

Oh sure, I may end up seriously paying for that tomorrow, and Pony will be absolutely furious if I stink up our bathroom so I’ll be stuck going at school if the spice decides to disagree with me. But that’s never happened to me before, not even with ghost pepper (holy fuck talk about spicy, I gargled heavy cream for half an hour to try ease the pain, and that only barely helped!), so why would it now?

I would’ve left after dinner, but halfway through it Katsuki’s phone just completely blew up. No, not literally, with notifications… though given that his ‘incoming message’ alert sound is an explosion, I’m going to stick with it! His phone blew up with message after message from Midoriya, which had Katsuki and me sharing a look, since… well, doesn’t he usually only have a couple of pages for any one person in those notebooks of his?

Once Katsuki and I had cleared the table (“Sit down, make him do it!” Mitsuki said. I helped anyway.) and gotten the dishes into the dishwasher, we retreated to his room to check on everything Midoriya sent over. He plugged his phone into his computer and pulled up a messaging app the two
shared, and went about pulling up everything he’d received.

“I thought he was just scanning and sending those pages of his notebook?” I asked, leaning over Katsuki’s shoulder as he worked.

“Plus Ultra, Kanna,” Katsuki said, as though that explained everything. Which, when I thought about it… yeah, it sort of did. This is Midoriya Izuku we were talking about. In that kid’s mind, if it’s worth doing, it’s worth going so far that you break your own damn bones to get it done.

So when Katsuki… ahem, ‘requested’ what information Midoriya had on Therian, he didn’t just go through his notebook and pick out that page. He’d scoured through archived areas on the internet and pulled up articles, interviews, exposes, everything he could find on Therian.

“Alright, let’s see what this fucker’s about.” Katsuki opened the first page, and the two of us started reading together.

The Feral Hero, Therian. His name is short for ‘therianthrope’, a sort of catch-all term for mystical powers that let a human turn into an animal. Fitting, then, that he was an animal shapeshifter: he could pick one animal every twenty-four hours, but he could change as much or as little as he wished, which made fighting him an absurdly difficult endeavor due to how his rapid shifting played with his size, proportions, and reach. Therian was part of the pre-All Might era of heroes, and had already been well-established when the Symbol of Peace shook up the political landscape, first in Japan, and then elsewhere.

It was once we got into the extra material that Midoriya’d sent us that we found the real meat of the matter. Therian was, at the time, a bit of a big shot among Pro Heroes. The reaction to his presence was about the same as how people do to Endeavor now: put your arms up, surrender, and hope he doesn’t brutalize you to put another win under his belt. He was cited multiple times for excessive use of force, but there was always some or other mitigating factor involved, to the point it would have been suspicious if there wasn’t. As a hero, this was the only way people could really find fault in his actions, and I myself have learned that ‘acceptable levels of force’ are not easy to maintain when your power is the animal kingdom. That much I could forgive, and even understand. No, his professional life was fine.

It was Therian’s private life that was the problem.

Therian was the son of a Quirk marriage, from the son of a Quirk marriage, and himself had a Quirk marriage. It was twenty years ago, about ten years after All Might first took his spot as the Top Hero, that the hilariously-named Todoroki Act (yes, sponsored by none other than Endeavor himself!) outlawed the use of Quirks as collateral for a contract or exchange. On the surface, this was to stop people from drawing up a contract saying they’d use their Quirk to produce X sum of Y rare material, and to give law enforcement more teeth against human trafficking. In actuality, this bill banned Quirk marriages.

“But why would that fucker want to ban Quirk marriages?” Katsuki asked. “I overheard Half-n-Half talking to Deku before their fight. Endeavor has a Quirk marriage.”

“Yes, and now try to count how many people actually believe that,” I said. “You’d probably only barely get to your second hand. I mean, what better camouflage for your own Quirk marriage is there than being the one responsible for outlawing them in the first place?”

Needless to say, being the product of two Quirk marriages and in one himself, Therian
was not happy. He was a major opponent of the Todoroki Act, even going so far as to rush an omiai contract for his daughter’s hand in marriage just before the Todoroki Act was signed into law. The contract’s date of enforcement was the day before the act took effect, and by the terms of the contract, he would have more or less sold his own child into slavery. And rather than go through with it, Therian’s daughter rushed down to the courthouse with her fiancé and the two of them were married right then. In his anger, Therian struck his daughter’s name from the family record and disowned her.

“He’s supposed to be retired though,” Katsuki said, leaning back from the computer. “Probably sixty-five, seventy by now. What’s he want with you?”

“He doesn’t want me.” I sighed, pulling up the video I’d taken just last night and showing it to Katsuki. “He wants my Quirk.”

Katsuki took my phone and watched the video intently. He rewound it to the point where I found the bug adhered to the back of the letter, and watched it again.

“His daughter is your mom,” Katsuki said, voice heavy with the realization. “He’s your grandfather.”

“I want nothing to do with him,” I said. “His offer isn’t even worth the paper it’s written on.” I sat on Katsuki’s bed and hugged my knees to my chest, tail wrapped around me protectively. He pushed his chair back from the desk and sat down next to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and pulling me in close. “Fuck him.”

“Fuck him,” Katsuki echoed. I leaned into him, laying my head against his shoulder. “I think… I’m gonna go with Best Jeanist. He’s the highest ranked Hero to offer me something. I figure if I can’t get All Might, Endeavor’s a piece of shit, and number three is never fucking around…” He shrugged, then nudged me with his shoulder. “You?”

“Mm.” I grabbed his hand with mine, and laced my fingers between his. “I’m going with Gang Orca. He sent a personal letter.” I shrugged. “If he’s offering guidance or whatever, I’m gonna take it.” We sat there for a moment. “Hey, do me a favor?”

“Yeah?” Katsuki murmured into my hair.

“When you get a chance, try and badger Jeanist into doing a line of girls’ and women’s clothing?” I sniffed. “It’s not fair that you guys get all the nice jeans.”

“Oh fuck off…”

“Well if you insist,” I said, moving to get up, and suddenly finding it difficult when Katsuki’s arm tightened around me. “Katsuki, I do have to get home.”

“… fine.” I got up, and he joined me. “But I’m walking you home.”

“Not gonna complain about that one.” I gathered up all my stuff and put it in my bag, then we headed for the door.

It took us about five minutes to actually get out the door, though, since Katsuki fell to the ground laughing when his mom, a rag soaked with milk in her mouth and tears streaming from the corners of her eyes, shoved a container with the leftover curry into my arms.
I am still the queen of spice.
Chapter Fifty

The rest of the week leading up to midterms was mostly uneventful. Pony and I tutored most of our friends (and several other classmates) in English, while Momo begrudgingly admitted that Mineta was better at teaching basic concepts than she was. Tsuyu and Mina had been on tenterhooks for the whole damn week, wondering when—not if, when—Katsuki and I would have our revenge for their little date stalking. It was a pretty normal week, even with the shadow of exams looming overhead.

And then those exams fell upon us fast and hard, and we were in test-taking hell.

A bit of context: Japan takes its exams super seriously. There is a whole damn week set aside for doing nothing but take absolutely enormous exams, the type that would leave your average American college professor scratching his head at how the darn thing dragged on so long, and leave law students seething with envy over just how much time was allotted for their exams. Each day was an absolute slog, starting bright and early with a descent into the underworld, only emerging back into the light once it was over, and the deed was done. Well, except for me and Pony on Friday afternoon. That was the time slot set aside for the English midterm, and while I did have a grade coming in from Present Mic, the oral sections had been last Friday.

So now Pony and I were done with exams a full three hours sooner than everybody else, and got home from UA campus at half-past-noon on Friday afternoon. Were we relaxing?

“Pony, where is my bikini!?”

“Why do you need a bikini!? It’s an internship, not a trip to the beach!”

“I don’t know it’s on the list just help me find the damn thing!”

Ha! No. No, we were not, because once I’d accepted Gang Orca’s offer, I found a goddamn packing list in my e-mail inbox. How he’d gotten my personal e-mail address, I don’t actually want to know, but it was a fairly enlightening thing to have. Plus… it left me with some serious speculation on just what I’d be needing for this whole thing. I mean, yes, my costume I can understand. Exercise clothes I can understand, and given who I’m going to be working with and where, a couple of those super-absorbent swimmer’s towels and other aquatic sportswear.

But the bikini was just the first thing that had me stumped. Alright, to be fair, it didn’t actually say ‘bikini’. The entry on the packing list was ‘casual swimwear’, and the parentheses next to it said I’d best not dare bring a school swimsuit. And since I hadn’t found a good one-piece that I actually liked in the past two years, I was stuck with… you guessed it.

“Found it!” Pony yelled as she skipped into my room, tossing both pieces of teal fabric at my head. “Why was it with my stuff though? And you still haven’t said why you’ll need it!”

“Don’t know, don’t care!” I grabbed the bikini and stowed it away in my bag, then turned to the next item on my list. “Next up… seriously!?” I threw the list down and hopped onto my bed, screaming incoherently into a pillow. Why!? What torture could this man have in mind that I could possibly need that!? 

“What?” Pony picked up the list I’d thrown onto the floor and read it, just below the swimsuit line. She started snickering at what she read, and I just groaned into the pillow. “Ooh, I know which one
you should grab!” She flounced over to my closet, humming to herself as she looked. “This one!”

I looked up to see Pony holding up my only full-length evening dress, which was also teal (“I still say it’s turquoise.” “Mom, nobody asked you! Just help me get this thing into a garment bag!”), and that I wasn’t actually sure would still fit properly. I hadn’t grown more than an inch or two taller in the past couple of years, but much a strange combination of pleasure and chagrin, my chest and hips had. Pleasure because I was starting to really look good… and chagrin because bras are expensive as shit, I’d just outgrown all of mine, and Pony’s still got a larger cup and smaller band, which means I can’t just steal hers.

I tried once. It was a painful experience.

“What could he possibly need me to have formal evening wear for?” I asked aloud, more to myself than Pony. Is it obvious that I’m really confused? Because I am! I’m confused as shit!

“Who knows?” Pony shrugged. “Alright, next item…” She laughed again. “He says to bring, and I quote, ‘more sunscreen than you think you need, minimum 45 SPF, and aloe vera for when you inevitably forget to put it on’. Wow, Kanna. Just wow.” Pony put the list down, shoulders shaking quietly as she tried to talk around her giggles. “You’ll have to tell me everything, got it?”

“When have I ever not?” I asked Pony, and instantly regretted it when I saw the gleam in her eyes.

“Well, there was my birthday just a few weeks ago,” she said, starting up a count with her fingers. “Pony…”

“Then there was that time you tried to reshoe yourself without mine or Dad’s help, the time you smoked your whole family out of the house while making sushi—”

“That was an accident!” I protested. “We still had an electric stove at that point! I didn’t see it was on!”

“Then there was the costumes, what exactly happened to my old Captain Celebrity t-shirt—”

“He’s a horrible person and you know it.” I crossed my arms and glared. “America’s top hero, kicked out of America, then blacklisted from Japan, and then left penniless from repeated lawsuits thanks to being a serial adulterer? Yeah, no.” I sniffed. “I’d burn that shirt again if you still had it.”

“My point stands!” Pony exclaimed, sitting down next to me on the bed and grabbing me by my shoulders. “When I say to tell me everything, I. Mean. Everything!” She punctuated her statements by shaking me, and I let my head loll back and forth in good humor.

“You know the same holds true for you, right?” I said. “If I tell you everything about mine, you have to tell me everything about yours, too.”

“Yeah, mine’s not gonna be as exciting as yours,” Pony admitted, voice a little melancholy. “Honestly, it’s a little scary, but I don’t wanna be away from Hosu right now, you know?” Her perpetual smile faltered a bit, turning downcast. “And yeah, maybe Manual won’t be as interesting of a boss as Gang Orca, but he’s a great teacher!”

“That’s literally what he named himself,” I said in agreement. “He’s the instruction manual. Though…” I looked at Pony, grinning slyly. “Maybe you should try to call him Manny, see what
happens? Ooh, ooh, wait!” I cleared my throat, and affected a really heavy, really fake Texas accent. “Man-well!”

“Kanna.” Pony suddenly grew very serious. “That accent was bad, and you should feel bad.”

“Sorry…”

The rest of the afternoon was mostly uneventful, but I was keeping a very close eye on the time. Trying to talk with Mom this past week and a half had been more or less a crapshoot, since I either managed to ‘catch her at a bad time’ (yeah, it’s been a ‘bad time’ since I got that letter, Mom), or she’s on call at the hospital that night, or doing her rounds, or something. It had always been something this past week, and it was hilariously plain to see that Mom was avoiding it. She had a lot of good habits, but ignoring the source of her problems and hoping it would go away? Yeah, that was one of the bad ones.

So I’d gone over Mom’s head, and called Keiko, who then got me in touch with the hospital admin, who forced the issue and has made Mom go on leave for a week, barring emergencies. Throwing herself at her work in a vain attempt to avoid dealing with problems wasn’t working, and if she wasn’t going to take care of herself, I’d do it for her.

According to the time, Mom should have been home for about an hour and a half by now. That was more than enough time for her to start getting frustrated at the lack of anything to do but catch up on television, and so she’d probably be sitting down at her computer to get some of her charting backlog done.

So I called her, and waited until she showed up on-screen.

“Hey Mom,” I greeted. She looked at her computer with an expression of moderate annoyance, crossed with bemusement. All of that was undermined by the deep bags beneath her bloodshot eyes, by how limp her hair was as it hung around her shoulders, and by the fact that her face had an almost visible sheen of grease. She hadn’t been taking care of herself. At all.

“Hey Kanna-chan,” she said back. “I suppose I’ve got you and Keiko-chan to thank for this little break, don’t I.”

“Mom—”

“I’m not accusing you of anything,” she interrupted quickly. “You’re both right. I…” She sighed. “I’ve been letting it get to me. I’ve been letting him get to me.”

“You have.” I fell quiet for a moment, and from the looks of things, Mom didn’t know what to say either. “Mom…” I looked for the words. “I need to know what’s going on. With you. With this.”

“… okay.” Mom took a moment to collect her thoughts, brushing her hair back from her shoulders and adjusting her stance. “I’m not really sure where to start. There isn’t a clear-cut beginning to all of this.”

“How about just where you think things start to matter?” I offered.
“I… yeah, that works. I know where I felt things start to matter.” She looked into the camera, eyes hard. “Let me tell you a little bit about my side of the family.”

Mom’s tale was… I don’t know. It started off horrifying, then slowly verged into the terrible, a brief spot of hope, and then veered sharply left into the kind of cruelty that only family can inflict.

The most important detail that Mom impressed upon me was that over time, Quirks tended to grow in power. Additionally, compatible Quirks often mingled and merged to become something greater than simply the sum of its parts, which would effectively allow the next generation to greatly surpass the one that came before it. In the first generation or so of Quirks this was mostly left to luck of the draw. But eventually, certain groups began to notice a number of patterns emerging, primarily the increasing prevalence of Mutation-type Quirks over time. In the early days, Emitter and Transformation-type Quirks massively populated the field, and left to their own devices, they didn’t tend to deviate that far from their original forms. However, the union of these two Quirk sub-groups often resulted in a Mutation-type, as a sort of compromise between the other two.

“As time went on,” Mom explained, “more and more children, even if their Quirks did not directly cause a mutation, did have some form of physical deviation from the norm. Your classmates Kouda and Tokoyami, for example, and that Honenuki boy from Pony-chan’s class.”

It was only a matter of time until somebody decided that there was a clear delineation between people with physical mutations resultant from Quirks, and people that still appeared outwardly normal. Thanks to Quirks, a new form of bigotry emerged, and it led to all the same things that bigoted beliefs and hatred have before: crime, alienation, segregation, the works. But because Quirks were so heavily based on inheritance, something else from the past came roaring back.

Eugenics.

“The one group that took the most part in controlled Quirk breeding was the shapeshifter community,” Mom explained. “In the early days, shapeshifters were generally limited in what form they could assume, or how much, or for how long. My father was one of the biggest… I suppose ‘breakthroughs’ would be the word, given just how much control and variance he had over his physical form. He was still limited to one animal every twenty-four hours, though, and that rankled.” She sighed. “So he pretty much bought my mother and had me.”

Needless to say, Mom’s Quirk was a massive success in Therian’s eyes. The only upper limit on how many different forms she could assume at a time was her concentration, and that could be trained. Losing full animal transformations was a bit of a blow, but the fact that Mom could do a mix-and-match and create new, hybrid body parts on the fly more than made up for it. After all, who needs to be able to fully transform into a single animal when you could get much better results from animal amalgams?

And then Endeavor of all people, who everybody basically knew had entered into a Quirk marriage of his own, put forth a bill to abolish them. Therian threw as much of his money and clout into stalling the bill as he could. Stalling, not stopping, because he knew it was going to be a losing battle.

“When even the person who’s in a Quirk marriage wants to abolish them, even if his reasons are definitely not what he’s saying they are…” Mom trailed off. “Well, there was a lot of momentum behind the Todoroki Act.”

While the bill was stalled, Therian had been negotiation with another family of shapeshifters, she
couldn’t remember exactly which, one of whom was an eligible bachelor around Mom’s age, and with a very strong Quirk. Whatever kind of terms he normally went for wound up mostly out the window in favor of expediency, and right before the new laws would have taken effect, Mom was set to be married against her will.

“So I dragged your father down to the courthouse and married him on the spot.” She sniffed. “I still don’t regret it.”

After that, Therian disowned Mom, cut her off, and basically did his best to blacklist her entirely. Thankfully she was already just about finished with her transition to the medical field, and with the utility her Quirk brought to that arena, she didn’t have to worry about her father’s attempt at a blacklisting. He still had massive amounts of funds, but Mom offered a service so rare and effective as to be invaluable. Nobody wanted to be the one Pro Hero who didn’t have something on hand to deal with a regenerator, or to be the one person who couldn’t get access to Mom’s services when they encountered a rare or exotic toxin.

“I thought you’d be safe from his attentions,” Mom said. “The… well, possible downside to your Quirk,” she euphemized, gesturing down towards her feet, “would have been enough to deter him, given his distaste for Mutation-type Quirks. That he still made the attempt…” I saw Mom take a moment to gather her thoughts. “Just keep an eye out, okay?”

“I will,” I promised. “Now go take a shower, young lady!” I pointed off-screen, parroting the exact line she’d thrown at me countless times.

“Yes, yes,” she waved me off. “Have a good weekend, Kanna-chan. And make sure to tell me all about your internship!”

“I will!” And with that, we hung up.

I pushed my chair back from my desk, thinking about everything I’d learned. Bigotry towards people with mutations, which led to Quirk-type exclusive eugenic programs, which somehow led to Endeavor pushing for the abolition of Quirk marriages, which led to my asshole grandfather. Great.

Like I didn’t have enough baggage from Dad’s side of things. Nope, Mom’s family had to get in on the act.

Clown fiesta, anyone?

* * * * *

Today was the day.

“You’ve all got your costumes, right?” Aizawa-sensei asked, for the seventh time since we left UA’s campus.

“Yes, sensei!” We all chimed back at him, for what was, again, the seventh time since we left UA’s campus.

“Obviously, don’t wear them in public without your internship coordinator present,” he continued
on, seemingly oblivious to our response, “and don’t lose them either. Normal wear and tear we will cover, but if you lose your costume, you’re on the hook for a new one.”

“Goooooooot iiiiiiiit!” Mina droned, drawing out her words to try and infuse some sarcasm into it. Rookie attempt, Mina, poor form. I give it a… three out of ten. Mostly for effort.

“Don’t stretch out that ‘got it’, Ashido,” Aizawa-sensei griped. “And be sure to mind your manners, Bakugou, Yaseiki.” The two of us shared a look, then rolled our eyes, which prompted a bit of laughter from the rest of the class. We did make sure to at least grunt our assent, though. “This is where I leave you, then. I’ll see you all next week.”

“Bye, sensei!” With that, Aizawa-sensei turned and left.

“I’m looking forward to this!” “Where you headed?” “I’m going to Hokkaido!” “Nara’s going to be so pretty this time of year!” “Kyushu, eh? I’m goin’ the other way.” “Ginza, seriously? That’s some classy stuff!”

And right as he did, pandemonium erupted. I gravitated over towards Tsuyu, since the two of us were heading in largely the same direction, though I was getting off the bullet train earlier than she was.

“You’re going to Shinagawa, right?” Tsuyu asked.

“Yup!” I pulled out my directions. “Gang Orca’s office is apparently adjoining the aquarium, so that’ll definitely be a sight to see.”

“Better take some fucking pictures!” Katsuki demanded, walking over towards us. “Your train’s passing through Tokyo, yeah? Gotta transfer to get to Ginza anyway.”

“We’re not making out on the train,” I said immediately. Katsuki didn’t so much as blink. “Or in the divider between cars. Or—hang on, wait right here.” I brushed past Katsuki and towards where Midoriya and Uraraka were speaking with Tenya.

“… can always talk to us,” I overheard Midoriya saying, which had Uraraka nodding emphatically. “We’re friends, after all.” Tenya froze. He turned with deliberate surety… and though I couldn’t hear his response, his fake smile told me all I needed to know. I turned back towards where Tsuyu and Katsuki stood, and where Momo had also joined (“I’m to go to the southwest edge of the Shibuya crossing and wait there,” she said, utterly baffled), and pulled out my phone, typing off a quick message to Pony.

> I’m worried about Tenya. Promise you’ll keep an eye on him?

The response was immediate.

> I promise.

“Well then.” I wrapped my tail around Katsuki’s wrist again, which had Momo and Tsuyu smiling and giggling respectively. “Let’s go find that train—”

“And kill it!” Katsuki finished.

“… no. Bad Katsuki.” I swatted him on the arm. “We don’t kill trains.”
“More fun than just riding them,” he grumbled.

“Well then!” I smiled sweetly. “It’s a good thing you’re supposed to suplex them, then isn’t it!”

Katsuki stared at me. Momo stared at me. Tsuyu stared at me.

“… kero.”

“Damn it Momo, you too!?”

* * * * *

I’ve been to a lot of aquariums. For a long time, the Sydney Aquarium was the one to beat for me. Well shove off Sydney, because the Shinagawa Aquarium just stole your crown. The aquarium is separated into two floors, the ‘sea surface’ and the ‘sea bottom’, and the first major exhibit you see is penguins. Tons of penguins. Now let me get this out there right now, I love penguins. They are the cutest damn things, especially the babies.

So when I was led past the penguin exhibit en route to Gang Orca’s building (which was behind the stadium they hosted the dolphin and sea lion performance shows) and saw one of the aquarium workers playing with what could only be a young penguin? And then to be invited into the exhibit to play with the penguin?

Oh yeah, I was definitely receiving special treatment. I was about to be interning for the aquarium’s patron hero. But for a blissful five minutes that didn’t matter, because a super cute penguin was all over me and nudging me with his flipper to try and bilk more fish out of me, and he was the sweetest thing, and I am riding on cloud nine because that was so cute oh my goodness.

Much as I loved that penguin though, he wasn’t my primary purpose here. That was reserved for the building that lay behind the stadium: the headquarters of Gang Orca’s agency. My escort led me past the audience waiting in the stadium, drawing a fair bit of interest due to my being a student in an obvious UA uniform being led to what everybody knew was a hero’s HQ, past the dolphin and sea lion trainers, past a particularly curious dolphin that plopped itself (“Herself,” my guide corrected) on our path to try and see who the newcomer was, and into the building.

“Taiki-san!” My escort, a wonderful young woman with shimmering iridescent scales running up her arms by the name of Umiko, waved to the man sitting at the front desk. “Your boss’s intern arrived!”

“Wh—already!?” The man behind the desk, who I assumed to be Taiki, stood up and bustled out.
“I’ll take it from here, thank you for your help Umiko-san.” She bowed, waved goodbye to me, and turned to leave. I stepped forward to meet the harried man before me and gave him a bow of greeting, which he returned. “It’s a pleasure to meet you Kanna-san.” I smiled, pleased that he hadn’t felt the need to use my last name. “My name is Suiren Taiki, and I’m… well, your boss’s head secretary. I’m afraid I’m not as prepared for you as I’d have liked to be,” he said, holding up a thick folder clasped under one arm, “but I’m supposed to send you up to meet the boss immediately anyways, so it’s not that big of an issue at least.”

“Good to meet you too, uh…”
“Taiki is fine,” he volunteered.

“Taiki-san then,” I said, remembering to use the honorific. I was going to have to use them until I could reasonably assume he was comfortable enough with me to not think it overly familiar when I remove it, though since this was only for a week, I wasn’t sure when that’d happen. “So… where do I go?”

“Well, if you’d leave your bags with me?” I put the briefcase with my costume down and put it next to my overnight suitcase, then took my purse off and slung it over my suitcase’s handle. “We have quarters set aside for you during your stay; I’ll show you to them after you’ve met the boss.” He gestured at the elevator to my right. “Top floor, then just go up the staircase and head straight.”

“Um…” I shuffled on my hooves a little. “Elevator, then staircase?”

“You’ll see.” That was all I was going to get from the man, since he went back around behind his desk and more or less zoned me out, murmuring to himself as he got working on whatever paperwork he needed to process.

I would’ve liked to ask a few more questions, but it didn’t look like there were any more answers forthcoming. Given what little I had to go on, Gang Orca seemed to be the type that leaned heavily on actions speaking louder than words. Additionally, ever since I walked into the aquarium, I had this odd feeling that I was being tested. The worker with the penguin right there? The one curious dolphin? People in the stadium as I’m going by? All of those could just be coincidences… but I’m not a fan of coincidence.

The elevator dinged as I reached the top floor, five stories up, and I gaped a little at what I saw. There were stairs in front of me, yes. But the stairs were transparent, and for that matter, so was the floor. I looked down, and beneath my hooves I could see the what could only be the glass of an aquarium tank, being used as the floor for a Pro Hero’s office. I walked up the stairs with some measure of trepidation, starting to get some idea of what I’d find once I got up there. The sound of my hooves on the… I think it’s acrylic, actually? The sound of my hooves on the acrylic punctuated my every step, and once I reached the top of the stairs… well, remember how they were transparent?

So was the floor of Gang Orca’s office.

The walls themselves were opaque, painted a nice, pleasing oceanic blue, and I could see numerous pictures, awards, pieces of artwork, and framed articles adorning the wall directly behind Orca’s desk. He had a couch in one corner with a pair of armchairs next to it, and off to the right side (left if facing the door), there was a wide glass entryway that seemed to exit directly out to the aquarium tank his office was situated above, the translucent flooring ending only a couple feet from the door and opening out onto water. But no office is complete without a desk, and so I looked directly to the center of the room. The desk was a relatively simple affair compared to the rest of the office, black lacquered wood in a somewhat loose crescent, curving inwards towards where Orca would sit. Why do I say would sit?

Because there was nobody at the desk. I looked back at the glass door that led out to the aquarium tank, but no, that was closed. Another glance at the rest of the office was enough to tell me that no, nobody was here. I was supposed to be meeting my temporary boss… and he was nowhere to be found.

I reached into my pocket to try and grab my phone before remembering that I’d left it in my purse, which was downstairs. There was a phone on Gang Orca’s desk… but I was leery of using that. I
hadn’t even met the man, and to just use his phone? That was… I gave it some thought for a moment.

Then my impatience outweighed my caution, and I walked around to Gang Orca’s side of the desk so I could read what labels he put on the phone’s extensions. I had to lean relatively far over the desk; the phone’s placement was obviously intended for somebody with a larger stature than I had, but I got the handset and put it to my ear, then went to press the button with Taiki’s name next to it so he could tell me where—

A massive hand closed around my tail.

“Your first mistake,” a low voice rumbled from behind and below me, “was letting your guard down so quickly.” The grip on my tail turned into a tug, and I hurriedly shifted, quills erupting along the length of my tail and stabbing deeply into the hand clutching me. That wasn’t enough to stop whoever it was from flinging me across the room, straight out of the now-open double-wide glass door, and into the waters of the aquarium tank.

I crashed through the water’s surface and grew gills on my neck as quickly as I could, then shifted my tail back through normal and to an orca’s. I broke the surface of the water, and stared back into the office.

And at the lip of the water, calmly plucking porcupine quills from his now-bloodied hand, was Gang Orca himself.

“Oh, yes.” His maw shifted into what I could only guess was his version of a smile. “You will do just fine with a little bit of extra guidance.”
Chapter Fifty-One

Gang Orca is a behemoth.

I’d be hard-pressed to give any accurate measurements, what with the salt water stinging my eyes and our relative positions, but let me at least try and give a good comparison. Find somebody you could reasonably cast as Hercules and not seem ridiculous. You know the type: muscle-bound behemoth, strains at whatever he wears, one flex away from being a walking shirtless scene. Now put him in a white-cream suit, bulky as hell because there is definitely body armor underneath it.

Oh, and don’t forget that he is literally a humanoid orca. That isn’t a normal human face. Those aren’t normal human hands. The collar of his suit goes all the way up to his fanged maw, and I’m pretty sure there’s an opening in the back for his dorsal fin. And while unlike me, he doesn’t have a tail, he definitely doesn’t need it. There’s enough muscle in that frame to pick me up and toss me a good thirty feet without any noticeable effort, even through the pain of getting stabbed in the palm with porcupine quills. Though now that I took a closer look, none of my quills seemed to have actually penetrated very far. He had rubbery skin, just like an orca.

And also like an actual orca, now that I was in the water, he scared me shitless.

“I get one week to beat you into shape,” he rumbled, rubbing at his wounded hand and flexing it, then confidently making a fist as small bits of blood ran down into the cuff of his suit. “You had best be prepared to not waste a single second of that time.” Gang Orca clapped his hands.

And the aquarium went dark.

Every single light in the building shut off, plunging the area into complete blackness. I couldn’t even see the surface of the water in front of me, nor any traces of light from cracks at the bottom of window shutters. It was perfectly dark in the aquarium.

“Your lesson begins… now.”

Somewhere in front of me, the surface of the water broke as something slipped beneath its surface. And suddenly, I was in the den of an apex predator.

I plunged beneath the water’s surface, shifting my eyes so they wouldn’t sting from the salinity or be blurred by the liquid, and began to dive. The rest of my body began to follow suit, my skin turning what I knew to be gray and rough, mottled by the small dimples from ampullae of Lorenzini to help me find anything else moving in the water. Immediately I felt something passing close to me, and with a quick flick of my tail I propelled myself further from it. I was still in the dark and defenseless. Inside my body, I felt the now-familiar shift of my redundant organs into electrical ones taking place, and prepared myself to release a burst if contact was made again.

But before I could do anything else, something appeared in the darkness, practically materializing out of nowhere before what could only be a fist slammed directly into my side. The suddenness of it, the ferocity, all of it took me completely by surprise, and all the air I had remaining in my lungs left me in a gasp. I didn’t even have a chance to respond when another hit struck me at the small of my back, sending me down into the depths, where I impacted what felt like an artificial reef. The change I’d already made to my skin kept me from being too scraped up, but even with the water resistance
slowing me down faster than air ever could, it really hurt.

I felt a pulse of something through the water, some sort of sound that I could feel more than hear. I recognized it instantly; I've used it too much myself not to. And now that I thought about it, I’d probably felt some of it earlier, though it must have been muted by the feel of transformation, when my skin changed. Whether that was actually true or not, the situation was the same.

Gang Orca was tracking me with ultrasound. And unless I wanted to miserably fail whatever this was, I had to do the same.

Before my fight with Tokoyami, I’d done some research into bioluminescence. Many examples of it are from symbiosis, though several are from chemical reactions within the body of the animal in question. The problem is that getting it to work properly was not something I’d been able to hack. Mom had been able to do it almost effortlessly, but her ability to alter her transformations on the fly was a serious boon in that case. I couldn’t do the kind of top-down, sudden changes in biology or chemical secretions to get the same results she could. I worked bottom-up, while she could just start at any point in between. Bioluminescence hadn’t been an option then, and it wasn’t an option now.

I’d just have to go to an old standby instead.

I’d already shifted an orca’s tail to propel me through the water. It was child’s play to sink deeper into that form, to let it reshape my throat, my ears, and the lung I was still using, to adapt them to a purpose more suited towards underwater life. And when that was done, I heard it.

“—much longer you intend to make me wait, girl. From your left, in five seconds. Perhaps now you’ve pulled yourself together.”

It was ultrasound. It should have been incredibly high-pitched and unintelligible, but it wasn’t. I could clearly hear everything he said, and in a pitch only slightly higher than his own. Somehow, despite it being something that should only have been capable of solid, aimless blasts of raw sound, Gang Orca was using sonar to converse.

And he’d just told me that he was about to hit from my left side—!

I lashed out with one hand, the water lighting up actinic blue as I discharged all of my changed body’s electric potential. It arced from my outstretched fingertips into the water around me, and I just barely caught a glimpse of a deep, white-on-black shape reaching towards me, somehow before the electrosensitive ampullae in my body could sense it. What could only be Gang Orca’s hand pulled back, and I shrieked with all the volume I could muster into the returning darkness, the bouncing ultrasound giving me a picture of the area as they returned to me.

The great big thing moved in front of me, and I struck out with both hands this time. Despite the current arcing from my fingertips, Gang Orca grabbed hold of my arms from right below the elbow and wrenched them away, the current dispersing harmlessly into the water beside us. For just the barest fraction of a second I could see him, one great, dark eye narrowed as he regarded me carefully. The clicks of his sonar faded for a moment, and we hung there underwater for a brief instant of calm.

“So you finally begin to properly listen. Hmph.” He did something with his arms, and I suddenly found mine twisted around behind me as I faced away from him, with one of his feet pressed between my shoulder blades. “Your foe is within your reach and you do nothing? Foolish. Villains compromise heroes every day. Just because you are their ally today does not mean they won’t be
your foe tomorrow.”

I tried to do something, anything. The electricity arced off of me, but either the water was somehow dispersing the charge enough that it was useless, or there was something else redirecting and absorbing anything I could put off. I let loose with a blaring screech of sonar, but this was apparently exactly the opposite of what he wanted, because in a flash of blinding pain, Gang Orca pushed with his foot and pulled his hand, until it felt like my arms were going to be pulled from their sockets.

“That will not work!” His admonishment came with the relief of the pressure from his foot, only for him to swing me around, down onto the craggy, rocky terrain of the aquarium tank’s floor. “Your sonar is strong enough to hurt me, but it is unfocused. You will do no good shrieking into the abyss like some tortured porpoise.” I could sense him touching down onto the ‘sea’ floor beside me, crouching by my side as I pushed myself back upright, hooves skittering on the artificial reef. “Nothing to say for yourself? Hm. Sonar, and yet you can’t properly communicate. Not even in Morse. You have such wondrous potential, and there you sit, wasting it.”

I wanted to say something, anything in my own defense… but damn it, he was right. I don’t know how to communicate like this. It was the big sacrifice I made when using nonhuman vocal cords. There was obviously some way to use it to speak to others in that pitch, Gang Orca right next to me was very clear proof of that. But just like with bioluminescence, I didn’t know how. I’d completely neglected to even think about that, mainly because I hadn’t been in a position where I needed to.

If preparation was nine-tenths of the battle, I’d already lost this one.

“This is why you’ve come to me,” Gang Orca said, pushing lightly off from the reef with one tap of his foot. “You are here seeking guidance, and I aim to give it. Ten seconds.”

Gang Orca faded into the water, disappearing so completely that the ampullae of Lorenzini I’d shifted couldn’t even sense his presence. I don’t have a clue as to how he managed that feat, only that he did, and that I had nine seconds left. The skin on my right arm shifted back to normal, and then the next instant, everything from my shoulder on down hardened, growing rough and chitinous. The sleeve of my UA uniform blazer burst apart as the growing claw expanded beyond what it could handle, ballooning to nearly three times the size of my head. The short sleeve of my blouse survived, but the sleeve strained as I rolled it up to my shoulder, barely able to handle the pistol shrimp’s massive pincer.

Two seconds left. I crouched down on the reef and shrank myself, reaching out with sonar to try and locate Gang Orca in the darkness. One second. I couldn’t afford to actually aim the pistol shrimp’s sonic blast at him, it was far too dangerous, but even the aftershock alone should be enough to buy me some space. My ears shifted back through human and into a turtle’s, and all the sound I’d been hearing was suddenly muted, far away.

I found Gang Orca off to my right, sensing his approach through my changed skin. I leapt up, and aimed my claw down. And then, right as he began to move?

I fired.

The blast wave blinded me for a second, but the force behind it carried me up and away from Gang Orca, even as I sensed him reeling back. I cocked the claw back and fired again, throwing me further and further up until I finally breached the surface of the water. I breathed deep with my one current lung, then shifted my ears back through human and through to bat so I could pinpoint the door to Orca’s office.
Then once I found it, one last explosive sonic burst sent me hurtling through the water towards it, and I clambered up the sharp slope through the glass entryway. I gasped and began to revert some of my shifts, giving me my other lung and arm back, but I kept my tail as it was and gills right where they were, just in case. Reaching up, I squeezed some of the water out of my hair, and carefully, very carefully got to my hooves on the slick acrylic floor.

I was sopping wet, the right sleeve of my blazer was destroyed, I hope the saltwater doesn’t ruin this bra since it’s one of my favorites… and oh dear lord, I’ve been wearing a skirt this whole time haven’t I.

I heard something else break the water’s surface, followed by a deep, low rumbling. It took a moment before I realized that it was laughter.

“T-to my c-c-costume?” I stammered, teeth chattering as the adrenaline drained from my system, and the chill of the water began to seep in. “W-what was t-t-that?”

Gang Orca didn’t immediately answer. He pressed a button on his phone, and a moment later it beeped.

“Taiki. Towels.”

“Roger.” The voice of Orca’s secretary came through the phone before he apparently hung up, the phone line going dead with a click.

“Go wash off, dry off, and get changed,” Gang Orca said as he looked back at me.

“I was wondering where your fight was.” A wet clap, and I had to slam my eyes shut when the lights came on, blinking through narrowed lids as Gang Orca pulled himself out of the aquarium tank and into his office. Water ran off him in absolute torrents, his every step a wet, squeaking mess, the cloth of his suit, costume, whatever it is plastered tightly to his body. And when he sat down at his desk, the cushion gave a loud, wet squish, which made me guess it’d been wet the whole time. “Against a clearly superior foe who has the terrain advantage, you choose to make a fighting retreat. Good.” He clasped his hands in front of him on the desk, and water ran in rivulets from his arms into small channels set into the desk, ones I hadn’t noticed before, and down onto Gang Orca’s body once more. “Perhaps there is some hope for you yet.”

“Y-you… what…?” I stammered, teeth chattering as the adrenaline drained from my system, and the chill of the water began to seep in. “W-what was t-t-that?”

“Go dry yourself off. I’d rather you not fall ill before we even begin.”

“And whose fault would that be, I wonder,” I murmured under my breath. He looked up for a moment and gave a disdainful scoff, then waved me off again. I turned around and headed for the stairs, careful to not lose traction, what with water and hooves on acrylic not mixing particularly well. I made it to the elevator and pressed the button, shivering from the chill, and practically fell over in relief when the elevator opened and I saw Taiki standing there, towel outstretched in his arms.

“I figured you’d want this as soon as possible,” he said, helping wrap the towel around me. It was
big, and fluffy, and it was so, so warm. “Threw it in the dryer when you went up.”

“You’re a saint,” I replied, practically melting into the towel as I leaned against the wall of the elevator.

“Taiki!” We both shot ramrod straight as Gang Orca’s voice boomed through the office, reaching us all the way in the elevator. “Who showed the girl to the office!?”

“Umiko-san, boss!” Taiki yelled his response.

“And why have you not asked the woman out yet!?” Orca fired back. Taiki flushed a bit, hammering on the door close button as Gang Orca’s rumbling laughter filled the area. The doors to the elevator closed, and Taiki joined me in leaning against the wall of the elevator, sighing in annoyance.

“So, really,” I said once it started moving. “Why haven’t you asked her out yet?”

“I would,” he said, “if it weren’t workplace fraternization.”

“Uh… it isn’t?” I offered. “You work for Gang Orca, she works for the aquarium. Same building, different boss.” Taiki glared at me. “Just saying!”

“Yes, and now I have no more excuse, now do I?” He slumped a bit as the elevator dinged, and we walked out on to a floor I hadn’t seen before. I followed him down a rather well-lit, if generic hallway, the walls colored sea-foam green, and stopped at the third door on the left. I looked on the door, and saw a nameplate had been affixed to it. ‘KANNA’, it read in roman characters.

“He had that made?…” I asked, trailing off a bit as I reached up to run my fingers across the metal, feeling oddly touched by the gesture. “But, it’s just a one week internship?”

“There’s a lot of different ways to make a first impression,” Taiki said, tapping an RFID card against the door lock. “Besides, think of it as an investment. Boss doesn’t take sidekicks or interns often.” When the light turned green, he pushed the door open, then handed me the card. I took it gladly, and followed him inside.

Then I had to affix my jaw once more before it fell to the floor, because holy shit did Gang Orca go Plus Ultra on this one.

The first thing I noticed was the giant teddy bear, about three-quarters the size of Theo-Bear Roosevelt, sitting propped up on the bed, dressed in a facsimile of Gang Orca’s costume. The bed itself looked to be a queen size, with a wave-patterned duvet on top and four matching pillows propped against the headboard. My suitcase sat by the foot of the bed on one of those collapsible stands, the briefcase with my costume sat at its side, and my purse was hung on the headboard, so I didn’t have to worry about anything being missing. A dresser sat on the left side of the room, with a large vanity behind it and a full-length mirror to its side. The closet lay next to it, and on the other side of the room, there was a door to what could only be the restroom. There was also a large TV affixed to the wall by a roving arm, with the remote in a small holder next to it.

All in all… if this was supposed to be a dormitory? Well, I felt robbed by college, let me tell you that.

“Here you are,” Taiki said. “If you want, I can take your evening-wear to get out any wrinkles from the packing.”
“That’d be great, actually!” I opened up my suitcase and got the garment bag out, then handed it to Taiki. “Oh, what am I supposed to put on afterwards?”

“Something you can work out in,” Taiki immediately replied. “And something you don’t mind getting wet.”

“Damn,” I sighed. “My hair is going to be a wreck after this week, isn’t it.” I ran a hand through my shoulder-length locks, already feeling the change in texture from the salt water. Ugh, I was probably going to have to buy more conditioner just to take care of my hair.

“I’ll page Umiko-san,” he said. “She probably knows a few things that’ll help with the salt water damage.”

“And you’ll ask her out, yes?” I needled.

“… just go get yourself cleaned up.” Taiki took my garment bag and slammed the door, leaving me alone with my sopping wet clothes.

Something to work out in and that can get wet… ugh.

So much for a shower.

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When I returned to Gang Orca’s office, I was clad in a sports bra, a dry-fit tank top over that, and running shorts. I held one of those super-absorbent swimmer’s towels in one hand, and in the other I had my cell phone, the key card Taiki gave me, and my UA student ID. I’d been caught off guard the first time, so when I entered, the first thing I did was look for Gang Orca.

I really needn’t have. He sat at his desk, hands clasped in front of him as he waited for me. He canted his head to the side and narrowed his eyes when he saw me, and I figured that was his equivalent to raising an eyebrow, since… well, he didn’t have eyebrows.

“You said to wear something I don’t mind getting wet,” I said, almost as a challenge. “So… I did.” I waved a hand at what little I was wearing, flicking my tail in mock irritation.

“It matters little.”

Gang Orca gestured at the chair in front of his desk. I took the seat, though had to adjust my tail due to the chair’s solid back, and threaded it between the seat and the armrest. Gang Orca just regarded me as I sat, expression pretty much unreadable. I mean, I’d probably figure it out eventually, but right now he was really just… well, a whale. Or was it a really big dolphin? I’m pretty sure I read somewhere that orcas are actually closer to dolphins than whales, as far as taxonomy is concerned anyway. I’d have to double check that one. Either way, the point is that Gang Orca’s expression is almost impossible to read.

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“So…” I trailed off again.

“Your first mistake,” Gang Orca began, voice low and heavy, “at least in my presence, was showing
such little care when you entered my office and found it empty. You stayed lax, not worrying at all, when a good warning sign that something is amiss is that the person you are there to meet is missing.” I frowned, glowering silently at my… well, my boss I guess. “Your actual first mistake was allowing Taiki to divest you of any way to contact outside help so easily.”

“Yes, because I’m supposed to not trust your employees,” I grumbled.

“And you knew he actually did work for me how?” The question was immediate, and left me fumbling slightly.

“Well,” I began, “the aquarium employee knew him, so I sort of just figured?”

“A valid assumption,” Gang Orca allowed. “But you must also assume that people can be compromised. These are things you shouldn’t be expected to know quite yet, true. You are still a student.” I huffed and crossed my arms, giving Gang Orca the best stink-eye I could. “Your second mistake was being so slow to use your abilities. I have all the information on your Quirk that UA does. I removed sight from the equation. Your very first action should have been sonar. I know you can use it, I heard your cacophonous screeching during the first year Sports Festival.” He nodded at me. “We’re going to be working on that.”

“And my third mistake?” I asked.

“There wasn’t one.” I blinked. “That trick with the claw, using it for propulsion. That was impressive.” He chuckled. “I take it you learned that one from your ‘Romeo’.”

“Remind me to murder Present Mic,” I muttered under my breath. “Brutally.”

“That will have to wait.” Gang Orca stood from his desk. “Now, we get lunch. And then?” He gestured towards the open doors to the aquarium tank. “We train.” He pointed to my stuff. “Leave the towel here. The keycard for your dorm is also a business credit card. I’ll be covering room and board for as long as you are with me, so long as your expenditures are not too outlandish.”

“Oh!” I looked at the keycard in my hand, then back at Gang Orca. “Thank you!”

“Mm.” He waved me off. “Go put on something more suitable for the public, and be back here in an hour and a half.” He plodded over to the entrance to the aquarium tank. “Don’t be late.” And then before I could get a word in edgewise, he sunk back beneath the waters.

I looked to the tank, then to the card in my hand, and shrugged. Then I headed back for my room to change into something else for the moment, though there wasn’t much point switching the sports bra for a normal one. About the time I finished switching out my running shorts for a skirt and pulling a button-up on over my tank, my phone started blowing up with notifications. Yes, blowing up, as in the same explosion sound that Katsuki uses for his notifications.

He’d grabbed my phone and set the incoming message tone to that same explosion sound he uses. Go figure.

>FUK
FUK THIS
FUK JEANIST
FFFFFFFFFFFF
Oh. Oh boy.

>What’s the matter?

His response was a picture.

It took me about five minutes to recover from the laughter. Wow. Ohohoho wow.

Bakugou Katsuki with a carefully-done coiffure. Now that’s not something I’d ever expected to see.

>It looks nice!
Not up to your usual standards… but nice enough, anyway.
Tell him to lay off the paraffin wax!

>HES MAKIN ME WEAR JEANS

>… Best Jeanist is tailoring jeans for you to wear.
From his clothing label.
Free of charge.
Katsuki.

>Kanna.

>Katsuki.

>Kanna.

>Those jeans cost twenty-thousand yen each. EACH, Katsuki.

>told him about the girls line thing
said wait for sat

I frowned.

>Wait for sat? Do you mean Saturday?
Katsuki?
BAKUGOU KATSUKI YOU ANSWER ME RIGHT NOW DAMN IT.

>gtg ttyl

>KATSUKI
KATSUKI GET BACK HERE DAMN IT

I waited a minute or two to see if he’d reply. Nope. Nothing. I sat down on the edge of the bed and sighed, then bent over to face my hooves, sighing in annoyance.

Shit. Now I’m going to be on tenterhooks until Saturday.

And I still have to go get lunch.
“Class B, for those of you with out-of-town work placements, our bus is leaving for the station soon!” Kan-sensei stood in front of his assembled students, arms crossed over his chest as he looked over them all. “Does everybody have their belongings and their costumes? If you forgot something, you won’t have a chance to go back and get it, so make sure you have everything now.” He grimaced. “If you’re missing something, you have five minutes, or purchase it at the station.”

Monoma Neito looked between his friends and girlfriend, and was relieved when they all seemed to have everything. Then again, it probably wouldn’t matter if Pony was missing something, because she was just going back to her hometown for hers. Ibara was staying in Musutafu proper, as was Mineta, and as for himself…

“Have fun with your internship, Neito.” Pony leaned in to give him a quick kiss, which he returned happily. “The person you’re going with is meeting you here, right?”

“Right in front of the main building,” he confirmed. “You be safe, you hear? What with…” Monoma trailed off.

“I know,” Pony whispered, eyes filled with fervor as she looked at him. “I’ll be careful. And besides.” She cast a sideways glance at the bus that Class A was currently filing into. “Somebody’s gotta keep an eye on Tenya, what with… well.” The two of them shared a meaningful look.

News of what fate had befallen Iida Tensei spread like wildfire through UA’s campus, especially given that Ingenium himself was one of the institution’s alumni. Monoma himself could recall overhearing some mention of Recovery Girl putting in extra hours on research, and griping about curmudgeonly… Romans? Romanians? It was one or the other, and he couldn’t quite recall, nor did he understand what that all was about. The fact of the matter was, everybody knew about Ingenium’s run-in with the Hero Killer by now, and according to Pony, Iida Tenya was… not taking it well. At all.

“Everyone aboard!” Kan-sensei’s voice boomed out, drawing both Monoma’s and Pony’s attention towards their homeroom teacher.

“I gotta go.” Pony gave him one last hug, then skipped off towards the bus. “Bye Neito!”

He waved his farewell, and when the bus door closed, Monoma turned back towards the other three left behind with him. Kendo, his longtime friend and one-time crush, was apparently interning with Uwabami nearby. Minoru Mineta, who stood there with quite a few magazines, posters, and other ‘memorabilia’, had signed on to work for Mount Lady. What he stood to gain from that internship was beyond him, but if Mineta wanted to trade any chance to grow as a hero in exchange for quality time with some T&A, then who was he to say anything? Though, after hearing from Tsuyu and
Kanna just how much of a pain Takeyama Yu was to her own cousin… perhaps a warning for Mineta would have been kind. And as for the last of his classmates still waiting for her internship coordinator?

“Are you anxious?” Monoma turned to see Ibara approach him, the briefcase with her costume in hand.

“A little,” he admitted. His internship… even accepting it was a daunting affair.

After all, how often is it that All Might’s former sidekick, Sir Nighteye himself, sends offers to first year UA students? It was about as unheard of as… well, All Might teaching UA students. Which, to be fair, was happening now, but—

“Oh, hi! You’re Monoma Neito-kun, right? Yeah!” Monoma’s attention turned his attention to the source of the new voice, and saw a taller boy step out of the UA building. He had blonde hair in a side-swept hairstyle, mostly controlled with a bit of a cowlick. His eyes were dark and beady, but the rest of his face was wider, and seemed permanently fixed into a happy, smiling expression. Even with the UA uniform covering him, the way the seams strained at his shoulders and biceps was enough to tell Monoma that under the cloth, he was built.

“That’s me,” Monoma confirmed. He looked to the briefcase at the boy’s side: it was the same design as his own, and Monoma assumed it held a costume inside. It was emblazoned with a number 10, but there appeared to be another set of five much smaller zeroes added with stickers. “And you’re…” Monoma frowned, trying to remember the information he’d been given. “Togata Mirio?”

“That’s me!” Mirio exclaimed, with a wink and a thumbs-up for good measure.

“Ah!” Ibara gasped. “You are the one who assisted us in the cafeteria on the day of the break-in, are you not?”

“Yup, was my pleasure!” He nodded at Ibara before turning back to Monoma. “So guess I’ve got a kouhai for the week, huh? This is great!” Mirio wrapped an arm around Monoma’s shoulders. “C’mon, the boss is expecting us!”

With that, and a quick wave back to his friends, Monoma found himself dragged away by somebody he would soon look up to in a great many respects.

* * * * *

“Hey, is that your mom’s place?” Mirio asked, pointing to the sign on a nearby building, advertising seven different businesses, one on each floor. On the fifth floor was a sign that read ‘Monoma Quirk Counseling’, which Mirio pointed at while looking at Monoma with an expectant smile on his face.

“Yeah it is,” Monoma confirmed. It was really a perfect profession for somebody like his Mom, who could copy somebody’s Quirk so long as they remained within five meters of her, especially since so many kids don’t actually know how to use their Quirks. Somebody like Monoma Ayame was a godsend for those kids with troublesome abilities.

“Cool, cool! Only two blocks away from the boss’s place, right there!” Once again Mirio pointed, and Monoma followed his finger to a large, onyx-colored office building. It stood somewhere between eight and ten stories tall if he had to guess, the entire building polished to a mirror shine. On the front of the building, Sir Nighteye’s logo, an eye with a crescent moon for the pupil, emblazoned
the top of the entryway.

Mirio led the way to the building, and walked in with a casual air, waving at the secretary seated at the front desk. The young woman looked up, then picked up her phone to make a call, but didn’t do anything otherwise out of the ordinary from what Monoma could tell.

“So this is the new blood?” Monoma turned to look at the voice’s owner, and barely managed to school his expression to keep from letting his surprise show.

“Yup!” Mirio exclaimed excitedly. “Monoma-kun, this is Centipeder! He’s the second-in-command here, and he’s got the best restaurant recommendations!”

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Centipeder said, waving a gloved hand that, to Monoma, seemed to be straining against odd proportions. “Nighteye-sama is waiting for the both of you in his office, I believe.” He took another step forward and placed the hand down onto Monoma’s shoulder, which only confirmed that whatever his hand looked like, it was not a typical human limb. “You’ll be spending the afternoon with me, Monoma-kun. I hope you look forward to it.”

“I w-will,” Monoma got out, somewhat surprised by how forward and open the Pro Hero was, especially for this agency. Then again, he thought while looking at Mirio, perhaps he was specifically recruiting people who were more light-hearted than himself?

“Good.” Centipeder’s voice sounded pleased, which was about all Monoma had to go off of, given the unfamiliar body language cues that the hero’s arthropod body had were not something he had any experience in reading. “Mirio-kun, with me after you’ve sent him up to the boss.”

“Yes sir!” Mirio gave a severe nod, somewhat at odds with his jovial manner, which Centipeder returned before exiting the foyer and going outside. “Alright, this way then. Let’s go mee the boss!” Mirio led Monoma to the elevators, and with the press of a keycard he’d just removed from his pocket, the two of them were on their way up to the top floor of the building. When the elevator stopped on the ninth floor, Monoma expected it to open directly onto Sir Nighteye’s office.

It didn’t.

Mirio led Monoma out of the elevator and into a hallway, decorated in light blue with white tile floor beneath his feet. The hallway was shaped like an upside-down T, with a narrow hallway directly in front of him leading to another door, and two more hallways with their own doors off to either side. The hallways were fairly wide, and Monoma figured that even some of the larger Pro Heroes out there could fit inside with little difficulty.

“Off to the left,” Mirio pointed at a door, “is the Command Center. If we’ve got a larger op going on, Sir Nighteye or Centipeder will stay behind and run mission control while the other is in the field.” Mirio smiled. “Unless it’s an all-hands situation, most hero agencies are gonna want to leave one of their heavy hitters back at the base in case somebody else needs help in the field, or an emergency comes up and needs rapid response. There’s even a stairwell in the Command Center to get to a helipad on the roof!”

“Have you ever done mission control with Sir Nighteye, Togata-senpai?” Monoma found himself asking.

“Eh, once. I was pretty bad at it!” Mirio sniffed, rubbing his nose with a grin. “The boss has partnerships with all the local police and has feeds from all their cameras and radios. There’s so much going on, it’s easy to lose track of it all. Wish I was better at it; for every person I save out there on the scene, a good mission controller can find me ten more! Anyway.” Mirio pointed down the other
end of the hall, towards the bottom right of the inverted T-shape. “That there’s a conference room. They’re actually really handy to have, which is really not what I’d expected to say when I first started interning here. Let me tell you though, I’m rather surprised by how much use it gets!”

“I see,” Monoma murmured thoughtfully, before he pointed down the hall, straight out of the elevator. “And that’s Sir Nighteye’s office down that way, then?”

“Yup!” Mirio put a hand on Monoma’s back and gave him a light shove in that direction. “Go on then, he’s—wait, nearly forgot, one sec!” Monoma turned to look at Monoma, who’d crossed his arms and now had a very thoughtful expression on his face. “If you can, try to make him laugh.”

“… huh?” He wasn’t quite sure how to reply to that. Make Sir Nighteye… laugh?

“I mean, it’s not as important for you to do it since he offered this and you’re not trying to get him to accept you,” Mirio said, one hand waving idly. “But still, if you can get the boss to laugh, it’ll be a really great first impression! Levity is always important in our line of work, he keeps saying. Helps keep your mind off of the nasty stuff that occasionally crops up, you know?”

“Y-yeah,” Monoma murmured, suddenly unsure of himself. A pat on the back from Mirio had him moving along down the hall anyway, despite his mostly silent protests. He stood before the door mere moments later, and after a glance back to Mirio (who offered him a thumbs-up and a big smile), Monoma took a deep breath to steady his nerves, then knocked on the door.

The door clicked open of its own accord.

“Come in, Monoma Neito.”

The hero’s voice beckoned him inside, and dutifully Monoma did so. Once he got an actual look at the office itself, though…

“Holy crap,” he said, almost forgetting where he was.

Every single wall, displays case, stand, table, and bit of free space was occupied with All Might memorabilia. Posters, clothing, figurines, wall scrolls, throw pillows, bobbleheads… if there was merchandise of All Might, Sir Nighteye seemed to have it. The centerpiece of his collection was fairly obvious: a large, framed portrait of All Might in his Silver Age, white-on-red costume, and Sir Nighteye next to him in a light-grey suit, both smiling and posing for the camera, an arm around each other’s shoulders. Monoma had seen his girlfriend’s collection of All Might merch… and hers was peanuts compared to this.

With one exception.

“No XXXX Limited Run one-fourth All Might?” Monoma sniffed, affecting a cocky, condescending tone. “I thought you were a true collector and superfan, and you’re missing the crown jewel!” Monoma spun towards where Sir Nighteye sat behind the desk, a wild and crazy grin plastered on his face as he regarded his temporary boss. “It’s so sad! Such a wonderful treasury, beaten by a sixteen year old girl’s!”

“You.” Monoma froze. Sir Nighteye placed his hands flat against the surface of his desk, and pushed himself up slowly, head low and back arched as he looked up at Monoma over the rims of his glasses. “You have seen an XXXX All Might in person?” Sir Nighteye came out from behind the desk and stalked towards him, movements so slow and languorous that Monoma worried that he’d been switched with an imposter. “In. What. Condition?”

“Ah, o-one moment!” Monoma pulled out his phone and swiped through his photo library,
eventually finding the one he’d been looking for. “Here it is!” He turned his phone around so that Sir Nighteye could see the photos he’d taken of Pony’s XXXX All Might figure, and zoomed in to better show where All Might had written his personalized note for Pony. Sir Nighteye took his phone (while carefully avoiding making skin contact with Monoma in the process) and examined the image carefully, scrolling around the zoomed in portion before, satisfied with what he’d seen, handing it back to Monoma.

“Ah…” Sir Nighteye closed his eyes and sighed. “The XXXX All Might. Available one day only at select stores in major cities throughout the continental United States, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of All Might’s debut, limit three units per store. Total numbered units sold, nine-thousand, nine-hundred and ninety-nine, with All Might himself possessing the zero unit for a total of ten-thousand.” He gave a sardonic smile. “For your friend to have been in the United States at the right time… how fortuitous.”

“She’s from the States!” Monoma revealed. “They have all sorts of stuff we can’t get here. Ah, she’s going back to the States again this summer! Oh, what ever will I ask her to get that can’t be had here?” He slid back into that former cockiness effortlessly, a shit-eating grin rounding out his cocksure expression. “Such a shame you can’t get it for yourself, Sir Nighteye!”

“That’s what the Internet and import markets are for, brat!” Nighteye retorted, his angry tone speaking to his displeasure, though the smile on his face and the shaking of his shoulders belied what he really thought. He seemed to catch himself, took a deep breath, and then the same stern countenance that Sir Nighteye had when Monoma first entered the room returned. “Now that we are thoroughly amused and relaxed, we have much to discuss, Phantom Thief. Please take a seat.”

Monoma repressed the urge to gulp, but that did nothing to ease the chill that threatened to run up his spine at the sudden tonal shift. It was easy to see just how this man had been able to command respect from All Might’s contemporaries: his every word and action, even his stance, oozed authority. When he looked at Sir Nighteye, he had this feeling of standing before a general, a commander who would lead you to victory, even through the most overwhelming and impossible of odds. But when he looked at you with hands clasped in front of his mouth, leaning forward onto his elbows, and light glinting off of his glasses, Sir Nighteye transmuted from a beacon of light to a disturbing, menacing figure, hiding in the dark and waiting to strike.

Monoma knew better than to disobey, and took a seat opposite Sir Nighteye at his desk.

“I do not normally take interns after the Sports Festival,” Sir Nighteye began. “I’ve always felt that a measly one week is a waste of time and energy. I’ve only offered this once before, and I’d planned to never do so again.” Nighteye adjusted his glasses, pushing them up the bridge of his nose. “Know this: if it had only been me, you would not be sitting there. But somebody asked me for a favor… and you know something you were never supposed to.”

“All Might’s Quirk…” Monoma murmured, voice quiet and nearly breathless.

“You know a mere fraction of the truth,” Sir Nighteye confirmed. “That fraction is potentially more dangerous than the whole truth. This work placement is to impress upon you the importance of keeping that information secret.”

“… am I being bribed?” Monoma asked, not wanting to hear the answer to that question, even as he __

“Yes.” Sir Nighteye had no qualms about it. “That you get something more out of this is merely good fortune on your part.” Nighteye let his hands fall to the desk. “So. When you attempted to copy All Might’s Quirk… what happened.”
“Nothing,” Monoma said. “I… usually there is this sensation when I touch somebody and copy their Quirk, a sort of tingle?” He pondered. “It’s almost like static electricity, but only I can feel it, and then there’s this little ‘dot’ in the back of my mind. I focus on that particular ‘dot’, and I suddenly know what that Quirk is, and how to use it on some basic level.” He frowned. “When I touched All Might, there was nothing. Which is… even if it’s a Quirk I can’t copy fully, like a particularly large mutation—”

“Like Centipeder’s,” Sir Nighteye offered.

“Like his,” Monoma confirmed, “I still at least feel it, and my Quirk would probably translate his into increased flexibility and strength to try and compensate for not being able to transform enough. But —”

“But All Might,” Sir Nighteye interrupted, “is Quirkless.” Monoma sucked in a breath. To have that confirmed… “All Might was born Quirkless. All Might will die Quirkless. But.” Nighteye looked him directly in the eyes. “Forty or so years ago, All Might received a Quirk.”

“Received?” Monoma asked, parroting in his shock. That didn’t… how did—?

“All Might received his Quirk, and with it, he became the Symbol of Peace. For the past thirty years, crime has been at an all-time low.”

“But All Might was hurt five years ago!” Monoma interjected. “That’s what he said! Did… Monoma paused. “Did he lose the Quirk thanks to that?”

“No.” Sir Nighteye grimaced. He was slowly losing his ability to use the Quirk without damaging his body. We went about searching for a successor to All Might, to inherit his Quirk. That’s when I found Mirio.” Nighteye smiled. “That boy… he has been the greatest pleasure to train and teach of all the heroes and students I have worked with. I told All Might that I had found a successor.” His smile turned into a grimace. “He already found one.”

“There is a student in Class 1-A,” Monoma remembered All Might telling him. “Midoriya Izuku. I need you to promise me that you will never knowingly copy his Quirk, and if you do accidentally, you must not use it.”

“Midoriya?” Monoma murmured, shocked.

“I was horrified at All Might’s choice at first,” Nighteye said. “Yet having seen him for myself… I feel like I’ve done my mentor a disservice. I need to give him more trust in these matters than I have of late, more comparable to the trust we had for so many years. And if he suggests I take on a student, and train them to fight like I do?” Sir Nighteye reached a hand out over the desk. “I shall endeavor to do well by you, Monoma Neito.”

Hesitantly, Monoma reached his hand out over the desk, and took Sir Nighteye’s with his own.

And then, almost by instinct, his vision bled away to nothing as he used the man’s Foresight for himself.

“Are you mocking All Might?” Sir Nighteye frowned at somebody that Monoma couldn’t see, an ugly expression across his face. Another voice began to speak, but soon the picture bled away again, replaced by something else. A conference room, perhaps. “Those two are taking it harder than any of us. She was right in front of them, and they could do nothing.” He recognized Mirio and Midoriya, but the others… was that Tsuyu? Who was that woman next to her? He wanted to look closer, but the world shifted again, flashing away to a street filled with rubble, Sir Nighteye missing
his left arm, bloodied and broken as somebody held him up. “He’s going to die here… that’s what I saw.” The image flickered again, but only slightly. A brilliant green star shimmered in the ruined cityscape, an eldritch monstrosity falling beneath its assault. “The girl… she’s keeping him alive through it!”

And then everything flickered once more before seeming to set itself in stone. There lay Sir Nighteye in a hospital bed, oxygen mask over his mouth, tubes and pipes going into abdominal cavity, the sheer number of beeps and mechanical whines enough to tell Monoma what was happening, why everything in the vision had gone so rigid, so firm, so concrete. This was the end.

This was Sir Nighteye’s death.

“All… Might…” Sir Nighteye turned his head towards a frail, skeletal man, the blonde hair and black sclera around brilliant aquamarine eyes probably the only clues that let Monoma realize that yes, this was All Might. “You finally come to see me… when I’m on my deathbed…?”

Midoriya stood by his bedside also. His costume was torn and damaged, but his body… his body was pristine. He didn’t seem to be hurt at all, nor exhausted in the slightest, even after everything that he had to have been through in that vision just earlier.

“Up until now…” Monoma started, realizing he’d missed large swaths of conversation. He’d missed something important, and turned his attention back towards Sir Nighteye’s last words. “I’ve been searching for every possible way… to change your future. I… wanted to change the future… where you are killed. I… searched all this time, but nothing… worked. I couldn’t… change a single thing.” His speech was slow, strained. His breaths were wet and shallow. “But… Midoriya showed me a way. I couldn’t clear… away my doubts. ‘I can’t change anything’… ‘it’s impossible to change’… those thoughts, they were always… in the back of my mind. Looking back… it was all about that…”

Sir Nighteye coughed. Monoma heard a scuffle in the hallway outside, and looked up to see Mirio, wounded and haggard, one leg bound in a cast, hopping and sprinting down the hall. An orderly was on his heels attempting to hold him back, but Mirio would not be deterred.

“A future that you strongly wish for,” Nighteye continued. “So strongly that there’s no room for any other outcome… a strong and clear vision. I’m sure Midoriya’s not the only one… I think everyone believed so strongly in a single future… that it all just came together.”

“Sir! Nighteye!” Mirio made it to his mentor’s bedside, tears streaming from his eyes. “No! Please don’t die! You can’t go! You just can’t!”

“Mirio…” Sir Nighteye smiled. “I’ve made you experience… such hardship. If only I… had been more astute…”

“You taught me everything!” Mirio sobbed. “It’s because of you that I’ve gotten so strong! And it’s because of you that I’m still alive! So please, you have to keep teaching me! You can’t die!”

Sir Nighteye brought up his remaining arm, and cupped Mirio’s cheek. He looked into his pupil’s eyes, and then Nighteye’s sclera bled black, his iris taking on the appearance of a camera lens, flickering, focusing in and out as it beheld a future he would not be there to see.

“It’ll be alright.” Mirio held tightly to Sir Nighteye’s hand on his cheek. “Mirio… You will be… and outstanding hero. This is the only future… that we shouldn’t change. So please…” Sir Nighteye’s hand fell from Mirio’s cheek. “Keep smiling—”
A hand landed heavily on Monoma’s shoulder, drawing him out of the vision. He looked to Sir Nighteye… to the man he’d just seen dying—

“It’s not an easy burden to bear, Foresight.” Sir Nighteye stood up from his desk, and walked around to offer Monoma a hand up, which he gladly took. “Before I learned to control how far I looked, death was always the first thing I saw.” His face took on an expression of concern. “You saw mine.” It was not a question.

“It’s—” Monoma didn’t know what to say. “Soon,” he settled on. “Too soon.”

“… I see.” Nighteye looked him in the eye. “And All Might?”

“Alive,” Monoma said, realizing what he was being asked. “You realized it, at the end. How to change what you saw.”

Sir Nighteye took a step back, and just observed his new, temporary pupil. Monoma wanted to squirm under his gaze, unreadable and unknowable as it was.

“Come.” Sir Nighteye turned to exit the office, and Monoma barely remembered to grab his costume case before following. “Suit up. It’s time for our first patrol.” He looked back to Monoma before opening the door. “If you’re right, and I don’t have much time left… then I’d best make the most of it. So come, Phantom Thief.” He held the door wide for Monoma, and gestured towards the doorway, where Mirio stood, outfitted in his costume, his logo a simple numerical one-million on the front.

“It’s time to learn.”
The remainder of my first day with Gang Orca was spent training. Some of it was done in his massive aquarium tank, yes, but yet another large segment of time was spent in a large gym, sparring against the man.

Without my Quirk.

“You don’t use your tail enough,” he said as he picked me up with one arm and threw me down onto the training mats. “You have five limbs to the average person’s four. Use them.”

“Against someone my own size? Sure,” I griped. “But that’s a bit of a tall order against you!” I got to my hooves with a quick kip-up, then settled back into a ready stance. Orca had only been offering me breathing room enough to reply to him with a sentence or two before he came at me, fists clenched and maw agape. And when I say maw agape, I wasn’t kidding, either: for this man, using his teeth was part of the equation. He did, at least, have a specially-made mouth guard to blunt his fangs, otherwise we’d have had to get Recovery Girl down here to help me regenerate my right hand, my left leg, and almost my entire tail.

“Enough rest.” Gang Orca set his legs shoulder width apart and bared his hands. “Again.”

I snarled and rushed forward, staying low as I made my approach. Gang Orca’s large stature came with the downside of making a small, low target difficult to hit, which would help me as I dashed to try and get past his side and around to his—

A powerful roundhouse kick, executed so quickly I couldn’t even see the telltale windup that made the maneuver so laughably impractical in actual fights, knocked the breath from my lungs and sent me rocketing across the training gym, into the padding that lined the walls. I stuck against the wall for a good two seconds before gravity took hold of me once more, leaving me face-down on the mat as I tried to get the air back into my lungs.

“Poor assumption.” Gang Orca’s thunderous footsteps plodded over to me, barely audible due to the copious cushioning on the gym floor, until a quick glance up showed me that he stood right in front of me. I felt his hands on my shoulders, lifting me up and setting me down on my hooves. He didn’t let go until he was certain I had my legs under me. I took a few deep breaths and brushed a bang away from my eyes, then moved his hands off of my shoulders.

“I can keep going,” I said. “I still have to…” I trailed off.

“Have to what, land a hit on me?” Orca finished. “A good, clean hit?” He chuckled, turning around to walk away. I glowered, crouching down low and readying my legs. “The object of this exercise was never for you to—”

I leapt into the air, using my tail to help push off the ground like I’d seen Ojiro do many times before. I had a good enough position, now it was all just a matter of kicking out with both legs and—

Gang Orca fastened one of his hands around both of my legs, and tossed me ass over end back into the mats on the wall.

“Lesson number seven.” He turned back to look at me over his shoulder, one eye glowing at me as
I pushed myself up from the floor mats. He pointed over at the other far wall.

And at the massive mirror that covered its entire surface.

“Mind your surroundings.” He grabbed a towel from the rack by the door, balled it up, and tossed it towards me. Despite unfurling halfway there, the towel still managed to land right in front of my hands. “You’re done for the night. Clean up, get some food, and then sleep.” He stopped, favoring me with one eye. “We start dark and early tomorrow.”

“Ugh…” I used my Quirk now, and felt the relief as my body lit up with an ephemeral green glow, the axolotl’s regenerative abilities helping me feel less like I’d gone three rounds with a buffalo and lost. The towel he’d tossed me was a huge help as I brushed the sweat from my face and hair, and once my legs decided to properly cooperate again I got up and walked over to where my temporary boss stood waiting. “Don’t you mean bright and early, by the way?”

“Hmph.” He shoved me slightly forward with a light pat between the shoulders, which still managed to shove me forward a few steps. I glared back at Gang Orca, who just chuckled. “Dinner will be dropped off in your room. Clean yourself off. Eat. Sleep.” With that, Gang Orca walked off down the hall, probably to take the elevator back to his office.

And that left me with nothing to do but follow his orders.

“Dark and early?” I scoffed, pushing open the door to my dorm room and heading straight for the bathroom. “The fuck is that supposed to mean, stupid shit like that, mangling a good idiom for some dumbass…” I trailed off, staring into the shower stream as I came to a startling realization. “Well shit,” I said aloud, more to myself than anybody else in particular.

“I’m starting to sound like Katsuki.”

* * * * *

I’m not sure how long I managed to sleep. All I know is that once I’d finished my shower and eaten the bento box of surprisingly good sushi (really, Gang Orca? Not helping yourself with stereotypes like that right now!) that I’d found on my dresser, I collapsed straight to bed, despite the fact that it had only been… what, seven pm? Eight, at the latest? Hey, don’t give me that, try doing demanding, exhausting combat training almost straight through from late morning to early evening! It’s demanding, and I was exhausted.

That didn’t really matter though, because next thing I knew the alarm clock on the bedside table—one that I know I hadn’t turned on—started blaring at me. I didn’t even look at the damn thing when I swatted it and rolled back over, burrowing deeper under the covers as I shoved my head into the pillow as far as I could.

And then I was suddenly wide awake when a massive, clammy hand closed around the tip of my tail and yanked me straight off the bed, covers and all.


“Bu-wha-you—” I stammered, unable to even really form a coherent word, much less an actual sentence. My hands scrambled to grab the duvet and wrap it around myself so that my goddamn
boss didn’t get a glimpse of me in nothing more than my nightgown. “What the actual fuck!?” I screeched.

“Up, Chimera.” When he spoke that name, my chosen name, I had the sudden feeling of ice water being poured down my spine. I stood up from my position on the floor, still wrapped in the duvet. “It’s time to patrol.” Gang Orca picked up the briefcase holding my costume from where it sat at the foot of my bed and held it out to me.

“Time to—what time is it?” I asked, reaching to take the briefcase with one hand while the other held up my covering.

“A quarter of two in the morning,” he replied casually, as though it was the weather.

My costume briefcase slipped from my fingers in shock, clattering hard on the floor below.

“If Taiki wasn’t already awake, that would have done the trick.”

“Two in the—” I rounded on my boss. “Seriously!?”

“I did say dark and early.” Gang Orca turned to leave my room, one hand on the door to swing it closed behind him. “Get ready. We’re out the door in fifteen minutes. Don’t make me wait.”

One last glower from narrowed eyes, and Gang Orca disappeared, closing the door behind him. I slumped down onto the floor, half on top of the extremely fluffy and cushy duvet-covered comforter Gang Orca had provided for my room, and groaned. I ground the heels of my palms into my eyes, willing myself to wake up, then forced myself to get my hooves underneath me as I picked up the briefcase with my costume and set it on my bed. A finger against the biometric scanner unlocked it with a click, and I opened it up to retrieve my costume.

For the love of any god that cares to listen, it is way too early for this shit. Not like I had a choice, now did I?

After all, I am the idiot who signed up for this…

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Once I had my costume on and met Gang Orca down in the lobby, he led me out a back entrance to where a large van, with one of those extra attachments to increase the height to something resembling standing room for a normal-sized person, sat idling. Well, idling is probably a bit misleading, since that implies an internal combustion engine. There are no fossil fuel-powered automobiles anymore, not outside of museums anyway. They’re all battery-powered, Quirk-powered, or ran on some other source of fuel that wasn’t derived from decayed and liquefied dinosaur flesh. Don’t ask me what that alternate fuel source is, I don’t know. That doesn’t really matter right now; what does matter is that Gang Orca slid open the door and beckoned for me to go inside. I did, and nearly regretted it: the backseat of this thing was so damn small. It was like the back of a sports car, the type that’s only there as a concession to design and not really meant for somebody to actually sit in, much less try to maneuver a tail around. A quick peek at the driver’s seat showed Taiki sitting there, sipping gingerly from a thermos of really strong coffee. Like, strong enough that I could taste its scent strong.

“A little cramped here,” I grumbled to Gang Orca once he got in the passenger seat. Which, I feel I
need to remind some people, is the front left seat here. This is Japan. We drive on the left side of the road here. You know, now that I thought about it, why does it always seem to be island nations that drive on the left side? “And why is the back seat of a van so dang tiny anyway?

“I should hope you can survive for ten minutes,” the boss replied without a backwards glance. He gestured at Taiki, who put the van in drive and pulled us onto the well-lit streets of Shinagawa prefecture. “Tops.”

“You didn’t answer the other question,” I grumbled, crossing my arms over my chest. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“Down to the docks.” Taiki answered this time, pulling the van into a smooth left turn. “Coast Guard is usually pretty good at catching incoming smugglers and hidden contraband, but there’s still a couple of people whose Quirks make it possible to slip past any cordon, no matter how tight it is.”

“And a shipyard just happens to be the most convenient place to come ashore without arousing too much suspicion, right?” I asked. “But what kind of Quirk are we talking here. Speedster? Deep diver? Flight?”

“Any kind of low-end mobility Quirk would do,” Gang Orca replied. “The smugglers in question are using their own product to do it.” He looked back at me with one beady black eye, staring hard at where I sat behind Taiki.

“Trigger…” It came out in a whisper, and I almost didn’t notice I’d spoken. The drug temporarily enhanced a person’s Quirk, but as far as I knew, it came at the cost of impulse control and rationality. Giving Trigger to somebody often had the same result as making Bruce Banner angry: it made them meaner, nastier, and stronger, but also had a tendency towards making them dumber. “And a low-end Quirk would be a camouflage all its own, wouldn’t it? And wait, doesn’t Trigger have some nasty side effects?”

“Normally you’d be right,” Taiki piped up again. I watched through the windshield as he pulled the van down a small, poorly-lit side street, and stretched a bit when he put the car into park. “There’s been some chatter on the dark web though, something about a new strain, more potent than before, but we’re having a hard time pinning down where it’s coming from. There’s contraband being smuggled both in and out of the country, but intercepted shipments sometimes have the finished product, sometimes a precursor, and occasionally a third, unknown substance that we’ve been unable to identify.”

“We’re calling it ‘Purple Haze’,” Gang Orca said. Then he opened the passenger-side door, got out, and opened the rear door on his side so I could get out. “We’ve gotten some samples of Trigger both with and without whatever it is,” he continued, offering me a hand out of the back, which I gladly took; I’d been contorted in a rather awful position to try and get my tail comfortable, and if he’d opened the door on Taiki’s side, I probably would’ve fallen backwards out of the car. “All we know is it tints the Trigger purple, and seems to remove the impulsiveness and irrationality. It’s not as potent as normal Trigger,” he clarified, leading me around to the back of the van as Taiki joined us, whereupon he put his hands on the handles, “but it doesn’t have the negative mental effects.”

Gang Orca pulled open the back of the van… and my inner tech nerd pretty much squealed in joy.

“Like it, huh?” Taiki asked, putting an arm on my shoulder and leaning on me. “Say hello to the mobile command center.”
Imagine the greatest PC battle-station you can possibly dream of. Now make everything shinier and sleeker, because for all that the emergence of Quirks set the world back, technology still managed to continue its endless progression towards the perfect streamlined appearance. There was none of that RGB lighting though; instead, all of the tech glowed with a soft, pale blue light, easy on the eyes and yet oddly invigorating. Five monitors all displayed different sets of information, with what could only be a three-dimensional holographic map of the area floating just an inch or two off of the desk, and a final, much larger monitor on the other wall of the van. Two rotating chairs were set on racks that slid out from under the ‘desk’ and unfolded, and Taiki clambered up into the van, taking his seat in one of them.

“Taiki.”

“On it, boss.” Taiki held his hands up, a space about the size of a soccer ball between them, and closed his eyes. A flash of something flickered between his hands, like the sun glinting off the surface of the water, and—I left the light on in my room, didn’t I? Darn, I should probably just go and… wait.

“What the actual hell?” I asked, looking back at Taiki’s hands. That strange glimmer had expanded, covering his entire personage and—crap, did I leave the shower running? Dang it, that’s going to use up a ton of… okay, no, what in the?…

“Noticed it, have you?” I looked to Gang Orca, who had his eyes closed, and what looked like it could be a smile spreading across his fanged maw.

“It?” I asked, probably sounding as indignant as I was starting to feel. “What’s ‘it’? Why are we playing the pronoun game here!? What in the fresh hell is—” I waved over at Taiki, and made the mistake of looking, my eyes falling on the iridescent bubble that had nearly encompassed the entire van, and had started ballooning out to envelop—oh shit I’d left the air conditioning blasting in my room before heading out! I’ve got to turn that down before it… alright, nope! This was starting to get ridiculous!

“Boss likes to play this game every time he brings someone on a nighttime patrol,” Taiki said, voice echoing oddly. I felt something oddly wet pass over me, and for a second I had a serious case of double vision, while at the same time the world spun on its axis as my inner ear decided now was the best possible time to stop doing its job. I stumbled on my hooves, nearly falling over were it not for Gang Orca holding me upright. I looked at Taiki reflexively, and shit, his Quirk’s going to… not do anything?

“Why is it not doing… well, the thing?” I asked, waving a hand. “Whatever that thing was that kept telling me I had something to do elsewhere. Where’d it go?”

“It’s already spread to its maximum range,” Taiki answered, clambering out of the back of the van. “Say hello to my Quirk: Someone Else’s Problem.” He smiled at me. “I gather you’ve already figured it out?” I had. The name was just too damn indicative.

Taiki’s power was a goddamn SEP Field.

Alright, explanation time for those who aren’t up to date on their slightly more offbeat sci-fi concepts. ‘SEP’ is an acronym for… well, the name of Taiki’s Quirk. Someone else’s problem. An SEP Field was something I’d seen as a concept in some or other science fiction series I don’t remember the name of anymore, and really can only recall this one particular concept because of just how brilliant it was. Basically, an SEP Field was a type of electromagnetic wavelength, barrier, or
other area-encompassing phenomenon that enveloped an area and made the contents completely and utterly unremarkable. Whatever happened to be inside was so unremarkable, so unimportant, that it was Someone Else’s Problem. The inside of that field could have had a poker game between the President of the US, the Pope, a giant talking dildo, and a velociraptor in a tophat, and your eyes would slide right off of it because it just wasn’t your problem. Now, obviously what was happening here wasn’t quite the same. It seemed to have both the ‘you have a hard time paying attention to the contents’ aspect, combined with a ‘you’ve suddenly been reminded of something important you have to do’ bit of mental trickery to make it exceptionally easy to disregard whatever happens to be inside the barrier.

“You said you were his secretary,” I accused, looking at Taiki with narrowed eyes. “Illegal Quirk use?”

“Legal loophole,” Taiki said, shrugging. “Use of a Quirk, if done with the explicit approval of or with supervision by a Pro Hero, is legal under all existing statutes.” He frowned. “Except in Rhode Island in the States. Which is odd, given that that’s where the prototype for all Pro Hero legislation started.” He waved a hand in a sort of ‘what can you do’ gesture. “But hey. That’s someone else’s problem.”

“Enough jokes,” Gang Orca admonished. He held out a small object to me, which I took and inspected. It appeared to be an earbud of sorts, which I immediately put inside my left ear. “We received word from Coast Guard that two somebodies went out of their way to attract attention away from the Tokyo Harbor area, which in and of itself makes that harbor an unlikely location. Shinagawa is the closest location within the area of reduced activity that is also far enough to avoid the increased presence on Tokyo itself.”

He looked at me with an absolutely vicious grin.

“It seems you’ll be getting your feet wet early, Chimera.”

I couldn’t help but return his grin with a positively feral one of my own.

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The patrol was… well, in a word, boring. For an hour and a half I did little more than experiment with a couple of other ways to travel along rooftops and other areas of varying altitudes other than my old flea-totem-falcon-wing method, and actually found a fair bit of success in emulating Tsuyu. To the surprise of absolutely nobody ever, frogs are rather good at sticking to walls and hopping around. There was the small matter of finding a way to keep my hands free to do other things such as inspect graffiti to see if it was still wet (not fun), or checking damaged security cameras that Taiki directed me to (“A bird pooped on it.” “Can you clean it off?” “… do I have to?”), but that wasn’t to say it was a fruitless search.

It just took a while before things finally got interesting.

“This is Orca.” My earbud crackled, and I instantly stilled where I was, clinging to the side of a shipping freighter by the remora suction pads I’d morphed along the lengths of my arms and tail. I detached my right arm with a twist and covered that ear so that it didn’t hear anything to distract from the sound in my left. “My lead was a dead-end; just a bunch of idiot dock-workers slugging it out after hours. Chimera, anything on the south side?”
“Maybe,” I whispered, careful to keep my response quiet as I used my tail to lower myself further down the freighter’s hull and closer to the waterline… and closer to what I’d noticed not two minutes prior. “There’s a weirdly warped section on the hull of this freighter.” I looked up at the name emblazoned on the side of the vessel, and promptly gave up trying to read it. “It’s the Russian one, I think. Or maybe it’s a different language. I don’t know, I can’t differentiate between languages that use the Cyrillic alphabet.”

“On my way. Taiki, manifest.”

“On it boss.” I heard the sound of mechanical keys clacking over the microphone. “Ship’s registered as the Sarkany, docked two days ago. Captain’s reports says they took on some hull damage as they entered the Sea of Japan, but couldn’t ID the source. Chimera, can you get in closer, tell me what you’re seeing?”

“On it, one sec.” I lowered myself down, one arm’s length at a time, until I was even with the warped section of hull. It seemed to have an odd ripple pattern to it, like somebody had dropped a stone into a still lake. Only instead of a lake, this was a solid sheet of plate metal. “Okay yeah, there is no way this wasn’t caused by a Quirk, or at least an experimental weapon. There’s a ripple pattern in the metal, and…” I squinted, then hopped off of the hull of the ship and onto the dock, using an infinitesimally brief flare of a cat totem to land silently. Next, I brought out my phone and opened the camera app. I took a photo and opened it in the built-in photo editor app, then cropped the image down to just the ripple section. Another swipe brought up a shape insert, and I pulled up a circle, expanding it to surround the edges of the effect. “Thought so, the ripple pattern is a perfect circle.”

“Are you certain?” Gang Orca asked, voice suddenly close. I nearly jumped out of my skin, but looked over to see Gang Orca right next to me, and showed him what I’d done with my phone.

“Positive.” He took the phone from my hands, looking between it and the ripple pattern, and handed it back to me. Then he reached into a pocket of his suit, pulled out what looked like a small metal dart, and tossed it at the ripple-patterned section of the ship’s hull.

The dart slipped straight through the hull of the ship without even making a sound. There wasn’t even a ding, dent, or hole to mark where it had gone in.

I saw Gang Orca reach into the opposite pocket of his suit and produce another dart, this time made out of wood. He tossed this one at the ripple pattern as well.

It bounced off, the slight ‘tink’ sound of an object hitting metal the only response it gave.

“Taiki.” His hand came up to the side of his head, near what I assumed was the location of one of his ears. “When was the ship due to depart?”

“This morning.” The reply was accompanied by the hurried clatter of fingers across keys, followed by the click of a mouse. “I’ve sent a report to the harbor master and the Coast Guard, and am requesting all security footage of this loading dock since the ship arrived.”

“Good.” Gang Orca turned to walk away, and beckoned for me to follow him. “What was on the ship’s cargo manifest?”

“One second…” Fingers across keys, and then a moue of surprise. “Well if they wanted to hide a needle in a stack of other needles, then that’s the spot. Boss, the vessel’s carrying lots of different
“Interesting.” I followed Gang Orca as we made our way back to the van, or at least where I assumed the van would be. “Add an addendum to your report to the harbor master that the captain of the ship is likely innocent. It wouldn’t be the first time somebody was used as an unknowing mule.”

“Roger that. Dropping my field; van’s just around the corner.”

“Um…” I stopped, unsure of how to properly address Gang Orca.

“Boss is fine.” I stopped where I stood for a moment. Gang Orca noticed I had, looked back, and chuffed in amusement. “You’re not the first to have that question, girl.”

“Okay then,” I muttered, somewhat put out. “Boss. Why is the Middle East as destination interesting?”

“It’s a clue as to who our smugglers are working with.” We rounded the corner and saw the van, along with the fact that Taiki had already migrated to the driver’s seat and gotten ready. Gang Orca slid open the back seat door for me, and though I grumbled, I still got into the damn thing. Gang Orca got in the passenger seat himself, and only once he’d strapped in did Taiki begin to drive. “The Middle East and South America both imply state-sponsored criminal activity, which is harder for us to actually act on. It’s fortunate that we found that ship’s hull when we did, otherwise the contraband would already be out in the open ocean before we knew anything was wrong.”

“Okay then…” I trailed off, unsure of what else to say. Apparently there wasn’t much else to say, since the rest of the ride was pretty much silent.

Taiki drove through the near-empty streets, bringing us back to Shinagawa Aquarium in a measly ten minutes, though I noted the route we took had quite literally zero streets in common with the route we took to get to the docks. Given that we pulled into a service entrance in the aquarium, then Taiki pressed a clicker that caused an otherwise solid section of wall to slide open for us to drive into, I figured that was for operational security more than anything. We pulled into the parking spot, and once more Gang Orca helped me out of the car. I hopped down onto the asphalt below just in time to see Taiki plug the van in, then come over and offer me a pat on the back as we walked towards the elevator to Gang Orca’s HQ.

“You know, for your first night?” He smiled. “Not bad, rookie. Little rough around the edges, but not too bad.”

“Have you asked Umiko out yet?” I responded immediately, eyes narrowed.

“We have a date later today.”

I stopped walking. Gang Orca stopped walking. We both turned to look at Taiki, who was currently sporting one of the best poker faces I’d seen in a long time.

“If you’re not lying, you’re finally going to get that raise I’ve been promising,” Gang Orca muttered under his breath. From Taiki’s victorious smile, I figured he wasn’t. Orca stopped in front of the elevator and turned to me. “Chimera. Get some rest.” The elevator dinged its arrival, and we all piled in. Taiki pressed the buttons for both the second and third floors, and the doors slid closed. “You’re
free until one in the afternoon. Do what you will, but I’d recommend some sleep.”

“Understood,” I said, nodding. The elevator stopped at the second floor, and I got off, then headed for my room.

It wasn’t the most exciting first patrol, but it was definitely productive. Right now though, it was time to get some more sleep.

Still wish I knew more about this smuggling stuff. And whatever that ‘Purple Haze’ additive was. It reminded me of something, something on the tip of my tongue, but for the life of me I could not remember what it was. It just kept slipping away like grains of sand through my fingers. Whatever. I’d sleep on it. I changed out of my costume and back into my nightgown, then curled back up under the covers, cuddling with the giant teddy bear Gang Orca had left for me.

I did make sure to set the alarm for eleven, though. Just in case.
Chapter Fifty-Three

Chapter Notes

Long overdue, I know. I burnt out a little, needed a short break from writing to get my steam back.

Thanks for your patience, y'all. Enjoy.

“... and I mean, it’s cool being recognized and all that, but it’s just so weird to have random people come up to you on the street and want to shake your hand or something!”

“Guess you had a more normal day than I did,” I sighed into the phone. A quick glance at the clock showed me that I’d woken up before my alarm, miracle of miracles, and yet I still felt horribly… well, not exhausted, but sore. Incredibly sore, enough to fall back to sleep very briefly. Gang Orca had managed to put me through a bit of a wringer already, and I was achy in muscles I wasn’t sure were even supposed to hurt. “How are the others doing by the way?” I asked. “Haven’t had much of an opportunity to get on the phone. Like, at all.”

“Except to text your boy toy?” Pony fired back, which got me sputtering into the phone. “C’mon, it’s so obvious!”

“Like you haven’t been chatting with Monoma every chance you get?” I replied.

“He’s been as busy as you have apparently,” Pony said. “Also, I got the feeling that there’s something he wanted to talk about, but either can’t or won’t? Like he cut himself off from saying something and then instantly tried to change the subject?”

“Welcome to hero work.” I laid back against my bed’s headrest, still unwilling to leave the warmth of the covers. “Dad had that a few times, where something came up and he’s not allowed to talk about it. Heck, I’m pretty sure by the time the week’s up you will have something you can’t discuss with us.”

“Hm, you have a point,” Pony hedged. “Oh, you were asking about the others right?”

“Yup,” I confirmed. “How’s everyone doing at their internships?”

“Well let’s see, Tsuyu is enjoying hers so far, but said she needs some way to get the smell of seafood out of her costume.” I wrinkled my nose, unsure of how that one came to pass. “Ibara’s having a grand old time with Kamui Woods, and Momo, well…” Pony trailed off.

“Incommunicado?” I asked. “Should we be worried?”

“Yes and no?” Pony answered. “Maybe? I mean, it always connects on the second ring, but then this weird music track gets played back at me on loop. Should try it yourself, it’s odd.”

“I will,” I promised. “Wanna hear about my day first, though?”
“Yes!” Pony practically yelled into the phone. “Spill, spill!”

So I did. I told her about how when I got to the aquarium, stuff seemed to have been set up like a miniature ‘test’. Then how Gang Orca ambushed me in his office, and we had a small fight in the aquarium tank. Then came my awesome dorm, which I had to take a picture of to send her, followed by training… followed by 2am wakeup for patrol.

“That sounds brutal,” Pony said plainly. “Just nonstop craziness for you huh?”

“I mean, it wasn’t that bad,” I admitted. “Just hectic. And have you ever tried reading an orca’s expressions? It just doesn’t translate at all!” I huffed. “I can’t tell what the boss is thinking because I can’t read his body language. Like, not one bit. And it drives me a little nuts, cause I’m not sure what he’s thinking, so I have to go by his words and tone, and those can be faked!”

“Well, you’re the one who signed up with walking talking Tilikum,” she said. “You did know what you were getting yourself into.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “I know you can’t see it, but I’m waving you off.” I heard her laughter over the airwaves.

“And I’m rolling my eyes so hard they’re trying to pop out of my head,” she said back, not missing a beat.

“Careful,” I jokingly chide her. “Anyway.”

“Well,” she said, picking up on it immediately. “There’s a lot more crime here in Hosu lately. Hero Killer’s got all the bad guys coming out to try and get something while heroes look for him. I mean, it means there’s tons for us to do, but…” Pony sighed. “I’m getting worried for Tenya. He’s barely said two words to me that aren’t internship-related. And I keep catching him looking down alleyways when he thinks Manual and I aren’t watching.”

“You don’t think he’s?…” I trail off, not willing to entertain the thought.

“I hope not.” I could practically hear Pony’s frown. “Anyway, I have to go. Patrol in five minutes, gotta finish getting ready. Bye Kanna!”

“I’ll talk to you later Pony.” I hung up the phone and was about to plug it back in when I had a different idea. I’m free until one in the afternoon. It’s currently just shy of noon. This probably won’t take more than a few minutes tops, but… hey, you never know.

I scrolled over to my contacts, found the number I wanted, and dialed. The call was answered halfway through the first ring.

“What.” Katsuki groused, voice heavy with… not sure actually. Maybe some anger, frustration? There was definitely more of that roughness to it, which always comes out when he’s trying to hide some other feeling.

“That’s how you greet me?” I said, joking. “That how you talk to your mom t—wait, of course it is, who am I kidding.”

“Mm,” Katsuki mumbled into the phone, voice more relaxed. “You good?”
“Yup.” I set my phone to speaker and propped it up on my pillows, then turned so I was on laying on my stomach, facing the phone and arms propping me up. “Sore and stiff. Little bruised too. Gang Orca really likes the whole ‘pain is an excellent teacher’ idea, so don’t be surprised if I come back to school all mottled and splotchy on Monday.”

“Least you get to fucking do something,” he said. “Jeanist hasn’t done anything but put me in jeans and screw with my hair.”

“Your hair?” I frowned, pressing the button on my screen to make this into a video call. “What, did he try to give you a bowl cut or something?”

Katsuki didn’t respond. Instead he apparently turned on his own phone’s front facing camera, since suddenly I could see him, and…

Wow.

Wow.

“Katsuki, you look…” I giggled. “Nice?” I couldn’t help it. I started laughing at Katsuki’s hairdo. He was… um… alright, look, the Beatles in their prime. That hairstyle, the one they all had? Yeah, that’s the one. That’s what Katsuki’s hair looks like right now.

And it does not fit him at all.

“Oi, it’s not funny!” He protested. “It’s really fucking annoying, he took three hours doing this shit!” I kept laughing, lungs starting to ache. Oh, oh wow.

“So when are you gonna start a band now?” I asked jokingly. “You’ve definitely got the hair for it!”

“Fuck you Kanna!”

“Not sixteen yet, Katsuki!”

“B—urgh!” Katsuki grumbled, then reached to pick up the phone. “Fuck!”

“Yes, yes, nice talk.” I waved at the camera lens, making sure Katsuki saw. “Gotta go now. Oh, for your hair? Tell Jeanist to try less Lennon and more Jagger, maybe.”

“What—”

Katsuki didn’t get a chance to answer, because I hung up the call. I had to get up and get set for the rest of the day, which meant a shower (not washing my hair until I know if I’m getting drenched or not today) and a change of clothes. Of course, before I could do that, the expected text came in.

>y tf lenin

I laughed, snapping up my phone for a reply.

>Not Lenin. LENNON.

And with that, I got up to get my stuff ready for a shower, so that… huh. I walked over to the door and picked up a piece of paper that looks to have been slid underneath.
Wear your casual swimwear and meet in the lobby at 1PM. —G.O

… okay. Great. Swimsuit day. My hair’s a mess, I’ve got large enough bags under my eyes to use them for groceries, and I think I might be due for a shave. Whatever. That’s fine.

Today’s gonna suck, isn’t it?

* * * * *

The elevator dinged, the doors opened, and I walked out into the lobby, phone and keycard held in one hand. Gang Orca and Taiki, both turned towards me with what I could only call an appraising eye, which had the latter shrugging and the former shifting his jaw… or maw. I’m pretty sure by now that that’s his equivalent to a raised eyebrow, and I just crossed my arms over my chest and stared right back.

“You said casual swimwear,” I said, gesturing towards my current outfit with my tail. “If you didn’t want me in a bikini, you should have been a bit more specific.”

And a bikini it was indeed. Teal with light blue accents, whose straps went across my collarbones and behind my neck. The advantage to this particular bikini is that I don’t have to actually tie either part and hope it stays on. I just have to slide it on, make sure everything’s properly seated, and hope the bottom doesn’t try to crawl up and give me a wedgie. It wasn’t likely that it actually happened; the last time, Pony had been trying to grab onto me after I cheated at Marco Polo, reached for my tail, and didn’t quite grab it. A little embarrassing, but that was about it.

I also learned a very valuable lesson that day: Pony takes fun and games, such as Marco Polo and freeze tag, very seriously.

“It’ll do,” Gang Orca declared, voice as serious as ever, despite his attire. “Come.”

He turned towards the exit to the lobby, gesturing for Taiki and me to follow him. We obliged, of course, and I finally got a good look at the man beneath the costume.

Despite the armored and protective nature of his costume, Sakamata Kuugo is still an absolutely massive specimen. Broad-shouldered, muscles straining against his skin, Gang Orca was a testament to just how much of a dividend training could pay out when your Quirk enhances your strength. There was footage online of the man dead-lifting a fully-loaded, American pick-up truck (as opposed to the somewhat compact type generally preferred here in Japan), and a quick glance was enough to tell me it wasn’t all from his Quirk. He was clearly not one to rest on his laurels, and his current attire (board shorts, flip-flops, and a muscle shirt) put his raw musculature on display. The dorsal fin sprouting around where I assumed the base of his neck would require the muscle tee have a cut-out in the back to accommodate, but somehow I think it was a pretty simple matter of just sliding the edge of the scissor against the fabric; even with the cut portion, he was still straining the fabric something awful.

Taiki, on the other hand, looked… average. He wasn’t unfit, but when put next to Gang Orca… well. Not many other than All Might and Endeavor have a chance of comparing in terms of physique.

… wonder what his workout plan is, and if I can get Katsuki on that—no, Kanna, focus!
“So,” I piped up as we began to walk along the path between Orca’s HQ and Shinagawa Aquarium, “could somebody fill me in on what we’re doing? And why I’m dressed for a day at the beach?” I appended at the end.

“Pro Heroes,” Gang Orca began, opening the door to the aquarium proper and holding it for Taiki and me as we followed, “do more for the communities they serve than simply stop crimes and fight villains. Some would have you believe otherwise—”

“Endeavor,” Taiki fake-coughed.

“Enough of that.” Gang Orca stopped walking and turned to give Taiki a hard look, glaring at him with one dark, beady eye. “Keep your opinion on such matters to yourself.”

“I mean, he does have a point,” I added, raising my hands in a placating gesture as the boss’s gaze shifted my way. “The statistics are there! Endeavor only shows up in public when there’s a crime. I mean, have you ever seen him at a disaster relief area?”

“No, because,” Gang Orca’s quick addition stopped my triumphant ‘aha!’ cold, “in almost any such relief operations, his Quirk would do far more harm than good. Instead, he redoubles his efforts to shore up the defenses while others are occupied. He is the primary reason crime continually fails to spike after a natural disaster.”

… discretion and understanding of one’s own weaknesses. Shit, I might actually be starting to feel some respect for the man.

“Tangent aside,” I said, trying to redirect, “if we’re ‘helping the community’ in some way…” I trailed off, giving an opening for him to take advantage of. He didn’t answer though, and instead kept leading us towards, if I was reading the maps and our heading correctly, the shallow pools where guests can pay extra to swim with dolphins. “Um?”

He pulled to a stop in front of the doorway leading outside to the pool, and looked back to face me.

“Every Tuesday, we host swimming lessons at the Aquarium. But not just any swimming lessons.” With this, he pushed the opaque glass door open.

And I suddenly found over thirty pairs of human eyes, and several more pairs besides, staring straight at me.

“We have a little help from the aquarium’s residents.”

I walked through the open door, and scanned the crowd before me. There was Umiko, the same aquarium employee who’d led me to Gang Orca’s office yesterday, lounging in the water, clad in a simple aquarium-branded one piece, shimmering scales visible all along her arms and legs. Two children, both of whom looked to be somewhere between five and eight years old, splashed and played around her. Beside them, flitting between the children and Umiko, was a penguin, two feet tall and wading through the water without a care in the world, fin-wings waving up and down as it waddled between the laughing tykes. Umiko looked up to see us, and waved to Taiki, who I’m happy to see waved right back, a light blush on his face.

There were another ten or twelve kids there, accompanied by parents. Some of the kids had both, while a few had only one present. A first glance showed a wide variety of Quirks, including three children that a cursory glance revealed to have gills, and a fourth that looked very much like a young
humanoid river otter.

And behind all of them, clicking at each other and occasionally prodding a curious child with their snouts, swam the aquarium’s full pod of dolphins, eight in all, with a manta ray lazily drifting along the bottom of the pool’s waist-high deep end visible through the crystal-clear water.

“If these children know how to swim,” Gang Orca said, stepping forward with what I could maybe, possibly, charitably identify as a broad grin, if I squinted, “then they are less likely to need a rescue in the event of danger, helping not just Pro Heroes, but also lifeguards and other safety and relief personnel. This is the purpose of our swimming lessons.” He turned towards me now…and I finally got a nice, long look at just what it was my boss had been holding this whole time.

“He says this, while holding a vintage Shamu SeaWorld soda cup.” Taiki had to stifle a snort, and I could see Gang Orca’s eye begin to twitch. “You seriously went all the way to the United States just to get that?” I couldn’t keep the shit-eating grin off my face now. “How many kids have come up to ask about that, only to run away when they see the teeth?”

Gang Orca didn’t answer. He plodded over to me, the flip-flop of his sandals loud enough to draw the attention of everyone present, including the penguin, the dolphins, and the manta ray that had been lounging, but was now at the surface and peering above the water line. He stopped directly in front of me, and I had to crane my neck so far back to meet his gaze that I had to put a hoof back and adjust my stance so I wouldn’t fall over.

“This is your turn, Chimera.” In a blur of motion, Gang Orca was suddenly next to me, one massive hand clasped about halfway down my tail—again. “Your chance to provide EXTRA GUIDANCE!”

Then, with a great, mighty heave, he picked me up by my tail and tossed me into the deepest part of the pool. I barely had a moment to thank my lucky stars that I’d packed this bikini instead of the red one before I hit the water back-first. I stayed underwater for a moment to gather my wits back about me, then pushed myself back up to the surface. I brushed the hair out of my eyes, and then the feeling of something oddly slick trying to crawl up my back and shoulders let me know that the manta ray was all over me, and that I probably had the world’s silliest sunhat right now.

“I know buddy.” I turned to face the critter, and ran a hand along its smooth back, nudging it off and away so I could look at all the assembled people. Sure enough, there was a general titter of laughter running over the gathering, with several of the kids flailing as they suddenly found themselves having to sit back up after falling over with the giggles.

“Umiko-san,” I said, looking at the woman. “Any tips for my hair? The boss seems intent on wrecking it with salt water this week.”

“Work first,” she said, tone lightly admonishing. “You can grow gills, yes?” I nodded, and Umiko clapped. “Sana-chan, Suika-chan! Sasame-chan! You three will be with Kanna-chan today, okay?” Next thing I knew, Umiko had the three kids with gills seated on the back of a dolphin, who was busy chirping and clicking as it (he? she?) brought the tykes over my way. The dolphin stopped in front of me with the kids, then nudged me with its snout, and when I looked down I saw that it had one of those Etch-a-Sketch type of pads, a pad with a magnetic stylus that you could use to write with metal shavings, clutched in between its teeth. I reached down to grab it, then looked at the kids perched on horseback…err, dolphinback.

“So…” I looked at the kids, and at the gills each of them had on their necks. “Who wants to go for a dip?”
The three of them summarily tilted off the dolphin’s back one by one, sinking like stones and spooking the poor manta ray, who’d resumed lounging on the bottom. I groaned.

I’m pretty sure the dolphin was laughing at me.

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はい、みんなちゃん!
Okay everyone! I wrote on the pad and turned it towards them, my own shifted eyes and gills letting me sit underwater comfortably, eyes completely immune to the salt as I pointed at the names I’d written beneath that to see who’s who. Sana-chan? The first girl, who looked to have very thin, pale blue tendrils or tentacles instead of hair, raised her hand. Her gills didn’t look very fish-like, unlike the ones I’d grown, and instead very much resembled those of a squid, the ones they have at the sides of their… bell? I think that’s the word for it? Suika-chan? The second girl, who actually had a long, serpentine tail instead of legs, raised her hand. Sasame-chan? The third girl, whose gills were identical to mine, had grey, shark-like skin, a dorsal fin, and a tail that very much resembled a thresher shark’s. She raised her hand, and I smiled at the three of them before running the little slide at the top of the pad to erase it.

泳ぎ方を見ていますか?
Can you show me your swimming technique? I wrote, then turned it towards them. The three girls leaned in, squinting as they read, and all frowned in confusion. I blinked, turning the pad back towards me, and realized my mistake. I crossed out the first two kanji, and replaced them with simple, easier to understand hiragana.

およぎかたを見ていますか?

The kids’ eyes all lit up, and then they immediately turned their eyes on each other. There seemed to be some sort of silent agreement, as though this exact thing had happened before, and the three all started playing rock paper scissors. It looked like Suika lost, and she slumped slightly before I washed some water over in their direction with my tail. It may not have looked like anything, but the current passing over them was unmistakable. The other two girls started giggling a bit at Suika, at which point I swam over to them and put my hands on each of their shoulders. The teasing stopped immediately, and I smiled gently at Suika before giving her a wave with my tail. She gave me a look before she went ahead and tried to swim. Well, that’s what I’d like to call it, except… well, she sort of just slithered along the bottom of the pool instead. She got to the other end and looked at me, then looked down sadly when she saw that I hadn’t quite managed to school my features in time, and had been frowning slightly. I forced on a smile and gestured for her to come back, which she did, and I brought the pad up.

I’ll show you. Then I waved to get Sasame’s attention as well, since I’m fairly certain she was having this problem too, then turned so they could watch my tail shift. It grew longer and thicker, the skin changing to scales banded in white and black. Soon, it looked like I had most of a giant banded sea snake growing out of my back, and I began to swim.

The issue Suika seemed to be having is that she didn’t know the proper form to actually swim with a tail. I swam to the end of the pool, arms and legs by my sides and only using my tail to propel me, using my body to help as I swayed side to side, letting my tail do most of the work. I did a couple circuits of the area, then turned and held my tail out as I returned it to normal, then switched its form to match Sasame’s. I made another few circuits of the pool, a little more lazily this time, though still managing the same speed.
It was... actually not the most comfortable way to swim. I wanted to do a more up and down, dolphin-style swim, but a quick look at Sasame’s and Suika’s tails was enough to let me know that it wouldn’t work that well for them. Suika didn’t really have fins so much as she did a slight tapering and shaping to let her cut through the water, and Sasame’s tail fin was oriented like a shark’s. Up and down wouldn’t do anything for her, but side to side would.

You try now, I wrote on the pad, then pointed at Suika and Sasame while showing them. They both turned to try, and I took the opportunity to gesture Sana my way and shift back to normal. You too, I wrote, and pointed at her. She complied and turned to... well, try and swim after the other girls, and I flopped down to the bottom of the pool and sat down, at which point the manta ray came over and... settled in my lap. Okay. Guess I’ll just… pet it like a dog?... yeah, that’s working. I made sure to try and pay attention to the girls, and watched.

Suika and Sasame had a little bit of trouble at first, but they quickly started to look just a little bit more natural of swimmers. Both of them pretty much sunk to the bottom on their first attempts, but after using their arms to push off and angle a little upwards, they managed to maintain a tiny bit of distance between themselves and the bottom of the pool, Sasame more than Suika. Sana, on the other hand, was doing a fairly respectable attempt at the doggie paddle… but she had zero coordination whatsoever. I nudged the manta ray off of me, again, and waded over to Sana.

Watch me, I wrote out, then handed the pad to her. First, I demonstrated a doggie paddle like she’d been trying, but made sure to do two things different. One, I had my hands closed instead of splayed wide, so that the water didn’t just pass through my fingers and I instead pushed it to propel myself. And two, I kicked. Sana was pretty much not using her legs at all save to orient herself, and while Sasame didn’t really need to use hers and Suika didn’t have any, people with a normal body shape get massive amounts of swimming power from their legs. It’s the biggest issue kids have when learning to swim: they forget to use their legs, or they kick at a frenzy, random pace with zero rhythm to it. I did a mostly full circuit of the doggy paddle, and then gestured for Sana to swim over to me. She got the hand part right, but she still wasn’t kicking properly.

I turned to the other two girls to see that a dolphin had come over to play with them, and they hung off of its dorsal fin and tried to push it across the pool on their own. I smiled at that; clever critter was giving me more time to work with Sana. The other two girls really just needed a small correction before whatever they had upstairs thanks to their Quirks kicked in to help. Sana, on the other hand… while she could breathe underwater, that was it. She had to do everything else from scratch.

But we worked at it, and after I’m not sure how long, I had Sana swimming over from one end of the pool over to where I waited at the other end. Sasame and Suika were having a blast now that they weren’t just sinking like stones, but I did pity the poor manta ray who kept trying to find some space away from the tykes. That dolphin was a godsend, not just for me, but for the ray as well.

All good things must come to an end though, and even underwater I heard whatever noise Gang Orca made to signal everybody. I grabbed ahold of Sana with one arm, Suika with the other, and Sasame with my tail, and pulled all three of them up above the surface with me to listen to whatever was going on.

“I’m afraid we’re out of time today!” Umiko announced, standing tall in the shallowest end of the pool. “Thank you everyone for coming, and we hope at least a few of you will be able to come back next Tuesday at the same time!”

“Will Miss Seahorse be here again?” I heard Sana ask next to me, and couldn’t help but blush slightly, though I did have to shake my head and frown a bit. She turned to face me, and her
smile *instantly* faded when she saw my frown.

“Not next time,” I said gently, “or the time after that, or after that. But hopefully sometime soon?” I saw her lip wobble a bit before she hugged me tight, and the other two girls I was holding joined in. A collective “aww…” went up from everyone around, and I couldn’t help returning their watery smiles with one of my own.

It took another fifteen minutes or so to pass all the kids back to their parents, and Sana’s mom managed to extract from me both my phone number and a promise to call if I was ever back in town to offer more swim time for her daughter (“Bye Miss Seahorse!” Sana waved back at me, practically walking backwards as she and her mom left). Once they were cleared out, Umiko corralled the dolphins through a tunnel back to wherever in the aquarium they usually stayed, and called for another aquarium employee to bring the manta back to the shark and ray experience’s pool.

“So,” she said once that was done, penguin in her arms flapping its flipper-wings against her arms in a staccato rhythm, “looks like somebody had a good time. ‘Miss Seahorse’, hmm?”

“Shush, you!” I said, smiling in spite of myself, feeling all those warm and fuzzies despite the chill of the air on my wet skin. “Anyone got a towel, by the way?”

The world suddenly went dark.

“I did *not* mean to throw one on me!” I yelled, half-muffled by the very thick towel draped over my head.

“I hope you weren’t expecting me to hold it out for you,” Gang Orca said, tone somewhere between amused and satisfied. I pulled the towel off the top of my head and wrapped it around myself, glaring lightly at the boss while straining some of the water out of my hair with my hands. “Get cleaned up, rest, eat, and then meet in my office at eight o’clock. Enough time should have passed by then.” He turned around and started walking for the door.


“Time enough for the Coast Guard and police to have acted on our efforts this morning.” He said it as though it was the most obvious thing in the world, and to him, it probably was. And… it probably should have been relatively obvious to me as well, I realized. Gang Orca pulled the door open and entered the aquarium’s interior, Taiki close behind.

“Don’t worry about it.” I turned to look at Umiko, who held the penguin out for me to take. I made sure my towel was cinched around me, then graciously accepted the very enthusiastic flightless bird, who promptly nuzzled up against my neck. “He’s always like that. I wish he wouldn’t keep dragging Taiki-kun away so fast, though.” She sighed, but perked up quickly. “Tokidoki-kun likes you, though!”

“The bird is named ‘sometimes’?” I asked, looking down at the silly penguin in my arms. Man, what an affectionate critter. “Oh, did Taiki ask you out finally?”

“Yes!” Umiko said, exhilarated. “He said to have a nice dress ready for Saturday! Ooh, I’m so excited!”

“Saturday?” I asked, and Umiko nodded in confirmation. Huh. A nice dress for Saturday… Katsuki
said ‘wait for sat’... curiouser and curiouser. What do they know that I don’t?...

Whatever. I have to get back. I reached to give Tokidoki the penguin back to Umiko, and he protested enough that Umiko set him down, whereupon he waddled right back over to me. I gave Umiko an exasperated look, and she laughed.

“Just make sure to come play with him later,” she said, reaching down to pick our feathery friend up. “I’ll get him back to the penguin plaza. You head back to work, hero!” She winked at the end there, and I laughed.

“Not a hero yet!” I laughed back. “Just a student. Trainee at best.”

“Honey, I saw the Sports Fest too,” Umiko added. “You kids may as well already be pros. Now shoo, shoo!” She made the same shothing motion with a hand, which immediately had to go right back to holding Tokidoki back as he tried to go waddling off again. I laughed, but obliged, heading back through the aquarium to HQ.

That penguin, I swear.... Hm. Wonder if I can sneak him home with me?... Ha. Yeah, right.

* * * * *

Several hours later, I was clean, dressed, fed and a lot happier. But there’s no rest for the weary, so of course it was right back to the grind.

“Coast Guard sent over all their photos, video, and paperwork from the raid this morning.” Taiki typed away at his laptop, and with a press of a button, it was all displayed on the wall of Gang Orca’s office. I blinked in surprise, then followed the boss’s finger towards a trio of projectors mounted in the middle of the ceiling. Dang, he’s got this place loaded for bear!... wait, no, that’s a hunting term, doesn’t work. Alright, what’s a more appropriate term, um... shit. I don’t know. I can’t think of a good one.

Whatever. I pushed that thought out of mind and tried to take a closer look at what was on the projector screen. They had a specific bit of the hull, marked in a near-perfect circle, identifying where on the interior corresponded to that bit we found on the outside of the ship. They even found the small metal dart that Gang Orca had tossed through that part of the hull, and photographed it for evidence.

“Do you actually carry those things around just for stuff like that?” I asked him.

“Yes. And no,” he answered. “My hands are too big to handle chopsticks. The wooden ones are toothpicks.” I boggled; that thing was big enough for me to use as a dowel! A sharp, pointy dowel, but a dowel nonetheless! “The metal ones have trackers in them. It took practice, but I can throw them hard enough to pierce the side of most any vehicle, but not so strongly that it goes through and through.” He chuffed. “I also use them for garlicky foods. Stainless steel.”

“I…” I trailed off. “I don’t even know how to respond to that.”

“If you’re done blowing the rookie’s mind, boss?” Taiki interrupted. I could feel my cheeks burning slightly in embarrassment, and I crossed my arms, huffing. He did not blow my mind! I was just... a little dumbstruck, that’s all. Big difference in magnitude of surprise. “Anyway, Chief Kadokawa had them send over an itemized list of what they found. Five hundred kilos of finished Trigger, twenty-five hundred kilos of precursor...” He looked up at Gang Orca. “No Purple Haze this time either.”
“Is that a recent thing?” I asked, perplexed. “Not to have it, I mean?”

“Well, it is perplexing because it doesn’t fit any known patterns,” Taiki admitted. “It first showed up a bit over a year ago, and it was incredibly scarce. Around September of last year is when its supply apparently peaked, and that level held steady until the last month or so.” He frowned. “We haven’t seen any of it in the past two weeks.”

“And yet the shipments still come in,” Gang Orca spoke up, “and all without any of the usual incidents that tend to occur alongside Trigger use. All of which would imply that while the supply still exists, it is so scarce that it’s reached levels of value akin to precious metals.”

“Well that makes sense,” I interjected, “it’s probably saved them untold amounts of product and funds just by being safer to use. Though I wonder why it’s called ‘Purple’ Haze,” I mused to myself.

“It lifts the aggression caused by normal Trigger use,” Taiki added, fingers flying across the keys and trackpad, “and it’s literally purple.” He clicked once more, and a picture blew up on the projector screen. I looked up to take a peek and… that’s...

My breath caught in my throat.

“You see something,” Gang Orca stated. It wasn’t a question.

“I’ve seen one of those vials before,” I admitted, pointing down at the bottom. “If you put that under a blacklight, a brand name should come up. It was…” I trailed off, snapping my fingers. “Shit, it’s right on the tip of my tongue, something German? Weisen, eisen… uh…”

“Wesenproduktion,” Taiki filled in, pulling up the website. “Let me send an e-mail to the Chief, tell him to get his techs on that. But still, this is a ridiculous stroke of luck.” He turned to me, incredulous. “Where and how did you see this, anyway?”

“W-well, it’s a bit of a funny story actually,” I began. “Turns out that company sent a really grabby, and really young rep to the Sports Fest, and—”

The sound of an air raid siren, blaring in an internationally recognized pattern, cut all three of us off. As one, we looked to where my phone sat at the desk, blasting its tune at max volume despite having been set to vibrate. It was the internationally recognized pattern: three fast, three short, three fast, stop, repeat.

My blood ran cold.

Hero SOS is a unique app, specially designed for the families and close friends of Pro Heroes, the type of person that unscrupulous villains would consider using as leverage against a perceived nemesis. The application, when used, installs special permissions on the phone that force its GPS to broadcast the device’s location, while also allowing calls through from designated protectorates and protectees. I’ve had it installed on my phone since the moment I’ve owned one, as has Pony, and we’ve often complained about the drain on battery life the app causes without seeing any actual use for it.

“Speakerphone,” Gang Orca said, countenance grave. He knew what this meant. I hurriedly turned my phone over and answered the emergency call, but not before I saw who was calling.
Pony.

“Kanna!” “Kanna-chan!”

“M-mom!? Pony!?” I yelled into the phone, somewhere between shocked, surprised, and terrified. The two of them were together? What was happening in Hosu? “What’s going on!?”

“Brain things!” Pony’s voice screamed back. “Brains and eyes! There’s tons of them, and they’re—”

“Look out!” Mom’s voice suddenly interjected, and I heard what sounded like them dropping the phone, along with a horrible, cacophonous screech that I would recognize anywhere.

Noumu.

“Tenya ran off!” Pony said, her voice sounding distant, gasped out between pants. “A-and we can’t find your dad!”

“B-but, can’t you find dad on the SOS!?” I yelled back, feeling a sinking dread in the pit of my stomach.

“I…” Mom couldn’t keep talking. I knew it.

“You removed him.” I grabbed my phone and spun it towards me, performing my personal pattern of taps at the corners that would override the OS and force the app’s GPS map open: three at the top right, one at the bottom left, two each at the top left and bottom right, followed by one more tap at each corner in clockwise order. My phone’s lock screen disappeared, replaced by a map of Hosu City. Two blinking blue dots right next to each other represented Mom and Pony. A third, halfway across the city, blinked red.

Dad’s phone had been damaged, but the GPS had recorded his last known location.

“The narrow alley by Ekou street, 4-2-10!” Beside me, Gang Orca had pulled his own phone out of his pocket and spoke into it in hushed tones, and Taiki closed his computer, reaching beneath the table for something apparently stowed there. “He might be hurt!”

“Pony, go.”

“But Aun——”

“I’ll handle things here! Now GO!” A moment later, and I heard the sound of cracking concrete, followed by the unmistakable echo of Pony’s heavy hooves pounding the streets.

“I have to go Kanna, I’m sorry!” Pony’s voice rang through one last time, strained.

And the line went dead.

I looked up to Gang Orca and Taiki, both of their faces set with grim determination. I opened my mouth to say something, but… but nothing came out. Words wouldn’t come.

“A helicopter is inbound,” Gang Orca said. He set a hand on my shoulder, heavy with purpose. I looked up to meet his gaze. My gaze blurred, and I blinked, eyes hot and itchy. “Come.”
Gang Orca guided me out of his office and to the elevator. I don’t know how long we waited for the helicopter. I only barely registered getting in, putting on the ear protection, and harnessing myself into the seat.

Please be okay, Pony. Please make it to Dad in time.

Please.
“Alright you two.” Manual, dressed in his steel-blue hero outfit, pulled off his fish-finned helmet and ran a hand through short, close-cut brown locks, then fixed an eye on his two charges. “It’s been a long day, and you two have done well. How about dinner on me tonight, yeah?”

“Oh, how about some ramen or udon? I’m feeling noodles!” Pony immediately answered, all smiles at the prospect of a free meal… and more importantly, the kind of conversation that could result from it. So far, the most valuable aspect of this work placement had been just how good of a teacher Manual was. It seemed as though he had an answer to any possible question Pony could ask, even with how wildly different their respective Quirks were. And given how often people rotated through his hard-capped, twelve sidekick roster, it wasn’t hard to see why: when he described himself as ‘the beginner’s guide to being a Pro Hero’, he wasn’t lying. In Pony’s opinion, it would be better to phrase it as ‘THE’ guide, bar none. It had been incredible! She turned to her current companion and longtime friend, sidling up to him ever so slightly. “What do you think, Tenya? Any objections?”

“Either would do,” he answered. And… that was it. Pony couldn’t help the frown that slid across her face at that. Both days now, Tenya had been… well, not robotic, the boy’s mannerisms were always that particular brand of stiff anyway. If she had to pick a word it would be… what was that one, stony? No, stoic! That’s the one she was looking for. Tenya had been incredibly stoic, almost to the point of being outright cold to others. Manual had already needed to rebuke him once, though the Pro Hero softened once he realized that the three of them were right near the hospital where Tensei lay paralyzed. To be honest, Pony couldn’t blame him. She could hardly remember it now, but she’d been practically catatonic when her mother died, and visiting her grave was still a harrowing, emotionally trying experience. But there was a clear difference between what she’d gone through and what Tenya seemed to be feeling. In those times, Pony only felt a prolong, deep sadness. As for Tenya, occasionally, if she was looking at just the right time…

She’d catch a flicker of burning rage deep in his eyes. It was there in the set of his brow, the tension of his jaw, the way he seemed to stare through people to the streets behind them.

Pony was worried for Tenya.

“Excellent!” Manual clapped his hands and bade his two charges follow. “It’s getting close to eight, so the dinner rush should be petering out. There’s a good place a few blocks from here, especially if you’re feeling tonkotsu!”

But she wouldn’t let it show.

“Sounds great!” She grabbed Tenya by one bulky, jagged arm of his costume, dragging him along with her in Manual’s wake.

Pity was the last thing he needed right now.

“I can walk for myself, Pony-san.” Tenya pulled his arm away from her, stepping two steps ahead of her in the process. Pony frowned at his back.

He’d been like this all day. They were friends. Why did he have to be so curt, short even? When Manual taught them the proper procedure for informing emergency personnel what had transpired, there was none of Tenya’s usual verbose nature. It had been short, clipped. Almost like he felt this
was a waste of time, and wanted to be doing something else, something that he deemed to be more important. He’d been almost brutal when Manual had given them leave to apprehend a pair of shoplifters, tripping the man with a leg sweep so hard that both she and Manual had worried that the thief’s leg had been broken. It was only bruised, badly but still only surface damage, but the signs were clear: something was eating at Tenya.

And whatever that something was, they were no closer to resolving it.

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“... and that’s why you should always keep an eye out for balloons in storm drains!” Manual finished off his most recent story as the three of them emerged from the restaurant. Pony wasn’t quite sure what the moral of the story was, but then again, it probably only mattered in very specific instances. That being said, something about the man’s latest tale was... oddly familiar. It tickled at a memory of something she’d seen out of the corner of her eye while Kanna was on one of her classics binges. She’d have to ask about it later. For now though, there was still the matter of Tenya.

Once again, he’d spent the entirety of their meal searching for stuff on his phone. Pony had managed to catch a very, very brief glimpse of what he’d been searching, and all she’d managed to glean was a mapping application with multiple location pins set into it. It hadn’t been a long enough glance to determine the location he was checking, what with how labyrinthine some of Tokyo’s various suburbs and prefectures could be, nor did she manage to actually read the information on the pins. Despite that, she had a sinking suspicion of just what Tenya’d been looking at for the past two days.

The Hero Killer’s most recent attack had been four days prior, specifically targeting one of Ingenium’s former sidekicks, a young woman who’d left the agency after Tensei’s paralysis in search of a less dangerous career path. Her Quirk hadn’t been exceptional, minor toughness and durability that increased as the ambient temperature shifted further away from 20 degrees centigrade in either direction, but on that particular evening she should have been a rather dangerous mark for Stain, with its temperature at a balmy 32 Celsius. Even with all that, her corpse bore absolutely no defensive wounds, despite the litany of cuts along her body.

Pony had taken note of the attack’s location, and eyed Tenya’s behavior when they came near the site during patrol today. He’d stopped in front of an alley that would deviate from the current path, but take him to where the attack happened. It was only when Manual called that Tenya seemed to come to his senses and follow them.

But she wasn’t so sure.

If Pony had learned one thing from her father, it was that the answer was sometimes right under your nose, even if you couldn’t see it. She had a hunch as to what was going on, why Tenya had chosen to intern with Manual, as opposed to any of the myriad offers he’d received from more, shall she say ‘prestigious’ heroes. He wanted to be near Hosu. He wanted to be near his brother’s attacker.

He wanted his pound of flesh... and he wanted to extract it personally.

“Alright you two.” Manual pulled up in front of the police station, and looked down at his two charges. “As a Pro Hero, you’re going to be working with the police. You’re going to be working with them a lot. And when you’re trying to do two halves of the same job, it’s important to be on the same page.” Wait, what was that? Pony tilted her head to the side, eyes unconsciously looking off to
Pony, upon hearing her chosen hero name, started slightly, but redoubled her efforts, frowning. It was faint, incredibly so, even for her enhanced hearing. Even so, it was almost unmistakable.

“I think I hear screams,” she said, voice far calmer than she actually felt. She couldn’t afford to let anything seep in and break her concentration, not yet. “It’s… it’s really faint.” She shook her head. “I can’t tell where it’s coming from. Too many buildings in the way.”

Manual, in a move that she would forever remember, did not simply dismiss her out of hand.

“Hold position here a moment.” He gestured for the two of them to wait in front of the police building, and went inside.

Not a moment later he was sprinting back out, radio in hand.

“Vespa, all hands! We’ve got reports of multiple villains! Call Ingenium’s agency, call Native, call everyone! Just hurry!” Manual clipped the radio to a strap on his costume’s shoulder and looked to both Pony and Tenya, eyes hard. “Epona, Tenya, we’re moving! On the double!” Manual took off at a steady stride, incredibly fast for somebody whose Quirk didn’t augment his base abilities in any way. But for Pony and Tenya, he was incredibly easy to keep up with, the two of them pulling alongside their current mentor in a matter of moments.

“What is it?” Tenya asked, a note of anticipation, of… hunger, Pony thought, in his voice.

“That brain thing All Might fought at USJ!” Manual yelled over the sound of their footfalls. Pony nearly faltered, but got her hooves back underneath her in time to keep an upright posture. She didn’t want to have to resort to running on all fours yet, it reduced her field of vision, and right now she needed to be careful.

“Noumu!?” Tenya asked, shocked. “But All Might—”

“There’s three of them,” Manual revealed, breathing hard as he pushed himself harder. “We need to—move!”

Manual suddenly shoved Tenya to the side, knocking him down, and leapt the other way, pulling Pony to the ground as he did. She skidded slightly, thankful for the padding on her updated costume’s pants, and turned to look.

She caught the barest glimpse of something with an impossibly pallid complexion, and when she finally tracked it with her eyes she gasped. Ragged, leathery beige wings sprouted from hunched shoulders, the skin pressed tightly against the bones. Pony could make out every single vertebra of the thing’s spine with just the barest glance, and even that brief glimpse was enough for her to tell that this thing’s anatomy was wrong. Its skin was grey as ash, and seemed leathery in the light, worn and dry and dead. The creature’s feet had been warped, twisted until they resembled a bird’s talons, each tipped with a wicked claw. It had a gas mask over its mouth, garbling and distorting anything the beast could have been trying, and likely failing, to say.

And last, but most certainly not least, was the exposed brain, glistening and throbbing under the streetlights, the dense mass jiggling precariously as the thing moved, somehow remaining seated within its open skull.
“Vespa, flyer heading southbound along Kesseru, intercept and incapacitate if possible, pursue if not!” Manual pulled his hand away from the radio and pushed himself up. Pony and Tenya did the same, and followed Manual as he went, Pony pulling ahead of Tenya. They were heading in the direction of the hospital… the hospital where Auntie Kimiko worked. She was supposed to be on break today, wasn’t she? She shouldn’t be anywhere near—

“Wha—Tenya, wait!” Pony stopped at the words, hooves tearing up the pavement as she pulled to a stop and turned around. She caught the barest glimpse of exhaust from Tenya’s Quirk use and a trace whiff of the orange-scented substance before he was gone, the roar of engines fading as he traveled between the buildings. Manual roared his frustration, but schooled himself and turned to Pony.
“Epona, continue on towards the hospital! One of them’s there, render any aid you can!”

“But Tenya—”

“Go!” Pony wanted to protest. She wanted to say no, to help find Tenya. She knew Manual wouldn’t be able to travel at the same speed she could, at the same pace Tenya could manage. But she also understood that Manual knew this city like the palm of his hand: every nook and cranny, every crevasse, every alleyway, side street, cut through, he knew them all. If anybody could track Tenya down, it was him.

She had to trust Manual. She had to trust that he could find Tenya.

Pony fell onto all fours and sprinted for the hospital. A high priority target, as her father once said. Healing heroes, recuperating villains, victims who got away… all of them could be found at a hospital. So many innocent people in harm’s way, unable to do anything to help… she could do something! She had to do something!

She gave a silent prayer for Tenya’s safety. But Pony had to focus. She rounded the final corner to the hospital plaza, and reached out with one hand to grasp a street lamp and pull herself upright. Stopping when on all fours was a harder affair, and it was more difficult to get a glimpse of her surroundings, but with some help from the environment—

“Get down!”

Pony reacted to that voice instantly, ducking to the side and rolling into the street, sure in the knowledge that her natural durability would protect her should a car come through. She rolled to her hooves and looked up at the space she’d just been in, only to see a fractal-branched thingspearing into the brick wall, neatly gouging it and, she assumed, plunging deep into the masonry. With a great, shuddering wrench, the thing pulled free, and Pony saw that it had spread into the cracks and holes, forming a single, solid mass. It… if Pony had to be honest, it looked like a disturbing, eldritch potato masher for a moment, until the merged branches pulled apart from each other, and then reformed into a single, ashen mass that pulled back into… oh God.

Four eyes, at what she could assume were diagonal points, surrounded the wet mass of the Noumu’s brain. The gray tongue slid back into its mouth, and it doubled over on itself, legs too short and upper body too heavy to properly support itself. It croaked, or moaned, or rasped something unintelligible, and turned towards the hospital entrance, and its guardians.

One of Manual’s current roster of sidekicks, Fir, shot off a salvo of sharpened pine needles at the Noumu. The Noumu screeched in pain as the needles pierced its flesh, but instead of sticking out like Pony had expected, they sunk into the Noumu. With a disgusting retch, the thing’s tongue flattened...
out in front of its face, and the very same pine needles shot back out at Fir… but with far more force than he himself had managed. Each one pierced deep into his bark-armored costume, and the power was enough to send him flying back, shattering the hospital’s glass doors behind him.

“Nobody use projectiles!” Pony turned towards the voice, that familiar voice. “We need to get this thing away from the hospital!”

Auntie Kimiko stood where Fir had just been, body armored in a durable exoskeleton as diaphanous wings fluttered behind her, the air shimmering with heat where they passed. Her fingers were tipped with claws, the hospital lights glinting off their razor edges. She stood opposite the Noumu for a moment, circling it carefully, giving the Noumu as narrow of a profile as possible.

Then in an instant, she dashed forward, plunging both sets of claws deep into the Noumu’s abdomen. The thing’s flesh writhed, and then slowly began to crawl up Auntie Kimiko’s hands, as if trying to subsume her as well.

“Pony! Catapult!” Despite her shock at the situation, Pony responded to the well-drilled command instantly, crouching down on all fours and bracing herself, horns parallel with the ground. She heard a grunt, and a heave, and the disgusting sound of claws rending flesh from bone.

And the instant she felt the weight on her horns, she reared up. Like the horses that were her namesake, she threw herself back, the particular nature of her Horn Cannon massively amplifying the force she could apply to the Noumu. It flew off into the night, an unknown distance away from where they currently were. She wasn’t sure in which direction it traveled, but it was away from the hospital.

“This is Wildling, with trainee Epona! Be advised!” Auntie Kimiko ran towards Pony with a radio in hand. “Hostile ‘Four-Eyes’ is clear of the hospital, on a ballistic trajectory towards Hosu Atta Modern Art! Fir is down, requesting status, over!” Kimiko finally reached Pony, and pulled her into a tight hug. “You’re okay, thank goodness! What happened to Manual and Tenya-kun!? Were you separated!”

“Tenya, h-he ran off!” Pony gasped out. “Auntie K, what the heck is going on!?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. It sounded almost painful when she said it. “I don’t know, Pony-chan. This is—”

“This is Vespa!” The radio in Kimiko’s hands crackled to life, and the two of them huddled around it. “Target designated ‘Wings’ has escaped, location unknown; be wary of attacks from above! Target ‘Blind’ is heading to Tanton Square from the north, on a straight line trajectory. Target ‘Four-Eyes’ confirmed to have landed at Hosu Atta and recuperated, Manual currently engaging. Safari en route to Tanton, but we cannot reach Native! Trainee Epona, you have been authorized to fight! I repeat, you have been—”

Pony had stopped listening. They couldn’t reach Native. In all this chaos, Uncle Kenta was unaccounted for.

In the Hero Killer’s current hunting grounds, the repentant hero was missing.

“Auntie K, we have to find him!” Pony pulled out her cellphone and tapped at the corners: once in the top right, three in the bottom right, four in the top left, two in the bottom right, and then once more in each, going counterclockwise. Her normal lock screen faded away, showing her dad’s
location at the fire department, and Kanna’s all the way in Shinagawa. “Damn it, I don’t—what about your phone!?” She demanded.

“I…” Kimiko trailed off. Pony caught on immediately.

She dialed. The line connected.

“Kanna!” “Kanna-chan!”

“M-mom!? Pony!?” Her best friend’s voice was tremulous, shaky. “What’s going on!?”

“Brain things!” Pony blurted into the phone. “Brains and eyes! There’s tons of them, and they’re—”

“Look out!” Pony felt Kimiko shove her to the side and lash out with one suddenly-massive arm, raking at the underside of a great beast swooping down from above them. The winged Noumu roared, whether in anger or pain or something else Pony didn’t know. She went to bring the phone back up, but saw it had skittered out of her hand and into the street. She clambered over on all fours and picked it up, huddling behind Auntie Kimiko as the Noumu flew off to who-knows-where.

“Tenya ran off!” Pony yelled into the handset. “A-and we can’t find your dad!”

“B-but, can’t you find dad on the SOS!?” Kanna responded in kind. Pony looked to Auntie Kimiko, wishing she’d hear otherwise.

But if the grim, sorrowful expression on her face was any indication, neither of the two girls needed to hear her answer.

“I…”

“You removed him.” Auntie Kimiko visibly flinched at the accusation, and Pony found that she wouldn’t meet her eyes. Kimiko began to worry at a fingernail, grinding her teeth hard onto the hardened keratin. “The narrow alley by Ekou street, 4-2-10! He might be hurt!”

Kimiko and Pony looked at each other. That was a fair ways away… back in the direction Tenya had gone, Pony realized.

“Pony, go.” Behind her, Pony could see the winged Noumu coming around for a second pass.

“But Aun—”

“I’ll handle things here!” She shoved Pony away and morphed again, preparing to fight. “Now GO!”

Gritting her teeth, Pony turned and ran. Her hooves struck the pavement hard, cracking it in places as she pushed herself harder than she ever had.

“I have to go Kanna,” she screamed into the phone, “I’m sorry!” Pony hung up, stowed the phone into her pocket, and went down onto all fours.

She only hoped she wasn’t too late.

- - - - - - - -
4-2-10 Ekou, she repeated to herself. 4-2-10 Ekou. She cut as close a path as she could, head down and barreling through any obstruction she could reasonably go through without worry. Her horns had already sheared through two cars and the corners of three buildings in her haste.

4-2-10 Ekou. She was almost there. Three more blocks, then a left, then into the alley between warehouses. She could make it in time, she could—

“... are worth keeping alive.” Pony pulled up short, straining her ears. There, to the left... that alleyway! “Unlike these others…”

That was...

“Shit, Iida-kun! No, don’t!”

No—Tenya too!? She wouldn’t make it in time! Not unless...

Pony eyed the warehouses. She’d been given permission to fight...

Pony fell down to all fours. She set her neck and shoulders, horns bared in front of her. She pawed the ground, once, twice.

Then, with a cracking of concrete beneath her hooves, she was off.

Pony crashed through the first warehouse in a horrible cacophony of tearing corrugated steel and crumbling concrete, and out through that into the next with no signs of slowing. She pushed herself harder, gritting her teeth and shoving through. There remained one wall between her and Uncle K, her and Tenya.

Pony met the wall.

The wall lost.

The concrete crumbled beneath Pony’s horns, her momentum transferring and sending it flying out into the alleyway. A figure in black and red, so fast she could barely track it with her eyes, leapt back in an instant, steel glinting in the dim moonlight. Stain, she thought. Just to her left, Midoriya from 1-A, straining against some invisible force, lying pronate on the ground.

And to her right, Tenya in the same state as Midoriya, Native struggling as he leaned against the wall...

And a line of flickering heat, coming her way.

Pony threw herself down to the ground, sliding into a defensive position next to Native, and watched as the lance of flame soared above her, scorching the Hero Killer’s left arm before he could evade, airborne as he was. Stain bit back a cry of pain and leapt away, arm already blistering terribly from the brief contact.

“Midoriya…” At the mouth of the alley, Todoroki Shouto stood, flame in one hand and phone in another. From this distance, Pony could barely tell what was on his screen. “You made me late.”

“N-no…” Pony turned to where Tenya lay, the tips of his fingers barely able to quiver. What was this? Stain’s Quirk? “All of you… why? Why are you here!?”

“To save you, you idiot.” Todoroki stepped forward, fire burning within the palm of one hand, while the other, now empty of the phone, shimmered with frost. “Midoriya, you need to be more specific next time you—”

“Don’t let him get close!” Midoriya yelled. It was almost too late for Todoroki to dodge the knives soaring through the air…

But Pony reacted in time. She took a step forward and raised her head, the two knives bouncing harmlessly off of her horns and clattering to the ground.

“We need to get out of here!” She yelled. “Can you—”

“No good!” Native yelled. “It’s his Quirk, we can’t move!”

Pony paused, thinking. Three to protect, two to fight, one foe. Normally the numbers would be in their advantage, two against one… but Pony had no illusions about winning this fight. They were UA students, yes… but they were still in their first semester. Up against a villain who had massacred almost a full dozen Pro Heroes?

This wasn’t a fight they could win. But… was there an answer? Midoriya, he was closer to Stain than the others. But the Hero Killer was ignoring him.

“... are worth keeping alive.” That’s what Pony had heard. And she’d seen Stain standing over Tenya, with Midoriya left alone behind him.

It was a gamble. A huge risk. But if she was right—

“Pony-chan.” She turned to look at Native. “He doesn’t want to kill Midoriya. If you can get Tenya out of here—”

“No!” Tenya roared. “This is my—”

Stain leapt again. A wall of ice rose up to block his path, box him into a firing corridor for Todoroki to loose another burning salvo. And yet, with agility and skill honed from what had to be years of experience, Stain bounded up the ice, using throwing knives as one would an ice axe, and the spikes on the front of his boots to propel himself upward. Once again, Stain was untouched.

And Todoroki took a glancing knife blow for his efforts. An instant later, Stain was upon him, tongue arcing out of his mouth—

“No!” Pony wrenched her head to the side, one horn catching Stain and flinging him down the alleyway. He righted himself in midair and landed, quiet as a cat and twice as graceful, full of murderous intent.

“Take Native!” Tenya yelled. “He’s who Stain wanted first! Take him and go, Pony!”

“But—” Pony caught herself, and turned to Todoroki. “Cover me!”
“With pleasure.” Another barrage of icicles sprouted from nothing, launched at Stain as Pony kneeled down beside Native. She maneuvered his arms so that they adhered to the high-friction pads on the back of her new, Roman-styled cuirass, and his legs to the ones on her sides. Unless he could all of them at once with enough force, he wasn’t coming loose.

“I’m going!” She looked down the alley, and saw Midoriya beginning to push himself upright. Hope sprung into her eyes, and she shared a meaningful look with Todoroki. “Keep him safe!”

“You won’t get away!” Pony lowered her head and charged out of the alley. Behind her, an inferno from the depths of hell itself sprung up from nothing, and a cry of fury pierced the night. On her back, Native hung limp, unable to support his own weight. His feet dragged slightly along the ground, but they were on their way.

They were safe. They were—

“Above!” Native cried suddenly. Pony leapt to the side, but the four-eyed Noumu’s razor tongue still managed to clip the side of her forearm. She managed to hold back the shout of pain; it was a cut, she saw, but not deep. She could live. She had to make it to where the other heroes were, to get this thing off of her tail—!

Pony sprinted for Tanton Square, where she knew multiple heroes would be waiting, fending off the other Noumu that had appeared there. To the fountain she knew lay in the middle of Tanton Square.

Two minutes later, the four-eyed Noumu in hot pursuit, Pony emerged into the square. On her back, Native seemed to slowly be regaining some ability to move, but he was still unable to provide any more assistance than telling her where to dodge. But now that they were at their destination, he didn’t need to offer anything more.

“Manual!” Pony yelled, and she saw her mentor turn. She bounded up the fountain and then over it. The Noumu followed—

And all the water in the fountain roared to life, shooting the Noumu skyward. A lance of blue-white fire shot through the night sky, piercing the four-eyed Noumu and burning it to ash in an instant.

Pony looked up to see Manual approaching, alongside Endeavor… and Auntie Kimiko.

“You’re okay!” She cried, falling to her knees and hugging Native and Pony once he’d gotten down from her back. “You made it, oh thank—”

“The others are still there!” Pony yelled, bringing them back to the present. “Midoriya and Todoroki, they’re fighting the Hero Killer! Tenya’s hurt!”

The assembled heroes pulled up short. All except for Endeavor… and a small, old man in yellow.

“Lead the way,” they said in perfect simultaneity.

Pony nodded, and turned around to show them to the fight. Hold on just a moment longer guys, she thought.

The cavalry’s coming.
I feel like this is something that shouldn’t need to be stated, but helicopters are fast. Well, okay. Not all of them are built for speed.

But the rapid response police helicopter we currently sat in, racing towards Hosu as the crow flies? The Tokyo scenery and skylines pretty much blurred past, the streets below us growing indistinct and indistinguishable from one another. And it still might not be fast enough, a small, traitorous part of my mind whispered. By the time we get there, it could be too late. I tried to ignore it, did my best to think positive, to keep my eyes facing forward as we flew over what was unmistakably the Shibuya crossing. But the thoughts kept coming. Tenya could be dead. Pony could be dead. Mom could be dead. Dad could be dead. All ripped apart by the Noumu…

If one of them was enough for All Might, then three?…

“We’ll be over Hosu in sixty seconds!” The pilot’s voice crackled over our headsets, cutting through the roar of the helicopter’s rotors and the din of the wind around us. I resisted the urge to stand up and look out the windshield; my current view was enough to see the glow of flames on the horizon, and trying to look down would be a fool’s errand. Our current speed was too fast to glean any kind of details down on the street, and even if we were going over 4-2-10 Ekou Street, I wouldn’t be able to tell which alley it was, or—

“Bogey incoming!” The co-pilot, whose eyes had been glued to the radar and other sensor readouts, suddenly wrested control of the helicopter from her companion and wrenched the vehicle to the side, just in time to glimpse the slightest traces of something racing past us. I didn’t manage to see what it was. But I didn’t have to.

That guttural cry had haunted my dreams enough times to know what it was.

“It’s coming back around for another pass!”

“I see.” Gang Orca unbuckled his harness and stood, walking the measly two paces to the helicopter’s doors. “Try to pull us alongside it. On the right.” With that, he removed the headset and tossed it onto his seat, then threw the door to the helicopter wide open. The wind blew in with a frenzy, tossing my hair every which way and stinging my eyes, reducing me to squinting through my fingers in incredulity. He was about to jump out of a helicopter. My boss was about to leap out of a helicopter, which had just been going well over a hundred kilometers an hour, with nothing to secure himself or any kind of safety net. And if the confident, self-assured way he braced himself in the doorway, a hand on either side with legs shoulder width apart, one leg back, was any indication… this wasn’t the first time he’d pulled a similar maneuver.

The Noumu’s shriek sped our way, not as high-pitched as the first had been thanks to the Doppler Effect, yet still loud enough to pierce straight through the ear protection we all employed. This time it was the main pilot who’d been observing the radar, and when I say the tightness of his jaw, I I held on tight to the side of my seat, tail wrapping around any sort of hold I could find. A moment passed, and he took control back, pulling the chopper up and to the right, moving us out of the Noumu’s trajectory while simultaneously giving Gang Orca a better angle from which to leap. I could see the Noumu try to bank away from the helicopter through the gap beneath Gang Orca’s arm, the creature bringing its taloned feet to bear in defense.
None of that deterred Gang Orca. With a mighty _heave_ that pushed the left side of the helicopter downward, he crashed into the Noumu, his own massive size rivaling the beast’s own mutated form. The Noumu tried to brace itself, wings splayed to catch the air and slow itself, but Gang Orca’s momentum was simply too much for it. The two of them crashed into the side of a concrete building, Orca forcing the Noumu’s pasty skin against the rough building material. Chunks of cement practically vaporized beneath the force, clouds of concrete dust flying into the air and nearly obscuring them from view. The helicopter pilot pulled up and banked, keeping Gang Orca and the Noumu within view as best he and his co-pilot could.

Gang Orca and the Noumu began to tumble to the ground once Orca ran out of building to force the Noumu into, and the beast took the chance to right itself, flapping furiously for altitude. But Gang Orca still held onto the creature by the ankles. With a mighty tug, he lifted his own weight—and then dropped, letting the downward momentum from his impromptu ‘pull-up’ drag the Noumu downward while it was bringing its wings back up. The two of them crashed down onto a terrace, one for a kitschy tourist trap restaurant downtown, and the helicopter pulled up alongside it.

I unharnessed myself and leapt from the open helicopter door down to the cracked and broken tile of the terrace below, unsteady on my hooves both from the rough flight and the state of the flooring beneath me. The tips of my fingers were already shifting, new glands linking up to the sharp, black claws that had replaced my nails as I approached the downed Noumu. If this one regenerated also, then I had to stop it before it could—

“Rrrraaaaaaaaggh!” Gang Orca’s war cry physically _slammed_ into me, somewhere between audible and ultrasound. I stopped short, nearly stumbling on a loose piece of tile, and could only stand there _watching_ as Orca tore into the Noumu. He had a foot pressed hard on its back, and both hands grasping tightly onto one of its wings. With a sickening squelch, Gang Orca _ripped_ the Noumu’s wing free from its back, possibly even ripping its shoulder blade free along with the limb. I stopped and had to hold a hand up to my mouth, exceedingly carefully so as not to envenom myself, for fear that what little remained of my dinner would try to violently exit the other end. The Noumu… it didn’t bleed. It didn’t have _blood_. It was a brackish, noxious fluid, more like a bug’s innards than a person. But Gang Orca wasn’t finished. He leaned over and grasped the Noumu’s other wing within his mighty jaws. With a single, ferocious tug, he tore the Noumu’s wing apart, leaving it as little more than loose flesh hanging from the monster’s back.

Then, with one final movement, he grabbed the Noumu by its exposed brain and threw it _down through_ the terrace. I could hear the sick, wet _splat_ of the Noumu hitting the ground three floors down.

A hot, acrid taste filled my mouth for an instant. I bit it back, swallowing hard, and then again to try and rid myself of the burning in my throat. That was…

Gang Orca was a hero renowned for his might and ferocity. While some heroes inspired a sense of wonder and relief at their presence, such as All Might or Best Jeanist, Gang Orca fell into the same camp as Endeavor. He intimidated villains just by _existing_. He’d never been known to go overboard and inflict excessive levels of violence upon villains… but the threat was always there. What I’d just seen? It was a reminder that, for all the gentleness and care he’d shown so far, Gang Orca had absolutely zero qualms about being truly _vicious_.

“Where would heroes gather?”

I blinked. Gang Orca turned towards me, spitting a chunk of Noumu flesh out of his mouth and tossing the creature’s ruined wing away with a hand. My stomach roiled again, and I had to hastily
“Chimera.” Gang Orca walked towards me and knelt down to where I sat on my knees. I... I don’t remember when I went down. What I just saw, it, it was... I gulped, looking Gang Orca in the eye. “You know this city. Where would the Pro Heroes gather in a crisis.”

“H-Hosu Memorial Plaza,” I said, accepting the proffered hand to pull myself up. A quick glance around showed me where I was, and from there... I pointed. “T-three blocks that way, then m-make a left.”

“I see.” I felt Gang Orca’s arm wrap around my waist, and next thing I knew we were landing on the street below, and he placed me gently on my hooves. “We should hurry.” With that, Gang Orca took off at a dead sprint. I had to call up a totem and sprint after him, careful to avoid the light cracks and craters his powerful footfalls left in the asphalt. We rounded the corner at a breakneck pace, Gang Orca plunging a fist into an already-damaged building nearby to help him turn, and me using my tail to grab a streetlight and hook around. One more block, and we broke into the plaza proper.

“More incoming! Get ready for—”

“Hold, hold!” A familiar man in light-blue costume, who I recognized instantly as Manual, held up a closed fist to signal a stop to the other hero, his other hand holding something suspended in a sphere of water pulled from the fountain. His eyes raked over the two of us newcomers, widening in recognition. “Gang Orca? But—”

“My trainee received an SOS.” He put a massive hand on my shoulder. I clenched my fists, doing my best to meet Manual’s gaze. “The helicopter is always on call.”

“Gang Orca?” I turned towards the voice, freezing, almost not willing to believe it. “But then—Kanna!”

“Dad!” I pushed Gang Orca’s hand off of my shoulder and ran for where Dad lay, propped up against a wall and barely able to move. Slight tremors seemed to wrack his form, frustration etched deeply into his forehead as he tried and failed to push himself up, his legs scraping at the ground beneath him, but the rest of his body not complying. And next to him...

I nearly slammed into my mother and father, hugging the both of them close, the two of them together, at once, for the first time in nearly a year and a half. So long, it had been so long since I’d been able to be with both of them at once, and—

“Pony!” I cried, realizing what I was missing. “Where’s Pony!? A-and what about Tenya!?”

“Kanna, Kanna!” Mom put a hand firmly on my shoulder and pressed down hard, grounding me enough to drive the sudden hysteria away. “Pony is leading Endeavor and some other heroes to Tenya.” She looked over my shoulder, eyes narrowing as she looked at the thing in the water globe. “Gang Orca-san. Can you take care of that thing?”

“Yes.” I turned to watch as Gang Orca signaled to Manual. Our local hero seemed to read the signal just fine and pulled some of the water away from the Noumu, just enough for it to moan its horrible, unearthly rattle before Gang Orca’a’s hands landed on its head and neck. His shoulders tensed, and then Gang Orca twisted, and tugged, and ripped the Noumu’s head free of its body. The head, even bereft of a heart, or lungs, or any way of oxygenating the brain, continued to try and snap at Gang Orca’a’s hands until he dashed its exposed brain against the concrete.
“That’s two of them, then.” Manual sighed, sagging against the concrete. “Now we just have to get the flier, and—”

“It has been handled,” Gang Orca interrupted, fixing Manual with one eye. “Its wings have been clipped.”

“In that case.” I turned to see Dad push himself up against the wall, his right hand pressed hard against the stab wound in his left shoulder. “Let’s go back up Endeavor with Stain.”

“I’ll stay with the wounded,” Mom added, glancing uncomfortably at Dad, whose free fist clenched involuntarily. “Go.”

“Right.” Manual gestured, and a large mass of water roiled beneath him. He went down on all fours, kept off the ground by a curtain of liquid. “Double time, let’s hurry!”

“Follow me.” Dad shrouded himself with the totem of a cheetah, and led.

* * * * *

“They won!?” Dad gasped, shocked. Pony nodded and mumbled her affirmative, barely audible through the bone-crushing hug I’d grabbed her into the moment I saw her.

And then, there was those three.


One glimpse was all it took to know that they had struggled. They were bloody and beaten, carved and slashed, gouged and stabbed. Each of them nursed many a wound, and it was only the adrenaline that kept them on their feet. Their foe’s Quirk may have been far and away inferior to any of the three’s own, but none of that mattered when the experience gap was against them. I looked to where Stain lay slumped over, bound and hogtied, and shuddered.

“By the time we got here,” a tiny, wizened old man in yellow explained, “they had already stripped the Hero Killer of all his weapons, and needed only to tie him up.” He nodded off to the side, where a small pile of glowing metal and smoking plastic slag lay propped up next to a dumpster. It didn’t take a genius to guess that it was all that remained of the Hero Killer’s arsenal.

“The police transport will be here soon.” Manual placed the radio back in its holster on his shoulder and looked at the assembled heroes. “That makes all three Noumu, and the Hero Killer on top. There’s still a bit more to be done, true, but I think that—”

A bone-chilling, rattling shriek echoed through the street, bouncing off of the buildings, shattering windows, and setting our teeth on edge. For a moment, none of us could move, unable to comprehend just what had made that noise. Beside me, Gang Orca crumpled, falling to a knee with both hands over where I assumed his ears to be.

A blur rushed past.

Brackish ‘blood’ splattered on Pony’s cheek.
Midoriya screamed as the Noumu carried him off into the sky.

“But that’s—!” The protest died in my throat as I got a glimpse at the Noumu’s back. The spot where Gang Orca had destroyed its wings… it still showed damage.

*It had grown another pair.*

“I can’t shoot it down!” Endeavor growled, hand alight with focused flame. “It has the boy!”

“It’s climbing out of my max height!” The old man added. “I’d need a boost to—”

The sound of a knife cutting through rope, soft though it was, roared through the night. Something *moved* between me and Pony, and for the briefest instant I could see a *tongue* sliding across her cheek.

Up ahead, the Noumu keened in dismay and stiffened up, suddenly losing control of its body as it let Midoriya go.

And in one fell swoop, *Stain* plucked Midoriya from the air, landed atop the paralyzed Noumu, and buried his knife in the creature’s brain. A twist and a wrench later, and the thing was properly *dead*.

“All these fake heroes who have overrun our society, and the ‘criminals’ who so aimlessly sprinkle around their ‘power’…” The Hero Killer rasped, dropping Midoriya as he turned towards us. A chill ran down my spine. Those eyes… that was the gaze of a madman. "Those are the targets of my purge. All of this, *all* of this, is for the sake of a *just* world!"

He had the same eyes as the Wendigo.

“*Come! TRY it! None of you pretenders can stop me! The only one I will allow to kill me is the one true hero! All Might!*”

I couldn’t move. I wanted to take a step, to, to… to fight? To hide? To die? Somebody was walking on my grave. I can see it now, the knife sliding between my ribs, feel the life bleeding from—

The Hero Killer stopped. I collapsed to my knees, gasping for breath, soaked in a cold sweat the likes of which I’d only felt a few times before. Beside me, Pony had fallen too, barely holding herself upright, eyes wide open and hands shaking.

We would only learn later that the Hero Killer, armed as he was with only a single knife, had only stopped due to a punctured lung. He’d swallowed some of his own blood, frozen in place, and finally passed out from the pain.

And yet.

I have no doubts that, were it not for that sudden injury, he would have fought us to the death right then and there.

And he might have won.

* * * * *
I’d never seen Hosu Memorial Hospital so busy before. Every available bed was taken up, to the point that some nurses and residents had been sent out to triage the patients that weren’t urgent enough to see immediately. The waiting area was standing room only, and had even begun to pour out into the hallways and onto the street. For all the chaos the Hero Killer had sown among the Pros, it was the trio of Noumu that had wrought infinitely more devastation in their mindless wake.

Dad had a private room on the third floor. There was some damage to his rotator cuff, as well as some worries about possible blood-borne illnesses that could have been lingering on the Hero Killer’s weapons. He sat there, staring at his hands, deep in thought.

And Mom stood in the doorway, unsure if she wanted to come in.

“I…” She shook her head, hesitating. “I don’t…. What do I say?” She whispered to me. I didn’t have an answer. The uncertainty in her voice… it was killing me, hearing it. For over a year, I’d hated my father. For only a few months now, I’d given him another chance, one that he’d grabbed onto with both hands and held as tightly as he could.

And now I don’t know how to get my mom to at least try the same.


I lightly grasped my mother’s wrist, and pulled her into the hospital room, closing it behind us. I took one of the seats next to the bed, the one closer to the head, letting Mom keep just that little bit more distance.

Dad didn’t look up at his. He continued to stare at his hands.

“Kenta—”

“It was like looking into a mirror,” he said, interrupting Mom. “When I saw Tenya-kun there, in that alleyway… It was like looking at a mirror for the first time in years.” He clenched his fists, and grit his teeth. “And for the first time, I saw myself through another’s eyes. I saw what I’d done, what I’d let myself become. And I hated it.”

“Dad…”

“He didn’t even see me,” Dad chuckled, though there was no mirth in it. “He rushed straight into that alley, and I wasn’t even there to him. It was just the new Ingenium and the Hero Killer. And you know the worst part of it all?” He grimaced. “Stain pointed it out. Stain was the one to tell Tenya-kun that I was there, that I existed. That it wasn’t just him and his vengeance.” He looked at Mom. “The same way it was just me and the Wendigo. Years… all in one night. That was me, wasn’t it? That laser-guided focus, ruining everything else I had, everything else that was good in my life?”

“But Dad, you—”

“Don’t,” he interrupted, “try to defend me on this, Kanna-chan.” He reached a hand out to Mom… and for the first time in years, she took it. “Kimiko. I don’t know if you can ever forgive me for what I’ve done. I know I haven’t forgiven myself. But…” The two of them laced their fingers together. “I nearly lost my life tonight. I don’t want to lose any more of it on this stupid, stupid crusade.”
“Kenta…” Mom squeezed his hand once, and let go. She stood up from the chair. “I don’t know if I can. Not now, not yet. Even with this, I just…” Mom trailed off, unable to meet his gaze. “It’s too sudden.”

“I know.” Dad closed his eyes, another sigh escaping. “But I’m done looking at my own family through a window. Done putting other things first. Done, bungling everything I touch.” He looked at Mom, eyes hard. “I am done with Mason.” Mom hissed in surprise, I gasped. “I’m through letting my life revolve around that thing. No more.” Dad’s grip tightened on the hospital blanket. “I should never have tried to take that burden for myself in the first place…”

“But I understand why you did. I may not agree with it, but.” Mom looked back at us from the door. “I can’t promise you anything, Kenta.”

“I know.” Mom opened the door. “I love you, Kimiko,” he said as Mom was walking out. “More than anyone else.”

“… I hope I can say the same, soon.”

Tears rolling down her cheek, Mom closed the door. I leaned into Dad on the bed, pulling him into the tightest hug I could while still being mindful of his wounded shoulder. I cried. He cried. Back in her office, I know Mom cried.

I slept by dad’s bedside that night. I was so scared that if I let him go, he wouldn’t be there when I woke up. That it would all have just been a wonderful fever dream, that the Hero Killer had actually succeeded.

I couldn’t lose him. Not again.
Chapter Fifty-Five

When I woke up (complete with cat-like stretch, shuddering tail, and a jaw-cracking yawn), I saw that Dad had dragged me onto the bed with him, and that I had proceeded to act exactly like a cat. That is to say, I took over the middle, nearly pushed him off the bed, and took all the best parts of the (admittedly terrible) hospital blankets for myself. Dad was already awake, and had lowered one of the bed’s railings so he could sit off the side while a nurse took his vitals, or whatever else she would be doing. It’s probably taking vitals, but it could be something else, and I just was not lucid enough to give a damn about the accuracy of my statement.

“Sorry for stealing the bed,” I mumbled, feeling more than a little embarrassed at the sudden attention. I brought a hand up to inspect my hair as best I could without a mirror. As expected, I’d developed a bit of a cowlick on the left side where my hair had been between head and pillow, and my first reaction was to start gathering my hair into a relatively short ponytail to try and keep it under control… except I didn’t have any hair ties, and was left fumbling for something to use.

“Here.” Dad came to the rescue, reaching to his costume and unwinding one of the leather cords, complete with a brilliant, piercingly blue feather hanging on it, from the side of its left leg.

“Thanks, Dad.” I gratefully accepted it and tied my hair back, making sure the feather hanging on the cord sat at the bottom and didn’t get caught in my hair. Some of my bangs still hung free in front of my left eye, so I brushed them back behind my ear. “Hope you didn’t sleep too ba—aaah,” another massive yawn cut me off, and I put a hand in front of my mouth in a vain attempt to stop morning breath. From the slight wrinkling in Dad’s nose when I opened my eyes again, I didn’t appear to have been successful. “Sorry,” I murmured again. “Is your shoulder okay?”

“That’s what I was just coming by to discuss, actually.” Both of us turned to the nurse, who, despite her apparent youth, managed to not get flustered in the slightest at our simultaneous stare. For the sake of clarity, this same dual stare had sent many a nurse, doctor, waiter, or salesperson running for the hills, followed by either a stern rebuke or an annoyed sigh as Mom pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. So, kudos to the nurse, I guess? “Here’s our images of your injury, if you’d like to take a look.” The nurse turned the tablet in her hands towards us both, revealing what I assumed to be a pair of x-ray images of Dad’s left shoulder. I could see where the wound was, and… that’s about it, actually. I didn’t know what I was looking at.

“He got my rotator cuff, huh?” Dad asked, voice very matter-of-fact about the whole thing, and almost instantly shutting down my slight alarm. “There goes another few weeks…”

“Better two or three weeks than your life.” I hugged Dad tight. “You regrew fingers. This is nothing in comparison.”

“Yeah.” Dad sighed, then turned back to the nurse. “What about the kids? Did they make out alright?” The nurse’s expression turned hesitant, and there was a sense of uncertainty in the way her shoulders tensed up. “Miss, I am a Pro Hero.” She was about to open her mouth to say something when Dad continued. “If that’s not enough for you, she,” he pointed my way, “will get the info from her mother, and I’ll get it that way.”

“Or I’ll just log into the EMR server as Mom.” Both of them shot me a sudden look of shock and surprise, to which I shrugged. “What? You know she likes to talk while she types.”
“I, I suppose…” The nurse acquiesced in the end, returning to her tablet to pull up the information we’d asked for. This was probably—no, definitely a breach of doctor/patient confidentiality, but at the same time, it was true. If I so chose, I could go to my mother’s office (which nobody would blink twice at), sit down at her computer, type in her username and password, and have the entire hospital’s bank of medical records at my fingertips. That said, Dad had definitely played dirty with this bit. “Here we are!” We turned back towards the nurse, giving her our undivided attention.

“Midoriya-san had several small lacerations and badly strained muscles, with some hairline fracturing on the metacarpals of his right hand, and fully fractured his left tibia and fibula. Todoroki-san had some deep stab wounds and other lesions, along with dehydration, and his core temperature was slightly elevated when he came in. Tsunotori-san seems to have been largely unscathed, save for muscle strains and exhaustion. Iida-san… ah.”

“Ah?” I asked. “What’s ‘ah’?”

“Alongside the expected lesions and lacerations?” The nurse turned the tablet towards us again, this time showing an x-ray image similar to the one Mom had shown me of Iida Tensei’s spine, but this time showing a hand. Her finger ran in a circle, showing a half-cut… something. “He has some nerve damage in his left hand.”

My heart sunk. Nerve damage. In Midoriya or Todoroki, they probably could have fixed it. But in an Iida? That’s—

“Thankfully,” the nurse interrupted my train of thought, “we already have an OR booked, and they should be able to fix that today.” She started, and shot us both a pleading look. “You didn’t hear that from me.”

“If anyone asks, I went into the EMR myself and looked at the order list,” I assuaged. “Mom needs to change her password anyway.”

“R-right!” The nurse (whose name tag I could finally see now that she didn’t have her arms in front of her, Yaezakura Kanade) bowed to us both. “Well, if that’s all, I should be continuing my rounds.”

“Don’t let us keep you Yaezakura-san,” Dad said. “We’ll be fine.” Nurse Yaezakura murmured her assent, and after offering one more bow from the entryway, she left the room, closing the door behind her. Once she was gone, Dad turned back to me, expression ponderous. “You don’t have to stay with me, you know.”

“I… yeah, you’re right.” I pushed myself off the side of the bed and to my hooves, then looked at the door. “I’m gonna go visit Pony.”

“Do you know what room she’s in?” Dad asked.

“Exit this room to the right, four doors down and on the left,” I replied without missing a beat. I couldn’t help but giggle the tiniest bit at Dad’s expression. “What? Mom didn’t want me spending all my break days sitting at home.”

“The kitchen wouldn’t have survived,” he replied without missing a beat. I squawked in indignation, and he held up a finger. “Scratch that. The whole damn house.”

“If you weren’t injured,” I growled, “I would punch you.”

“No you wouldn’t.” Dad’s eyes narrowed in focus for an instant, and then the brilliant green of his
Quirk flared, surrounding him with the spectral image of an axolotl.

“Starfish is faster,” I quipped.

“Lucky you.” I smirked, and Dad just rolled his eyes. “Go see your friend Kanna-chan, I have healing to do.”

“You know where the call button is if you need someone,” I said, then exited Dad’s hospital room and closed the door behind me before turning right. Four doors down from room 404 and on the other side of the hall brought me to room 411, and a quick check of the door placard showed a strip of paper with Pony’s name inserted under the plastic. A part of me wanted to comment on the amusing nature of having those two particular room numbers, but I bit down on it, and instead, knocked politely on the door.

“Come in,” a deep, baritone voice rang from within the room. I smiled, and opened the door to see Tsunotori Kihei sitting by the bed, slicing an apple. Pony’s legs hung off the side of the bed, her discarded hospital gown crumpled in a ball on the floor; Pony’s casual outfit of shorts and a tank, alongside the empty shopping bag by Kihei’s seat, told me he’d brought her clothes from home. Which reminded me. I need a shower and a change of clothes at some point. Maybe I’ll steal the extra set Mom keeps for herself in her office? Our sizes are similar enough…

“Hey Uncle K,” I said as I walked in, closing the door behind me. I crossed the space between the door and the bed, and wrapped Pony in the tightest hug I could. “Thank you. So much. So, so much.”

“I couldn’t stop him,” Pony mumbled into my shoulder, her own arms wrapping around me. “He just… he just ran off. And t-the…” Pony trailed off, resting her chin on my shoulder. “Was this what USJ was like?”

“No.” I buried my face into her hair, breathing deeply. She was here. She was fine. They were all fine. “This was worse.”

We stayed like that for a little bit, just… comforting each other. I don’t know how, but I’d actually managed to forget that Class 1-B hadn’t had anything quite as… well, real as what we’d experienced that day at USJ. I’d had many a nightmare after that day, the Noumu’s screams, Aizawa’s bloodied and broken form, and Shigaraki’s hands haunting my dreams, all underscored by Mason’s slithering voice. Pony had helped, done her best to understand, but she never quite understood it.

It was a bitter realization to know that she’d experienced it for herself.

A knock on the door and a firm, deep “Pardon me,” brought us all to attention, and we turned towards the entryway as it opened. Pony, Kihei, and I all stiffened up slightly as we saw the man in the doorway, and I’m fairly certain my mask of confusion was mirrored on their faces as the newcomer entered and closed the door behind him.

“It’s fortunate,” Hosu Police Chief Tsuragamae Kenji said, as much of a wry grin as his canine head was capable of producing on his features, “that both of you are together, woof. Detective,” he nodded at Kihei.

“Tsuragamae-shouchou.” Kihei tilted his head, but other than that, he made no other moves. Kihei was a consultant for Hosu’s police, but he remained outside of their command structure, if memory served. “What can we do for you today?”
“I need to speak with your and Native-san’s daughters,” he said. “Regarding the incident.”

I frowned. The euphemism, reducing everything that had happened last night to nothing more than an ‘incident’… it didn’t sit right with me. I understood that on some level it was a necessity, something that helped with the detachment occasionally needed to deal with the realities of police and hero work. But that didn’t mean I liked it.

“What do you need to know?” Pony asked. Her shoulders were tight, tense. We both knew the Quirk use laws. Pony had received permission to use hers offensively.

Tenya hadn’t.

“In your own words, I would like you both to describe the events of last night in as much detail as possible.” Chief Tsuragamae reached into his pocket and produced a recorder, which he set on the small table beside Pony’s hospital bed. “With both of you here, that lets me catch two balls with one leap.”

I stared.

Pony blinked.

Kihei coughed.

“… I see the dog joke fell flat,” the Chief admitted, though there was absolutely zero change in his expression, at all. Nothing to indicate any attempt at… well, very bad humor.

“I think you barked up the wrong tree,” Pony muttered, more deadpan than I’d ever heard her.

“Not sure it was woof the effort,” I followed up, maintaining my own, natural deadpan.

Chief Tsuragamae stared. Then he flipped the recorder to the ‘on’ position, and began to speak.

“This is Hosu City Chief of Police, Tsuragamae Kenji, interviewing hero interns Tsunotori Pony, under Manual, and Yaseiki Kanna, under Gang Orca, regarding the incident on Tuesday, May the twenty-first, two-thousand and thirty-three…”

* * * * *

“I didn’t think so.” Todoroki replied, sitting over the edge of his hospital bed. Midoriya could see faint blood spots on his friend’s bandaged arm, where Stain’s two throwing knives had sunk in to the hilts. “I couldn’t either, really. It…” He trailed off.
“Now that I can reflect on it more calmly,” Midoriya said, filling the empty space left by Todoroki, it was pretty impressive. Todoroki and Iida both murmured their agreement, but didn’t say anything else in particular. “After the way it ended,” he continued on, feeling a little bit more awkward as he was the only one talking, “I… yeah, I’m pretty sure it’s a miracle we’re all still alive.” He looked down, picking at the bandages on his leg. “With my leg like this, I think that if he’d actually wanted to kill me…” Midoriya gulped. “He definitely could have.”

“No doubts about that,” Todoroki added, “he let us live. On purpose.” Todoroki sighed, then looked askance towards Iida. “You’re pretty amazing. Being able to face him, even with all that murderous intent he was throwing at you.” Midoriya shuddered, and he saw Todoroki did too. The way Stain had paralyzed them all, not with his Quirk, but with raw charisma and fear…

“No, that’s not it.” Iida tried to move an arm, as if to hold one out or raise a hand or something of that ilk, but a wince was enough to know that he was still in pain. “I—”

The door opened, silencing the boys.

“Oh, the wounded are up and at’em already, I see?”

“Gran Torino!” Midoriya exclaimed upon seeing All Might’s mentor walk in.

“Manual-san…” A look of apprehension flitted across Iida’s face, gone as soon as it arrived.

“Kid, you are unbelievable,” Gran Torino murmured as he approached. “I’ve got many a complaint for you, you know.”

“S-sir! I, I’m sor—”

“But before that!” Gran Torino interrupted, “you lot have a visitor.”

Midoriya looked to the door just in time to see another person walk in. He was tall, absolutely massive; Manual, even at 176 centimeters, didn’t even come up to this other man’s shoulder. He wore an all-black three-piece suit, with a spot-patterned tie and heavy cufflinks at his wrists. The most standout feature, though, was his head.

He had a very, very large beagle’s head.

“This is Tsuragamae Kenji-san, Hosu City’s Chief of Police,” Gran Torino informed the boys.

Captain Tsuragamae!? Midoriya thought to himself; the man’s surname meant ‘facial expression’… but he didn’t even have a normal face with which to make expressions! Iida and Todoroki both got to their feet and bowed, and in a frenzy, Midoriya tried to stand himself, wincing as he moved his injured leg.

“You can stay seated, young man,” the chief of police said, to which Midoriya stilled. “I know you’ve all had it quite ruff.”

… ruff?

“So you’d be the UA students that stopped the Hero Killer, then?” He stopped for a moment. “Well, let me amend that. While you three are the ones who actually fought him, there were others present.”
The Chief clapped his hands, and a moment later another two sets of footsteps came around the corner. Or rather, Midoriya amended, hoof steps, as he saw Tsunotori and… Yaseiki.

Wait, that’s right. Native was her father, wasn’t he?

“With regards to the Hero Killer himself,” Chief Tsuragamae continued, “we’re currently holding him within the hospital while he awaits treatment. Multiple broken and fractured bones, severe burns…” He turned an eye on the boys. “You three certainly did a number on him.” And then his brow furrowed. “Using your Quirks.” Midoriya stiffened. Out of the corner of one eye, he saw that Iida and Todoroki did as well. But on the other side… Tsunotori and Yaseiki did not. “You’re UA students. I’m sure you already know all the laws governing Quirk use. How those rules can affect the use of what amounts to a deadly weapon. And how, even up against a foe as deadly as the Hero Killer, using those abilities without permission from your mentors and chaperones is a clear violation.”

It was all matter of fact. Tsuragamae wasn’t saying anything the other boys didn’t already know. But here and now, in this context…

“Due to these violations, the three of you, as well as Pro Heroes Endeavor, Manual, and Gran Torino are subject to strict punishment.” His eyes narrowed. “Under ordinary circumstances, that is. And these ones were certainly anything but.”

“I, I don’t understand,” Iida spoke up. “With respect, Tsuragamae-shouchou, you just mentioned how our actions are grounds for discipline of the highest order. And yet now, you…” He shook his head. “What are you trying to say?”

“Tenya.” Midoriya looked straight to Yaseiki, who had just spoken. Straight to the phone she held up, waggling it back and forth. “It was an SOS.”

Todoroki hissed. And Midoriya understood.

In the early days of Pro Heroes, there was a separation between one’s heroic identity and their civilian life, for privacy and protection in equal measure. But as the laws began to change, and the law made it simpler for heroes to simply unmask and register, so too did the threats they faced. The Cowl Protocol, more colloquially known as the SOS Protocol, arose from those days, beginning when the early Pro Hero Cowl enlisted the aid of civilians around her to track and rescue her husband, himself the grievously injured Pro Hero Poignard, due to time being of the essence. Ever since then, the SOS Protocol had been an exception to prove all rules, a situation in which even the most maligned Quirks could be used without fear of repercussion, due to the severity of the circumstances.

The caveat to the Protocol is that the initiator needed to be related to the persons responsible for its invocation. Any collateral from the Protocol’s use lay at the feet of whoever felt it necessary.

But Yaseiki was just a student, just like him. If it hadn’t been her who’d invoked it, then who—of course.

Her mother.

“I spoke to these two,” Chief Tsuragamae waved a hand at the two girls, Tsunotori somber, Yaseiki unreadable, “to determine the sequence of events. Given when the SOS went out, and how long it took Tsunotori-san to arrive?” He turned to Iida. “Your hasty, reckless, foolish intervention… helped
save Native’s life. For fulfilling the primary purpose of the Cowl Protocol, there can be no consequences."

Every word was a hammer blow to Iida. But at the end, at the realization of what had come to pass… Iida Tenya may have raised his head high, face stoic and unflinching, but the glimmer at the corner of his eyes and the shakiness of his lip spoke volumes.

“And you two,” Tsuragamae turned towards Midoriya and Todoroki. “Your mentors have informed me that you are both within your rights to take part in an SOS incident. And with that?” He clapped his hands. “The rescue of Native lay with Tsunotori Pony, trainee hero Epona. The defeat of the Hero Killer Stain?” Tsuragamae looked at the boys. “Midoriya Izuku, trainee hero Deku. Todoroki Shouto, trainee hero… Shouto. And Iida Tenya, trainee hero—”

“Ingenium.” Iida interrupted. His face was resolute, eyes still shining behind his glasses. “Until I find one that works better for me… I will ensure Ingenium lives on.”

“… I see.” Tsuragamae Kenji coughed into his hand. “Then with that.” His hands fell to his side, and Izuku’s eyes nearly bulged out of his skull when the city’s Chief of Police bowed at the waist, and held there. “On behalf of Hosu City, and from a fellow officer of the law, you have my sincerest thanks.”

* * * * *

After the Chief finished up his spiel, Pony and I followed him out, which left only Manual and Gran Torino in the room with them. Just outside the hospital room, Endeavor stood, a smug, self-satisfied smirk sitting there on his burning chin. I could gather he’d heard everything, but that didn’t really tell me anything about why he was so damn happy about it.

“I wonder what canary that cat ate to be so satisfied.” I jumped at the voice, turning on a hoof to see that Gran Torino had followed us out of the room, and was nowleveling his walking stick at Endeavor.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Endeavor replied. His tone felt like he was a particularly surly schoolteacher, trying to explain to a child that two plus two does not equal banana. Or at least, that’s what I got from it. “My Shouto’s first official act as a Pro Hero, and it is the defeat of the Hero Killer.” He smirked. “It’s only the first step, but I would like to see All Might start the same way.”

“… uh,” I coughed into a hand, trying to stifle the laugh. “Kowalski,” I addressed Gran Torino, “what was your Thao’s first ‘official’ act as a hero?”

“Kowarusuki?” Endeavor growled, horribly mangling the pronunciation. “Tao? What riddles are you spouting, girl—”

“That zygote? Ah…” Gran Torino adopted a thinking posture, then snapped his fingers. “Rescuing hundreds of people from a disaster and defeating the villain that caused it, if memory serves. All Might always was an overachiever, even when I was just his teacher.” Endeavor’s sudden poleaxed expression was glorious, and I only regret not dropping my phone in Mom’s office to charge so I could have photographed this… but alas, I must conserve my battery. “And you, girl! Taste in the classics, I see!”
“You are… All Might’s…” Endeavor whipped his head towards the door to the room, and *growled*. He made to step towards the door, to go back in, presumably to see Midoriya, to try and glean what was so damn *special* about that kid. I wanted to say something, get him to stop, letting Endeavor at Midoriya could be *disastrous*—

“I wonder, what kind of reunion is this?”

All of us looked to the end of the hall, zeroing in on Recovery Girl of all people. What was she doing here, all the way out in Hosu? And who is that person next… to… oh God.

*What is that thing?*

“Recovery-dono!” Gran Torino waved with his walking stick, stepping towards her so the two equal-height elders could properly greet each other. “It has been a while, hasn’t it? My boy is still being as great a pain as ever, I presume!”

“*Both* of your boys!” Recovery Girl replied, with a jab of her cane, giant needle, thing, on the floor. “And before you ask, girl,” she said while looking directly at *me*, “I’m not here for his current fool of an apprentice.”

“But, um…” Pony spoke up now, stepping forward. “I mean, it’s great to see you Recovery Girl, but… aren’t you supposed to be at UA?”

“That,” the… *unsightly* newcomer spoke up now, his voice a surprisingly smooth dulcet tone, almost sounding like Sinatra crooning into your ear, “would be *my* fault.” I correct my statement. Sinatra, if he spoke Japanese with just enough of an Eastern European accent to drip off his words like syrup. “After all, it is not often that my longtime rival comes to *me* for help.”

“I take it she was truly desperate, then,” Pony said. I just… stared at her. She stared back. “What? I like your movie collection too, you know!”

“Pony, Thor Two was the worst of the Thor movies, being quotable doesn’t make it any—”

“And on *that* note!” Recovery Girl slammed her cane into the ground again, drawing all of our attention. Except for Endeavor and Chief Tsuragamae, who… both must have left when the chance presented itself. “I presume the boys are in the room behind you.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” I said, turning and pointing. “I… guess I’ll be going elsewhere, now…”

Awkward.

Gran Torino beckoned Recovery Girl and… *whoever* that was… back down the hall to the room with his charge. I looked to Pony. Pony looked to me. I started to say something… when my phone buzzed in my pocket. Then it buzzed again.

I pulled it out of my pocket, and saw both messages.

*Mom*

>*Getting Thai. Your usual?*

*Gang Orca*

>*Take some time for your family. But I will be picking you up at 2pm.*
The world won’t stop on our account. We still have work to do, Chimera.

* * * * *

The group had scarcely left the room when a nurse slipped inside, and went straight for his bed. Tenya looked up to see her, glanced to where Midoriya stood closed off in the bathroom, speaking quietly into his phone, then at Todoroki. He turned to the nurse and nodded; he trusted the two with him to know. The nurse told him the results of his exams.

Midoriya slid the door open and limped back into the room on his crutch.

“Oh, Iida-kun, I just heard from Urara… ka…”

Tenya looked up at Midoriya. It must’ve shown on his face.

“Midoriya.” Todoroki spoke up. “Iida… the results of his physical exam just came in.” Midoriya glanced between the two of them, face blank and uncertain.

“It seems my left hand…” Tenya sighed. “They told me my “brachial plexus” is impaired. There’s some nerve damage in my left hand.” Midoriya hissed. “I-it’s not as bad as it sounds!” Tenya hurriedly assuaged. “It really just amounts to some difficulty moving my fingers, plus some numbness, and it could even be fixed with surgery. And I’m right-handed too, so!…” He looked down. “When I found the Hero Killer, I… I lost myself. I should have contacted Manual first. I hate him, I still hate him so much… but he was correct.”

Tenya’s mind flew back to that alleyway. To his blind fixation on the Hero Killer.

To completely missing Native, his friend’s father, laying there in the alley.

“That’s why, until I can become a true hero?” Tenya looked down at his left hand. “I think I’ll leave my left hand like this.” He flexed his fingers experimentally, feeling the dullness of the movement. “A reminder.”

“… Iida-kun.” Tenya looked up to see Midoriya standing before him, his shiny, burn-scarred right hand extended. “I’m… the same as you.” He closed his hand into a fist, and held it before Tenya. “Together… let’s become stronger. You and me.”

Todoroki coughed.

“… sorry for that.”

Tenya and Midoriya both looked his way, blinking at the sudden, partial non sequitur.

“What’re you apologizing for?” Midoriya asked. Todoroki looked askance, suddenly seeming… Tenya couldn’t put the word to it. Sheepish, maybe?

“I… that makes twice now that I’m involved, and people’s hands go bad.” Todoroki lifted his hands, staring hard at them.

“What are you talking about!” Tenya all-but yelled, desperately wanting to chop the air in his usual
fashion, but unable to due to his arms being in slings.

“… h-hehe, I guess even Todoroki can crack a joke!” Midoriya added.

“It’s not a joke,” Todoroki corrected. “Not at all. I…” He put a hand to his chin, then instantly pulled it away in some strange terror. “It’s like there’s some ‘hand crusher’-like presence in me…”

“**Hand Crusher!?”** Midoriya and Tenya exclaimed as one. And then they cracked up.

“O-oi!” Todoroki protested.

“Maybe that should be your hero name!” Midoriya added. “The Hand Crusher!”

“As funny as this may seem to you!” The door to their hospital room slammed open, and all three boys jumped. There in the doorway stood Recovery Girl, glowering at the three of them. And behind her… Tenya goggled.

The man’s red… robes? Ye olde suit? Whatever his garment, it brushed the floor as he walked, but did little to disguise just how paper-thin and pale his skin was. The odd, gray hue of the man’s complexion let Tenya see each and every vein running up his neck. And the back of his head… he couldn’t help but feel it was like a vampire squid.

And those eyes…

“You three… in all my years—”

“Perhaps you would prefer not to reprise your yearly ‘in all my years’ speech, Shuzenji dear?” Tenya boggled at the familiarity with which the man spoke to Recovery Girl. “After all, we do have patients to tend to.”

“Indeed.” Recovery Girl cleared her throat. “Iida-kun, if you would like this to be private, I can heal the other two and—”

“It’s fine,” Tenya interrupted. “They…” He looked to Midoriya, and to Todoroki. To his two comrades in a battle for their lives. “They can stay.”

“I see.” Recovery Girl walked closer to him, while her companion closed the door behind himself, and approached… Todoroki? “Tzimisce, wrong patient,” she snapped at the man.

“In a moment,” he assuaged, his voice thick with an accent Tenya couldn’t place. He reached out to Todoroki’s wounded left arm. “If you would?” Todoroki looked to Recovery Girl, who sighed and nodded, before he extended his arm. The newcomer (Tzimisce, she said?) took Todoroki’s arm and unwrapped the bandages, then removed the gauze covering his wounds. “I see. Am I correct in assuming you wish to keep the scars?” He asked.

“I would, yes,” Todoroki confirmed. “But why—”

“Observe.” The man took his fingers and pressed them to Todoroki’s arm. Under his touch, Todoroki’s flesh *writhed*, and right before their eyes, the stitched-closed stabs seemed to invert themselves, breaking the sutures apart and shedding the scabbed mess as they watched. Not five seconds later, and naught but two pale, shiny scars remained where before Todoroki’s arm had held two lines of eight stitches each.
“I shape flesh,” the man explained. “Mold it, sculpt it, manipulate it. I could have been a monster, like many of my forebears… but I deigned to take the role of a mendicant.” He looked to Recovery Girl, who he favored with a smirk. “Few could rival me.”

“As you just saw, Tzimisce-dono is a healer of some ability.” Recovery Girl turned back to Tenya, and he found her needle-cane pointed straight at his face. “Which is why, noble as it sounded from outside the door, you will not be simply leaving your left hand ‘like this’, as you so eloquently put it.”

“B-but that’s—”

“Unless, of course, you want your brother to not be able to walk again?”

All three of them sucked in a sharp hiss of breath, and as one they turned to the newcomer. To Tzimisce.

He favored them with a smile of too many, too sharp teeth.

“Alone, I could not do it. Unprepared, I could not do it. But with a procedure as simple as yours as a dry run, and the aid of my greatest rival and at least one protégée of hers, well…” He turned towards Tenya, hands clasped behind his back. “The choice is yours, young man.”

“I’ll do it.”

“You will have to undergo surgery for this, Iida-kun,” Recovery Girl warned. “The rest of your work placement is forfeit. Hero practicals for another week after are also forfeit. You will be setting yourself behind.”

“I had already understood that when I made my initial choice,” Tenya said, resolute. He looked Recovery Girl square in the eyes. “If there is a chance, any chance at all, that my brother can be Ingenium once more… and if I can help him…”

Tenya lost the words. Recovery Girl’s hand landed on his knee, and he looked up to see her smiling.

“It’s good you haven’t eaten yet today, then. We have an operating theater booked in two hours.” She nodded at Tzimisce, who went to the door. “And Iida-kun?”

“Yes?” He looked to Recovery Girl, who stood at the door, smiling now.

“We already had your parents’ permission. This was just a formality.”

The door closed, leaving the three of them alone together.

“Iida-kun…” Midoriya stood, walking over to his bed on crutches.

“It’s okay,” Tenya said. Inside, he’d already made his decision.

Ingenium would live on.

* * * * *
“So he’s fine then.”

“As fine as you can be when you can regenerate,” I replied, careful not to swivel too far in Mom’s chair or risk unplugging my phone. That charger is the only reason I could make a call at all. “He’s still going to need a few weeks, but…” I sighed. “It could’ve been worse. So much worse.”

“Yeah,” Katsuki agreed. “… they got him, right? The Hero Killer?”

“Last I heard, he’s currently tied down, with four separate sets of cuffs attached to the bed, with armed guards posted both in and outside the room.” I leaned back in the chair, frowned, sat back up, turned a dial on the side of the chair, and tried again. Mom must’ve forgotten to set the recline limit after her last in-office nap. “And you heard who got him, right?”

“Yeah,” he spat. “And I’m stuck with Jeanist’s fucking PR shit…” I heard something like a yell in Katsuki’s background, followed by his own muffled curse. “Shit, I gotta go.”

“Don’t let him mess your hair up too bad this time!” I called into the phone. Then I hung up before Katsuki could give one of his trademark angry responses, and slumped on the desk.

Dad was getting discharged in thirty, Pony and Kihei were down in her room, and I was just sitting here in Mom’s office. Not for much longer, though, because the unmistakable smell of wonderful, spicy, delicious Thai food was wafting through the open frosted glass door to Mom’s office. Which meant she was back with the food.

“Kanna-chan, give me a hand with this please!” I hopped out of the chair and trotted over to the door, where I relieved Mom of the two food bags that she’d been carrying in one… well, claw. She’d shifted her hand to a crab’s claw to carry it, because the other one had her surgical case.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on a one week mandatory vacation?” I asked, one eyebrow raised while I pointed at the briefcase containing all of Mom’s personal surgery tools. “As in, ‘not doing surgery’?”

“Kanna.” Wuh-oh. She dropped the honorific. “Remind me again, what exactly happened yesterday?”

“… I retract my question,” I said with some contrition. Right. Emergency. All hands. I knew better than to ask what the surgery was for, so I instead tore into the bags of food to pull everything out. “You made sure they got everything correct?” I asked.

“Yes, Kanna-chan, I made sure they added your small container of bird’s eye chilies,” Mom said, some measure of amused exasperation in her voice.

“Just checking! Let’s see…” I grabbed everything out, one container at a time. “Rice, rice, rice, brown rice, my chilies, my Prik Khing, your beef Panang, Pony’s chicken Pad Thai, Kihei’s Pad Ka Prow with,” I shuddered, “shrimp, and… wait.” There was another container in the bag. I counted off on my fingers. Mine, Mom’s, Pony’s, Kihei’s… there was one extra. I looked to Mom, who was busy talking to herself and checking to see if everything was in her surgical case, so instead went back to the remaining container in the bag. I grabbed one of the plastic spoons in the bottom, and opened the container. It was the same type they used for Mom’s Panang curry, but it clearly wasn’t, so… I took a taste.
My eyes went wide.

“Mom?…” She’d stopped inspecting the contents of her surgical case. I pointed to the bag. She nodded.

I could feel myself start to tear up.

Mom had gotten an order of Tom Kha Gai soup.

It’s Dad’s favorite.
Interlude Twelve | Alchemy: Iga-Ryu

The southwest corner of the Shibuya crossing.

The crossing itself was one of the most famous crosswalks in the world, right next to Abbey Road in terms of universal recognition. The crosswalk played host to hundreds, possibly even thousands of people at a time, moving with such coordination and harmony that it would occasionally seem to be rehearsed. It was one of the busiest intersections in the world, one in which you could get lost without ever lifting a foot.

And it was where she’d been directed to wait.

Yaoyorozu Momo looked at the map attached to the message she’d received from Edge Shot, and compared it to the map she’d pulled up on her phone. The ‘x’ he’d used to mark where she needed to be (which, incidentally, was actually a stylized shuriken stamp; it wasn’t hard to tell the difference between written and pressed ink once you were used to it) was, now that she looked closer, inside of a building. The one directly behind her. Momo turned to look at the coffee shop, perfectly positioned to have a flawless view of the Shibuya crossing, and had to hold back a groan. It was an absolutely massive tourist destination, given the view, but it was being mentioned for a reason. It would likely cost her some more time, time that could have been better spent actually at her work placement.

But then again, Edge Shot was known to be a little… eccentric, if she was being charitable. He straddled a boundary between obscurity and transparency, one that, if she was being honest, seemed to be the exact line that Aizawa-sensei would have liked to toe if he weren’t devoted to teaching. People knew just enough about Edge Shot to get excited whenever he appeared in the news, but not enough to actually know the man behind the mask. He never provided reasons for what he did, either deflecting, changing the subject, or simply disappearing before a question could even be asked of him. It was somewhat infuriating, but at the same time, it played directly in to the image the man worked so hard to cultivate: a ninja, a warrior of the shadows.

And if he wanted to play a game, then Momo supposed she had no choice but to follow the rules. With a look at her watch and a heavy sigh, she turned away from the crosswalk, and to the coffee shop behind her.

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Half an hour simply to order a low-quality, overly-bitter Earl Grey, and another twenty minutes beyond that before Momo could find a seat. This particular blend had far too much of the bergamot flavor Earl Grey was known for, enough that it completely overpowered every other note her palette would otherwise have been able to discern. As much as she loathed doing so, she’d had to give in to temptation: Momo emptied out a third of her ‘Earl Grey’, and filled the rest of the cup up with cream, along with two packets of sugar. It was a mockery of proper tea, but it was the only way to make this infernal concoction palatable, and she would be damned before she went and threw an overpriced, twelve-hundred yen beverage in the trash.

No matter how much it richly deserved the garbage bin, Momo mused, thoughts as bitter as her tea used to be.

She finally managed to acquire a seat by the window and looked out at the crosswalk, trying to
discern what message Edge Shot could have hidden for her. There was no rhyme or reason to this game of his that she could determine, only that she had to follow the rules. The lights changed to red, and the crossing began, hundreds of students, tourists, professionals, and all sorts of people from all walks of life began to mingle in the road, drifting along on their own personal current as they followed the paths before them. It was random, it was chaotic… it was beautiful, she decided. There was a certain serenity in the fact that all of these people could successfully find their way through the crossing, despite the massive crowd. It reminded her of—

"Your tea, miss."

Momo nearly jumped at the sudden voice, and even more when a small try was set in front of her. Upon the tray sat a new cup of tea, lid off to allow some of the heat to dissipate. She couldn’t help but take a small whiff, and easily caught the scent of Darjeeling.

There was no Darjeeling tea on this shop’s menu.

"Excuse me," Momo began, turning to the woman who’d placed it before her, "but I think there’s—"

Momo’s breath died in her throat when she saw the woman. Her face was stone-cold, expressionless, her long black hair cut so straight and true that the locks could be used as a straightedge. But what stunned Momo the most were her hands. They shone in the light, a deep, matte-black finish on what appeared to be prosthetic limbs. And in those false, outstretched hands, she held a letter, with a single number upon it, written just above the image of a shuriken. 8,000,100.

八百万百. Yaoyorozu.

Momo accepted the letter, then looked up to the woman who’d given it to her. She was dressed in the same uniform as the coffee shop’s employees, but when she bowed, turned, and walked away… it was stiff. She would call it robotic, even. But no… that was ridiculous.

Wasn’t it?

Returning to the letter, Momo turned it over, scanning it for any other visible marks. The woman’s prosthetic hands hadn’t left any fingerprints, that much was obvious, but there were no other signs that hands other than her own had held this piece of paper. A quick smell of the letter didn’t reveal any other information. Whereas sometimes, as her father had instructed her, you could occasionally pick up a whiff of cigarette smoke, alcohol, or perfume… there was nothing. Momo steeled her nerves; there was only one way to find out now.

She opened the letter, and set its contents out on the try in front of her.

The first item was a business card. Edge Shot’s, by the look of it, though it held little more than the image of a pair of shuriken stabbed into a log, along with a phone number and an address in Shinjuku.

The second item was a Shinkansen ticket, to Iga Prefecture. The ticket itself seemed to double as an advertisement or tourist brochure, and it proudly advertised the Iga ninja museum.

The third item was a letter. It was short, succinct, and to the point. Barely three lines.

You stand at a crossroads
Shall you walk the expected path?
Or shall you strike out into the unknown, as your Sensei before you?

Momo stared at the letter, and then at the options before her. An address in Shinjuku. A ticket to Iga.
In the end, it was no choice at all. Momo sipped at the Darjeeling the woman had given her, and marveled. This… was well and truly a high-quality tea. It would stand on its own, no milk or sugar needed.

The pieces of the business card and the letter that accompanied it, both torn to shreds, fluttered to the bottom of the trash can.

* * * * *

Momo stood on a conspicuously empty street outside of the Iga Ninja museum, suddenly apprehensive from the silence. She had done as she was meant to, yes, she could tell. She’d played by the rules set out by her would-be mentor for this week, and come here, even when she could have simply remained in Tokyo. It had been a leap of faith.

And one that she was beginning to feel hadn’t been rewarded, as she saw the closed museum before her.

There was no way to purchase a ticket, for the employees manning the booth were not present. The doors were locked, and while she could easily produce a skeleton key to open her way inside, that would do nothing to any defenses of the electronic variety. An electromagnetic pulse would disable those, but as of yet, she did not know of a way to actually produce one without some measure of destruction, or have any way of limiting the affected radius. And so Momo stood at an impasse. She had come all this way, and was beginning to feel that it had been for nothing. Had she been too hasty? Had there perhaps been more to it than she knew, and she had failed to notice it? Was all of this some large test… one that she had failed? And if it had been a test, and she had failed, then what did that mean for her—

A flicker of movement in the corner of her eye had Momo stepping back, scanning in that area. She had seen something, she knew. Dark, deep reds and greys that blended in perfectly with the architecture in the area, but despite that, Momo knew she had seen somebody move. A closer inspection at the area, and she knew she’d been correct: the barest fraction of a footprint remained in the dirt path leading inside the museum.

And the metal, grated door, previously locked, now sat ever so slightly ajar.

Perhaps it was impetuous of her. Perhaps it was her impatience speaking, or some measure of frustration, or her desire for answers. Without a single hesitation, Momo opened the gate and walked in, shutting it firmly behind her. She turned to look deeper into the complex, only to see that same flicker of movement ducking behind a corner. And again, Momo turned to follow, knowing she was being lead to a specific direction. If Kanna were here, she would certainly have said something about horror movie logic. Only for Tsuyu to point out that it was an inconsiderate comparison. But no, there was no turning back now. Not when she was so close to her destination.

Momo entered the museum proper through an open shoji door, closing it behind her as she walked in. The urge to call out, to ask if anybody else was present… it was a powerful urge, but one that she managed to tamp down on for the time being. If indeed there was somebody else here, then…

She didn’t know.

The exhibits themselves drew her attention. All of the various tools at a ninja’s disposal, with true, historical examples hidden behind the glass. Claws to be worn on the hands and feet, to help scale
walls or for use in melee combat. Sharpened nails for the fingertips, meant for a single quick, stealthy strike before being discarded. Grappling hooks, oh so many grappling hooks. Incendiaries, bombs, powders, medicines, fifteen different varieties of shuriken… at least some of them made out of horseshoes, if she wasn’t mistaken. Perhaps that would be a good use for Kanna and Pony’s discarded horseshoes, instead of simply having Mina melt them down to scrap and giving the slag to the support courses to play with?… a thought for another time, perhaps.

Momo eventually came to an exhibit that surprised her: firearms. Not little derringers, or even other concealable firearms that could be secreted away on one’s person.

What she saw behind the glass was a pair of arquebuses, worn with age and ravaged by time.

“Those two guns nearly ended the life of Oda Nobunaga,” a voice suddenly spoke, sending Momo a few inches airborne from the sudden shock, “or so the original proprietors of the museum were told, some centuries ago.” She turned around to see a man standing behind her, one who had not been there but a moment before, and who had not been reflected in the glass in front of the arquebus exhibit. Gray hair, in a style so geometric that it looked more like origami than anything. A grey and red togi, worn over similarly-colored hakama pants, and zori on his feet. A mask covered the bottom half of his face, and his hair also dipped low enough to obscure an eye from view. A rope belt around his waist seemed to secure the togi, but Momo saw the way the garment pulled at fasteners hidden from view, how the ends of the belt seemed to pull down more forcefully than it should have been for its apparent weight.

Kamihara Shinya was not wearing his usual costume.

Edge Shot. Quirk: Foldabody. His entire body was practically origami, capable of being folded and pressed into myriad shapes… and if the cues she’d picked up from his outfit were correct, this applied to anything he was wearing. Even on the surface, it was plain his Quirk required an incredible amount of precision and mental agility.

The same quick thinking, Momo realized, that her own Quirk would benefit from.

“It would seem that you have made your choice,” Edge Shot continued, “just as Eraserhead and Kamui Woods before you.”

“Aizawa-sensei?” Momo asked, surprised. He had trained under…?

“I will guess that upon the first day of classes, nobody noticed his presence until the moment he made himself known, despite having been present the entire time?” Edge Shot surmised. “That is a rather simple example of ninjutsu, believe it or not. The teachings are vast, extending from the expected,” he gestured to the shuriken, each cataloged behind the glass display with their date and origin, “to what you would not have imagined at first.” Here he gestured past Momo and to the guns she had been inspecting but a moment before.

“Why here?” Momo asked. “I understand the purpose of showing me this, but—”

“Do you?” Edge Shot interrupted. Momo stopped, affronted. “Truly? Then come.” He turned, and began to walk. Momo could do naught but follow, bewildered. This…

This was not what she had expected.

Edge Shot led her to the museum’s outdoor courtyard, walls of what could only be ninja equipment
lining the area and secured behind lock and key. He walked up to one of the cases and reached out a finger, stretching and molding it to shape as he unlocked the case. Edge Shot reached in and withdrew a sickle and weighted ball, connected by a dark iron chain.

“Come,” he said. “We will spar. You, with your Quirk. And me,” he began to spin the weighted ball on the end of the chain, holding the sickle in his right hand, “with this. On my mark.”

Momo inspected the man before her. She knew what that weapon was, even if she had never used one before. Kusarigama, chain sickle. It was one of the most well-known ninja implements, even in popular culture, but she had no trust in anything media showed her as to the proper technique for using these tools. Edge Shot, on the other hand, twirled the weapon in hand with a practiced ease, one that spoke to long hours of pain and practice, to blood, sweat, and tears spilled to master this weapon.

No matter what, Momo could not allow him to get close. She stripped off her UA jacket and unbuttoned her blouse, forcing down any embarrassment at the idea that she would be showing her bra to a man. He was a consummate professional… and if she wished to train under his tutelage, she had to be one also.

“Hmm. Maybe I was wrong to assume,” she could hear him murmuring as she stripped. A thrum of outrage ran down her spine, and in that briefest of moments, she nearly lost sight of her plan.

“Mark.”

Edge Shot was on her in an instant, the weighted ball at the end of his kusarigama flying through the air towards her. She rolled to the side to avoid it, and a flash of rainbow bloomed from her hands before she tossed a bola at Edge Shot’s legs. The man would have no issues avoiding that with his Quirk, but he’d specifically said it was her Quirk versus his weapon.

None of that helped when Edge Shot leapt just barely over the bola, pulled the weight back to him, and sent it flying at Momo again, this time on a sideways arc instead of straight forward. She created a barrier on her forearm, more a reinforced vambrace than a shield, and batted the iron ball away before rushing to meet Edge Shot. From the palm of her hand, a matryoshka appeared, which she tossed at Edge Shot’s feet.

“A doll? That—” Edge Shot cut himself off with a strangled hiss as the matryoshka broke apart on contact with the ground, revealing a flash-bang grenade that Momo had created inside of it.

A grenade without the pin.

Momo closed her eyes and covered her ears even as she rolled to the side, and once the bomb detonated and she heard the muffled sound, she turned towards Edge Shot. In her hands she held a bo staff, which she spun once before advancing on Edge Shot—

Momo’s left foot swept out from under her as something cold tightened around her ankle. Before she could even think to create something to let her slide free from the grip of whatever held her, a smattering of dirt and pebbles from the ground suddenly flew into her face, leaving her coughing and blinking the particulates from her eyes.

“You were close.” Momo froze when she felt something cold press along the side of her neck. A quick glance down showed Edge Shot directly in front of her, the side of his kama’s blade pressed against her neck. “You showed guile and cunning. Both good traits. But you lacked situational awareness, and you hadn’t thought to use the properties of our little ‘arena’ to your advantage.” He
brought the blade away from her neck, and with a quick shake, the chain loosened from around her ankle. He offered Momo a hand up, which she gladly took to get to her feet.

“Thank you for the advice…” Momo trailed off, unsure what to call Edge Shot. He wasn’t her teacher, and he wasn’t *exactly* her boss. This was merely a work placement after all… or was it, really? Was it something more, now?

“Shishou shall do for now, if you require something to call me,” he supplied. Momo bowed her acquiescence. “Now, I would suggest you clean yourself up.” Edge Shot unraveled his arm and unlocked a nondescript door on the far side of the courtyard. “You will find dormitory facilities two floors up. Your suitcase and costume are already inside.” Surprised at that, Momo cast a glance to where the two of them should have been, only to find the cases missing. “Clean yourself up, and set your clothes for the laundry. There are yukata available for your use.”

“Yes, Shishou.” Momo bowed again, and took her leave.

“Ah. Before I forget.” Momo turned around, and saw Edge Shot’s unfurled arms holding the kusarigama out to her. “Take this with you. Study it. Recreate it. I expect to be able to put that back in storage by the end of the day.”

“U-understood!” Momo stammered, taking the (replica?) implement in her hands.

“When you are ready, meet back here. We have much to discuss.” With that, Edge Shot’s fingers blurred. A moment later, he held three pellets in his hands, which he flicked down at the ground. A flash of light, a puff of smoke, and by the time Momo could see the rest of the courtyard clearly, he was gone.

And this time, there were no footprints left for her to see.

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By the time Momo finished in the shower, however brief it was, she saw that her clothes had been taken away from the provided laundry hamper, and replaced with a white yukata with red accents. Upon trying it on, she found that while the fit was far from perfect, it would do well enough for the moment. A brief shimmer of rainbow light, and she slid her feet into her newly-created fluffy slippers just so she wouldn’t have to go out barefoot. Or, well, she could have used the slippers provided… but they were cheap, ratty old things. She wouldn’t have hesitated to guess that they were older than *she* was.

With some trepidation, she descended the stairs back into the demonstration courtyard at the Iga Museum to see Edge Shot, seated at the edge of the wood balcony before the dirt-filled training area.

And he was not alone.

“E-excuse me!” Momo called to the woman from the coffee shop, standing there. She did not so much as blink at the sound of her voice, remaining so motionless that Momo would have thought her dead. “Shishou? This woman—”

“Is not,” he interrupted. “It is as capable of holding a conversation without another person to direct it as your cell-phone is.” He snapped his fingers, and the ‘woman’ shuddered to life. A hiss of steam
heralded the appearance of a seam on her abdomen. It opened up, revealing an odd mix of complex machinery… and archaic clockwork.

“**Karakuri-ningyou**?” Momo asked, awe in her voice. She knew that karakuri-ningyou, even without any more advanced machinery, were sophisticated enough to perform such tasks as mix and serve matcha, or even shoot arrows with unerring accuracy. To see it mixed with modern robotics, and possibly some measure of programming…

“Indeed,” Edge Shot revealed. He gestured to the seat cushion opposite him, and Momo walked to it, doffing her slippers before stepping onto the wood and sitting seiza on the cushion. “It is to my great relief that you chose to come here instead of resorting to Shinjuku. You know where we are, yes?”


“And the continuing home of the Iga-ryu,” Edge Shot finished. “For a long time, ninjutsu was in decline, nothing more than a passing fancy, a relic of Japanese history.” He chuckled. “Then Quirks came, and the Iga mattered again. Our methods, teachings, philosophies… your homeroom teacher, and several other ‘underground heroes’ besides, are students of ninjutsu. Eraserhead and Kamui Woods are the only ones since I became Grandmaster to receive training in the true Iga-ryu.” His eyes narrowed with mirth, likely smiling behind his mask. “Or should I say, were.”

“M-me?” Momo stammered. The… Edge Shot was grandmaster of the Iga? And… and he wanted to train her?

“Ninja are not soldiers. They are engineers.” He gestured to the museum behind him, to the karakuri-ningyou who had picked up a broom and begun sweeping. “For any problem, even with the limited resources available to them, the ninja had a solution. Medicines, tools, weapons, anything could be done by a ninja with sufficient resources. But those were often lacking.” He snorted. “Several of the shuriken in this museum were made from repurposed coins, salvaged scrap, and old, worn-out horseshoes. The Iga, despite their ingenuity, always had a bit of an issue coming by the necessary resources.” His eyes narrowed. “But you. All the ingenuity, able to be applied in an instant. Complex creations, the highest quality builds and materials, whatever tool the situation merits, all an instant away. Without any of our training, you dominated your foe in the Sports Festival. With it, you would have won, and likely advanced further. None would have been able to stand against you.”

“I…” Momo looked away, self-conscious. “I am not so sure. Edg—Shishou,” she corrected hastily, “I… are you certain that I am… I mean—”

“Not at all,” he replied. Momo flinched. “But then again, one can rarely be truly certain of anything where other people are involved. But I have faith.” He reached a hand forward, lightly touching Momo’s own. “Yaoyorozu Momo. I, Kamihara Shinya, Grandmaster of the Iga-Ryu, offer you this apprenticeship. You will struggle. You will hurt. But you will learn like you never have before.” He looked her in the eye, the cold steel of his gaze softening in that brief instant. “Do you accept this offer?”

“I…” Momo closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and steeled herself. “Yes.”

Edge Shot smiled.

“Stand, Genin Yaoyorozu.” She looked back, somewhat shocked.

“What?”
“Not everything of ninja in popular culture was inaccurate.” He stood up, and beckoned towards the entrance to the museum. The karakuri-ningyou stood once more, holding what seemed to be a hakama, a folded gi, and several other items she couldn’t quite discern.

“Only most.”
Chapter Fifty-Six

Chapter Summary

The plot thickens, and the origin of 'Purple Haze' is revealed. More hints at the big thing on 'Saturday'... and it's only Wednesday. Sorry Kanna; guess you'll have to wait.

And no, Katsuki isn't about to tell you.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was fighting me for a while. Everybody go say thank you to @knolden for sitting on me until it was written. Sorry it's shorter than most of the more recent ones, but my muse has been very low of late. I'm moving cross-country on Saturday--yup, Saturday--and there's a LOT of preparation involved in it. Additionally, law school orientation is a week from Thursday, so I'm more than a little nervous.

Plus, I've been trying to get through the 'suggested reading list' that the Dean of GW Law sent us. It's... dense.

Very dense.

Lunch was a somewhat awkward affair. Mom was trying her best, and Dad was too, but even with all of that... it was difficult. So many times I caught the two of them looking at the other, then hurriedly looking away, or about to say something before seeming to think better of it and cutting off entirely. Multiple times, Pony and Kihei tried to get the both of them into discussion with one another, but that was very much a ‘pulling teeth’ type of scenario. The crux of the issue is that neither of them knew what to talk about. Especially not with other people around. My parents had stuff they needed to iron out between them, major issues that needed to be aired and skeletons dragged out from the back of the closet, but they couldn’t exactly do that with Pony, Kihei, and me in the room. This was never meant to be a major, ‘healing’ discussion. The point of it all was just to acclimate the two of them to being in the same room and on more-or-less speaking terms again.

We couldn’t even all just depart and conveniently leave Mom alone with Dad either, since she had to get down to surgery. Apparently Mom was part of the effort to repair Tensei’s spine, and was needed for the ‘dry run’ on Tenya’s hand. Maybe that was something I wasn’t supposed to know, but... I suppose we’d see how Tenya was when these work placements were over and everyone headed back to school. It was a team of Mom, Recovery Girl, and somebody that was apparently Recovery Girl’s… Romanian maybe-vampire rival?

I don’t even know anymore. It’s weird.

I made my way down to the hospital lobby, and saw Gang Orca speaking with none other than Gran Torino and Midoriya. He looked to be completely healed, if a little unsteady…
“—and the record for most consecutive rescues at sea with thirty-seven!” Midoriya gushed, stars in his eyes.

“That is not a day I remember fondly,” Gang Orca growled. “You say I saved thirty-seven. I say I let thirteen drown.”

… but certainly not too exhausted to avoid getting himself into a bit of hot water over hero trivia. Hero stats otaku he may be, he only really knows what’s readily available, and I’m fairly certain the news wouldn’t have publicized the fact that people died before a Hero could get to them.

“I-I, that is, I’m sorry sir, I didn’t mean—”

“Quit your apologizing, boy!” Gran Torino interrupted, poking Midoriya in the side with his cane. “Own the words you say, even if they weren’t taken they way you meant it. You can’t change what’s already been said, but you can control how it’s interpreted.” He shook his head, chuckling softly. “I can see why that old zygote sent you my way. You’re exactly like him.”

“Yeah, if I hadn’t been certain you were All Might’s mentor,” I said quietly, so as not to be overheard, “then I certainly am now.”

“Oh?” Gran Torino gave me a quick once-over before looking me in the eyes. “And what makes you say that, young miss?”

“He’s the only other person I’ve ever heard call their student a ‘zygote’.” I stared down Gran Torino. Gran Torino stared right back. Though it probably only lasted a couple of seconds at most, time seemed to stretch into an eternity. Finally, he cracked a wry grin, and the tension faded.

“Someone was bound to notice eventually!” Gran Torino shrugged, tapping his cane twice on the floor. “Yes, he’s my old pupil. Still as much an idiot as ever.” He glanced over to Midoriya, still smiling. “This one has a bit better of a brain on him, if he could just quit trying to be Small Might and be himself instead!”

“An interesting dilemma to be sure,” Gang Orca added, speaking up, “but I’m afraid we haven’t the time for idle banter. Chimera, let’s go.”

“A-actually,” I paused, gathering my wits so I didn’t stammer again, “could I have a word with Midoriya first?” Midoriya looked a little surprised at that, and looked to both his boss and mine.

“Mm…” Gang Orca closed his eyes and seemed to mull it over for a moment before nodding, murmuring his assent. “Two minutes.”

I nodded and offered him a quick thanks before grabbing Midoriya over to the side, in a small alcove by the hospital’s main entrance. I looked up at him, his height just about four centimeters taller than I was.

And then I hugged him tight.

“Y-Yaseiki-s-s-san!” He stammered, going ramrod straight in my grip.

“Thank you,” I said quietly; he went still. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to say this enough Izuku, but thank you. For saving them. For…” I stopped, trying to find the words. “For being the hero Dad and Tenya needed.”
“I-it wasn’t j-j-just me!” Midoriya continued through chattering teeth. “Todoroki-kun w-w-w-was, a-a-and T-Tsunotori-san t-t-too—”

“Todoroki’s not here, and he wouldn’t let me hug him anyway,” I interrupted, squeezing tighter for just a moment before I let go and put my hands on his shoulders. “Plus, he wouldn’t have been there if you hadn’t been. And by the time Pony got there, it would’ve been too late. And if Tenya hadn’t done his stupid, foolhardy, crazy plan…” I shook my head, then looked him in the eyes and smiled. “Sorry Izuku, as far as my thank-you hugs go, you’re gonna have to take one for all three of you.”

He stiffened. I gave him a wink, a pat on the shoulder, and walked back over to Gang Orca. He gave me an appraising look before nodding, and motioned towards the door.

“Before we follow up on that lead you discovered last night before this mess…” He stared down at me, giving me a very obvious once-over, and sniffed, which is rather odd to listen to when the person sniffing is using a blowhole instead of nostrils. “We are stopping by your home so you can clean yourself up. No employee of mine is going to be interviewing possible leads while reeking of blood, sweat, and antiseptic.”

I wanted to protest. I really did.

But damn did a shower sound good right about now.

* * * * *

Much as I wanted to wear my costume for the comfort of familiarity, Gang Orca wasn’t allowing it. Something about sending the wrong message and how we needed to appear more… approachable, I think is what he wanted to say, but faltered on the last word.

“Aren’t you wearing your costume, though?” I asked, unable to keep my tone from sounding petulant. I crossed my arms and started tapping the ground with a hoof and everything, which is much more difficult than tapping a foot is, and much more involved to boot. None of this actually worked on Gang Orca, and all he did was fix me with another beady-eyed glare.

“My costume is a suit,” he responded. “Your argument is invalid.”

“… you just used an internet argument in real life,” I pointed out. “And damn me for saying this, but it was actually appropriate to the situation. Wow.” I reached into my closet and pulled out a pair of blouses, holding them both up against myself. “Cream or royal blue?”

“Whichever one makes you look less like a teenager and more like a professional,” he ground out, obvious annoyance leaking into his tone.

“Trick question,” I said, putting both of them back and removing what I was actually going to wear. “The correct answer was teal.” A quick swing of my tail had the door closed, and about ten seconds later I was opening it back up, dressed in dark, capri-cut black slacks and a teal button-up top. I had my hair pulled back into a low tail, with just a faint trace of makeup. I still looked more or less my age, if a bit more put-together than most of my peers.

Well. With the exception of Momo of course, because I can’t match the power of her all-designer
“Everything on my budget.

“Good?” I asked, hand on my hip and staring up at Gang Orca, one eyebrow quirked.

“… once you have your provisional license, we’re getting you a proper suit.” He turned towards the stairs, and I followed, wincing as the steps audibly groaned beneath his weight.

“That statement makes a lot of assumptions,” I said, following him down the stairs and out the front door, locking it behind me. “Not the least of which is that I’ll actually pass the exam on my first attempt! That thing has a fifty percent maximum pass rate!”

“And I’ve been administering it for the past seven years,” Gang Orca finished, unlocking the car Hosu’s police kept available for visiting heroes. It was made with somebody of Chief Tsuragamae’s size in mind, so Gang Orca actually fit in the driver’s seat.

“Well, there’s also the assumption that I’ll still be working for you, and not for some other Hero,” I added as he shifted the car into drive. “I mean, this is just a week-long work placement. It’s not a full term-length internship like upperclassmen get.”

“Oh? Do you already have other standing offers of employment?” I opened my mouth to reply. “Your father doesn’t count.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I sat back in the seat and pulled out my phone to—wait. “Hold on, what do you mean by other standing offers? That implies I already have one.” Gang Orca was silent. “Y-you’re serious, right?” Still, he was silent. “Right?”

No answer. Of course.

I’m getting the feeling he really enjoys just fucking with me.

It’s not funny.

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Just like last time I saw it, the Wesenproduktion building was a monolith of glass and steel. In many other places, it would’ve stuck out like a sore thumb.

But in any part of Tokyo proper, like Hosu, it fit right in. In fact, the building was rather small in comparison to some examples of similar construction that you’d find in Ginza or Shinjuku, or even in Akihabara. It was just… kind of bland, really. The romaji stating the company’s name was really the only majorly distinguishing feature. Well, that and the fact that the usual smoke break club was full of lab coats instead of suits and blazers. Lab coats that had obviously been used in the intended environment, to boot: even from here, I could see more than one chemical burn, or scorched patch, or otherwise damaged section on the otherwise pristine white garments.

Gang Orca parked on the street, the car’s “Official Business” placard allowing us to leave the car just about anywhere without fear of being ticketed or towed, and I joined him in… meeting up with Taiki, of all people, outside the building.

“Weren’t you in Shinagawa?” I asked, curious.
“Isn’t Shinagawa just a thirty-five minute ride on the JR away?” Taiki retorted. I had no answer for that one, and he gave a victorious smirk. “Besides, I come bearing warrants.”

“Ooh, government permission to be nosy!” I exclaimed. Fun fact: if a police department either has to cross into another precinct’s jurisdiction for their investigation, or just needs some intimidation factor, they can specify one or more Pro Heroes to execute the warrant. If a criminal stole something in Akihabara and sold it in Shinjuku, for example, normally the precincts would have to work out who had jurisdiction on the case. Or they could just find a cooperative Pro Hero and ignore all the stuffy questions, though it did come at the cost of removing a Pro Hero from other situations in which they could more effectively help. Given that we were already in Hosu, and it was the trail of an investigation many months in the making (near as I could tell anyway), it just made sense to sic Gang Orca on it.

Plus, good luck trying to obstruct a warrant when there is a killer whale telling you to open the door.

… note to self, don’t imagine Shamu knocking a door open with a yell of “Surprise, motherfucker!”

“Quit your laughing, Chimera.” I sobered up immediately, Gang Orca’s command snapping me to attention. “And be alert. You’re the one who knows who—and what—we’re after.”

“Yes sir,” I replied immediately. He was right. Funny stuff could wait for later.

We walked into the lobby as one, and fixed our eyes on the receptionist, who immediately plastered one of the most fake smiles I’ve ever seen on his face.

“Welcome to Wesenproduktion, sirs, miss,” he greeted, standing up from behind the desk and bowing. “How may I help you today?”

Gang Orca slapped the warrants down on his desk, the bold text at the top declaring the documents’ purpose sending the man’s eyes bugging out. Gang Orca looked to me, and nodded.

“Call Mr. Schutz, please,” I stated, calmly but firmly. “We believe he has information—and evidence—linked to an active criminal investigation.” The receptionist nodded shakily and reached for the phone, stopping only to consult whatever directory was on his monitor before hurriedly dialing. I took the time to properly appreciate the building’s lobby… for a given, very loose definition of ‘appreciate’. German efficiency: great for getting stuff done, terrible for architectural styling. This lobby was utilitarian to the core; hell, even the chairs, coffee table, and sofa set aside for visitors looked more like church pews than something I’d ever willingly set my butt down on. The only wall decoration was a map of the surrounding area, set into a frame that matched the lobby’s gunmetal-gray coloring so well that it blended into the wall.

“Schutz?” Taiki whispered to me, voice clearly amused.

“It’s a German company,” I whispered back. “Is it really a stretch to think that it has German employees?”

“Well—”

“What a surprise!” I turned towards the stairwell to see a familiar, still ridiculously-tall blonde walk the final steps down the stairs, a gleam in his eyes that didn’t match the grim set of his jaw. “How may I help you, Frau Y—”
“Not here,” I interrupted, gesturing to the warrants that Gang Orca was in the process of gathering up. “Your lab.” I paused, looking at my boss. “… if he’ll fit?”

“It could fit three of me easily,” Gerhardt Schutz answered, leading us towards the stairs that he’d just taken down. I was about to ask why he insisted on those when he simply flicked his eyes down to his badge, and I understood immediately. He had an established pattern of behavior. A deviation from it, such as taking the elevator back up instead of the stairs, could alert his superiors. Superiors that might not take kindly to being given a warrant and told to cooperate without their own lawyers present.

If he kept up a normal pattern of behavior, this could be treated as something he knew was coming, as opposed to a surprise for all involved, and attributed to a failure of communication somewhere along the line. From the fact that he was doing this, as opposed to immediately calling the company’s in-house counsel… I could guess he genuinely wanted to help.

The three of us followed Gerhardt up to the third floor in silence, not speaking until we were safely ensconced in his office, the frosted glass door closed and the LED on the door’s key-card reader red.

“So!” Gerhardt turned to the three of us, though his gaze primarily rested on Gang Orca. “What can I do to help you?”

“The boss’s intern,” Taiki said, withdrawing an evidence bag from a messenger bag slung over his shoulder, “recognized a piece of evidence from a long-standing case of ours.” He broke the seal on the evidence bag, and only after writing and signing the paperwork folded inside of it did he procure the actual evidence from within. “She believes you, in particular, can help with this.”

Taiki placed the vial of thin, purple liquid on the lab table. Gerhardt’s sudden gasp was as much confirmation as any of us needed, and Gang Orca’s countenance took a turn for the grim.

“Yes,” Gerhardt said, pulling on a pair of nitrile gloves before reaching for the vial. “If I may?” He made a gesture with his hands, as if to open it.

“You may,” Gang Orca rumbled. “The lab techs in Shinagawa have already analyzed the vial and its contents as well as their labs allow.”

“Danke.” Gerhardt opened the vial and procured an eyedropper, a graduated cylinder, and a scale. With practiced motions, he managed to draw up exactly one milliliter of the liquid and place it in the cylinder, which itself then went on the scale. I have no idea what number it showed, but given how he hadn’t tared the scale, he obviously knew exactly how much the cylinder weighed. “Hm… the density is low. Perhaps…?” He reached into his pocket and withdrew a penlight, and once he flicked it on I saw it was ultraviolet. The light shone over the vial, revealing a set of digits and the company’s name written on it. “This is… hm.” He looked up at us. “Troubling.”

“How so?” Gang Orca asked. “Details, if you would.”

“These digits.” I leaned in closer to read the numbers Gerhardt pointed out: 22320923@11, it read. “This is the batch number. Batch eleven, created on the twenty-third of September, last year.” He got up and walked to his computer, typing something into a search field there. “All vials accounted for in our internal system. And yet, this one clearly was not in storage.”

“Which means someone else removed them without adding that into the system,” Taiki murmured.
“Is there any way to inventory all vials of this substance? You have confirmation that one was missing; would this be enough to do a full audit?”

“Not me,” Gerhardt admitted, shaking his head. “But perhaps a superior of mine can—”

“Kraut!” A banging came on the frosted glass door to Gerhardt’s lab, and we could see a short, stout silhouette outside. The keycard reader beeped, and the next moment, the door was pulled outward, revealing a man in a suit who practically embodied the term ‘sweating bullets’. I’m not kidding: his sweat was silver, as were the capillaries I could see in his eyes, and same with the veins practically bulging at his neck and temple. “What in the nine hells were you thinking, talking to them without our lawyer present!?”

“I vas merely—”

“Schutz-san was merely cooperating with an official warrant,” Gang Orca rumbled, interposing himself between Gerhardt and the newcomer, who rapidly pulled back as the Pro Hero loomed closer. “And you would be?”

“Kagakkan Ensui,” the man bit out, managing to maintain eye contact with Gang Orca despite his obvious fear. “A-and I’m the one in charge on this floor! Not you, me!”

“Oh?” Orca murmured, baring his fangs. “Well then. I suppose that makes you the one we need next, then.”

“E-eh?” Kagakkan seemed to stumble mentally at that. I drifted closer to Gerhardt, who even now was typing away furiously at his keyboard. A brief glance at what little I could see of the screen revealed that he was typing entirely in roman characters, possibly his native tongue.

“Indeed.” Gang Orca placed the warrants flat on the table so Gerhardt’s… boss? Manager? Supervisor? Probably the last one. He put the warrants on the table so Gerhardt’s supervisor could take a look at them. “It would seem that this building, and its facilities, are the origin of a piece of evidence that had long eluded us.” His grin turned predatory, every single one of my boss’s wicked-sharp teeth proudly on display. “So if you could do us a favor and conduct a full audit of your chemical stores, all in accordance with our warrant of course, then I won’t have to resort to more…” Gang Orca paused, leaning closer in. “Drastic, methods.”

“W-well!” Kagakkan gathered up the warrants, folding them up and stuffing them into a pocket. “We’ll see w-what our lawyers t-think of your little probe, won’t we!?”

“Those were just copies,” Taiki said nonchalantly. “Your lawyers can look at those all they like, they’re solid.”

“And we will be expecting that audit within the next forty-eight hours,” Gang Orca declared, in a tone that brooked no argument. “I believe that will be all, yes?”


“As you vish,” Gerhardt murmured. I could practically taste the venom dripping from his voice as his superior stomped out, the man doing his best to slam the door behind him, and failing due to the same technology that let it close swiftly in an emergency. He turned towards us, grinning wryly. “It would seem I am in trouble for doing my job, hm?”
“If anything befalls you, let us know immediately,” Taiki said, concern in his voice. “Retaliation for cooperating with an investigation is illegal, and we can help if something happens.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, bowing to Gerhardt slightly. “Your boss is a prick.”

“Language.” I winced. Gang Orca procured a business card and handed it to Gerhardt, who accepted it with gusto. “If you learn something else, you know who to call. Taiki, Chimera.”

“Yes boss.” He nodded towards the door, and we made our way out. I lingered in the doorway for a moment, looking back at Gerhardt. He waved me off, and eventually I had to go or be left behind.

I’d found Gang Orca a solid, actionable lead.

I just hope I didn’t cost somebody else his job in the process.

* * * * *

His special vial secure in his pocket, Gerhardt pushed open the door to his superior’s office. The chairs that were usually present seemed to be missing, forcing Gerhardt to stand; another indignity, heaped upon him by this miserable excuse for a human being. How Kagakkan Ensui had managed to rise this high in Wesenproduktion’s hierarchy, he would never know.

“You fucking moron,” the man hissed, glaring at Gerhardt over the paperwork on his desk. “You invited a Pro Hero into the building!”

“We are a support company,” Gerhardt stated, dropping his accent completely. In his rage, Ensui would never even notice. “Helping Pro Heroes is quite literally our company’s mission statement.”

“With technology!” Ensui roared. “Or equipment! Chemicals! Machines! Not,” he slammed on the desk, “with THIS!” The desk cracked, the sound of the wood giving way beneath Ensui’s heavy fists echoing in the small office. “You’re suspended, Kraut. Two weeks!”

“My deadline is in two weeks,” Gerhardt said, voice as level as he could keep it. “Surely you do not —”

“Well then whose problem is that, hm?!” Ensui picked up the phone, leveling a glare at Gerhardt. “Two weeks. Now get out.”

Gerhardt left the office, retreating to his lab. Or attempting to do so, anyway: his keycard failed to allow him entry.

Fine. If that was how the man wanted to play it.

Not that it mattered. Gerhardt had already sent his opening play.

My superior is acting anomalously with regards to an official request from a high-ranked Pro Hero, the e-mail, the one he’d sent before Gang Orca and his retinue had even left, began. Set up a monitor on the Hosu, Tokyo location’s computer systems, and begin an external audit of our stores. I have reason to believe that somebody here is appropriating company property for their own personal gain, and is not above pinning the blame on somebody else. I am under the impression that
the ‘somebody else’ will be me.

Five minutes later, he received a reply.

*Our sysadmin is cursing your name, but has begun the audit. We will know if anything changes.*
Your suspension has been reversed. Plans for the Onigashima collaboration remain on track. Use the Ginza facility.
Be careful.

—Wilhelm Schutz
—CFO, Wesenproduktion Berlin
Chapter Fifty-Seven

Chapter Notes

So I know I forgot to mention this, but this fic is on a pseudo-hiatus. What that means is the updates have slowed way, WAY down, as I've become a little bit busy IRL to be keeping to some of the prior update paces I have in the past. What's that, you ask? What has me so busy?

Law school.

Eeyup. What is this 'free time' of which you speak? I barely have any!

After our little visit to Wesenproduktion, the rest of the day was… uneventful, I guess you could say? I stopped by the hospital one more time to say bye to everyone, only to find out Tenya was already in surgery, Mom was in the OR with him, and I wasn’t allowed in the operating theater. That last one really didn’t surprise me, I wasn’t family to Tenya, and this wasn’t exactly a routine operation. But it still sucked. I hated not knowing what was going on. Especially when my friend’s future might be on the line.

There’s an old saying about picking your battles though, and this was one that I wasn’t even going to bother fighting. A quick goodbye to Dad and a best of luck to Pony later, and we were on our way back to Shinagawa. No helicopter this time. Instead, we got a car.

And as we sat in the middle of Tokyo traffic, I got the feeling that Gang Orca was instantly regretting the choice to drive instead of taking the metro.

“Oh come on!” Taiki yelled, smacking the top of the steering wheel in annoyance so he didn’t honk it instead. “Why? Why do people do that!? I’m serious, using the turn lane to creep up and then merging back in doesn’t make you clever, it just means you’re an asshole!”

It didn’t help that Taiki apparently had a bad habit of talking to traffic.

“Boss, permission to put on the sirens?” He asked, voice pleading. Gang Orca seemed to mull it over for a moment, actually giving serious consideration to the idea.

“… no.” Both Taiki and I groaned aloud at that. “Behave. Both of you. Traffic is a fact of life. Get used to it.”

The both of us just grumbled, though not particularly good-naturedly, and resumed whatever it was we were doing. For Taiki, that was focusing on traffic.

For me, it was staving off the 1-A group chat. I’m not sure when the damn thing started, only that I’m about ninety percent sure it was Tohru’s fault. Despite being invisible and thus not having facial expressions or most forms of body language to work with, she was ridiculously sociable and expressive. I’m not sure whether that’s something she developed to overcome the difficulties her Quirk causes, or if that’s actually just her personality.
>AcidSwing: OMG KANKAN iz ur dad ok!?

>DeepDope’d: wow shes gonna tear ur head off 4 that nickname

>RockSolid: dude what about the guys tho they got the hero killer!

>Wehkachu: Have none of you considered the prudence of not immediately badgering her for information regarding her family’s incredibly recent near-death experience? Politeness must have slipped all of your minds. Also grammar.

>CarmenSandiego: guyz guyz cmon y dont we just b nice

>>You (WildChild) have left the chat.

Nope. Not dealing with this shit. Fuck group chats and everything they stand for. Seriously, whoever thought chats were a good communication medium had something wrong with their head.

Fuck this. I’m just gonna listen to music and close my eyes.

Someone wake me up when we get there.

-------

We finally did get back to Shinagawa Aquarium, after a full hour and a half in traffic of course, but we made it. A pair of photos graced my message screen courtesy of Taiki, one of them of just me asleep in the backseat, and another where my tail had draped over the front seat and on top of Gang Orca’s head. I had been a little too asleep to actually notice that, but the photo existed nonetheless, and the boss took it with a surprising amount of grace. I had a feeling I’d never hear the end of it though, so now I was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Because when the opportunity to do some good-natured poking fun of someone arose, you grabbed onto it with both hands and didn’t let go.

Sometime during the ride, Gang Orca had apparently called in for some dinner to be delivered to our office, and we returned to find a quintet of relatively-fresh okonomiyaki waiting for us on the main table. Gang Orca picked all five of them up, transported in pizza boxes as they were, and led us towards the elevator up to his office. Once we exited and made our way up the still frustratingly-disorienting clear stairs (no, I didn’t stumble! I didn’t… okay, fine, I tripped, happy!), Gang Orca put the food down on the large discussion table while Taiki and I grabbed seats.

“So.” Gang Orca returned from the quick trip over to his desk with two pairs of chopsticks, one for me and one for Taiki, and a very large pair of cooking chopsticks for himself. “We have new information that helps our case. Chimera.” I looked up, about to put a bite of okonomiyaki into my mouth, but stopped to give him my attention. “You know more about the origins of ‘Purple Haze’ than either of us present. Please share.”

I gave a longing look at the okonomiyaki clutched before my chopsticks and sighed before setting it down. “Alright. So, this stuff you’re calling ‘Purple Haze’…” I took a deep breath. “You know my family’s history with the Wendigo, yes?” I asked. As expected, both of them nodded. “From what I know, he was experimented on, and wound up with some strange… stuff running through him. From what I was told, it is to quirk factor what insulin is to blood sugar.”
“That... has disturbing implications.” Gang Orca mulled over the idea, a hand on his... chin? Chin. Let’s go with chin. “So when he went on his killing sprees, and eating people... he was also consuming the Quirk Factor in their bodies. And you’re saying this is how he grew more powerful.”

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “About... hang on, let me think.” Alright, it was, what... okay, yeah I was right. “About a year and a half ago, my dad fought him, and managed to sever an arm at the shoulder. Apparently that arm’s of major value for research, since, well.” I shrugged. “Apparently it had some of his magic Quirk juice in it, and at least one company found out how to synthesize it.”

“So if his body is producing it, that would explain why the augmented Trigger isn’t just a permanent power boost,” Taiki added. “Especially since they cut the actual drug in half and replace the remainder with this. It just augments the duration. Plus, the timeline fits. The better Trigger went on the market a little over a year ago, and the supply’s been petering out in the past couple of weeks. I mean, we still see some, but the prices?” He shook his head. “A quick search on the dark web showed that it’s gotten marked up a hundred times. A safe, longer-lasting power-up with no negative side-effects? That’s like dangling money in front of a miser. Of course they’re going to want it.”

“Until the auditors finish their task, there’s little more we can do on that end,” Gang Orca rumbled. He’d already eaten one full seafood okonomiyaki and moved on to the next one, which itself had been half-eaten by the time Taiki and I were done talking. “You.” He pointed at Taiki. “Follow up with the auditors. That supervisor will probably try to give the runaround to anybody looking into their systems.” He looked at me now. “You. Get some rest. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

I nodded, then shuddered when the implication set in. The rest of my okonomiyaki went into the box, which I closed to take back to my room.

“Goodnight then,” I said. Taiki gave me a wave, while Gang Orca just nodded, and I retreated to my room. My comfy, cozy room, where I set the alarm for a blisteringly-early two in the morning, because I knew where this was going. Then I washed up, took a couple of melatonin pills to help me conk out this early, and tucked myself in for bed.

Sleep was slow in coming.

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[BACK UPSTAIRS...]

“Taiki.”

“Yes boss?”

“You did remember to give her a copy of this week’s patrol schedule.”

“... shit.”

“Hm. She is going to be very angry come morning. I’ll be sure to tell her it was your fault.”

“What? No, boss. Please. Please, boss, don’t do that to me!”

“You had one job, Taiki.”
“… why do I still work for you.”

“I offer top-tier dental.”

* * * * *

Two in the morning came far faster than it had any right to. My hand slapped out to begin my torrid love affair with the snooze button, before I realized that one, I’m already in a relationship with Katsuki, and two, Gnag Orca would kick my ass six ways to Sunday if I so much as dared to be late. No point in showering if I was going to be on patrol, so I just pulled my hair back into a ponytail, and pinned that one lock of hair that wants to try and hang in front of my face back with a bobby pin. Then, with costume on and all the essentials squared away, I headed out the door to the lobby.

And… nobody was there. Unlike two days ago, where both Gang Orca and Taiki had been ready and waiting, neither of them were present.

“Hello?” I called out, hoping one of them was just in the back. Nothing. No response. I was about to call out again when my eyes settled on a piece of paper set on the little coffee table by the front door, which hadn’t been there last night. A quick look at the paper had me cursing up a storm, and stomping off back to my room in a way that I sincerely hope woke somebody up.

* Patrol Schedule, the sheet read. And on both Tuesday and Friday, it had 2am patrols listed. But not on Thursday. Thursday didn’t have anything set until 10am.

And today was Thursday.

Fuck this. I’m going back to sleep.

I’ll rip somebody a new one in the morning.

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The alarm went off again, this time at the much more rational eight in the morning. I’d managed to scrounge up another five hours of sleep with relative ease, since at my age it’s not hard to convince your body that more sleep is the best thing in the damn world. When I woke up, my eyes were crusty, my hair was a mess, and I’d drooled all over my pillow, which I dare anybody to tell someone about, or I will lodge my hoof so far up their ass that they can taste my horseshoe. The shower was a warm relief… wait, pun not intended. It was warm, and it was a relief, but that’s not what I was going for. Ugh… accidental puns are the worst. Intended ones are great, if often so forced they lose much of the amusement, but still.

I made my way downstairs to the lobby, where the smell of something surprisingly tasty led me elsewhere. I followed the scent into the back, towards the employee area, where I found Taiki… cooking up what could only be fucking french toast on a hot plate. Where the hot plate came from, I don’t know. Where the ingredients came from, I don’t want to know.

“I s-see you got the note!” Taiki said when he saw me coming in, smile wavering a little. I gave him
my best glare and shuffled in, taking a seat at the small card table and trying my best not to slouch. My hair was still a bit damp, and it slapped against my neck and upper back, dampening that part of my top. I didn’t care, it would dry eventually, but still.

“Yeah, I saw it.” I crossed my arms and stared at him. “At two in the morning.”

“Peace offering, peace offering!” He exclaimed, putting a plate down in front of me. I looked down, and actually had to blink. It was proper brioche french toast. Where had he gotten the brioche? *When* had he gotten the brioche? “Powdered sugar? Butter? Syrup?”

“Powdered sugar,” I replied, then blinked again when he offered me a fork and knife to eat with. “Didn’t think this was something you’d know how to make. Or like, for that matter.”

“Kanna.” Taiki gave me a serious look. “We’re Japanese,” he said, like that explained everything. And to be honest, it really did. What? I’m serious! The sheer quantity of pastry and sweet shops in Japan is astronomical; I swear, the country’s sweet tooth is so long they could probably use it to build a space elevator!

“Mm,” I mumbled back, around a bite of french toast. It was firm on the outside, somewhere between soggy and gooey on the inside. Odd as it is, that’s *exactly* how I liked it. “So what is on the agenda for today, anyway? You know, since I wasn’t patrolling well before the crack of dawn.”

“It’s a surprise.”

Taiki and I both jumped slightly as Gang Orca *ghosted* into the small kitchen-cum-breakroom, somehow completely silent despite the fact that he’s an absolutely massive, plodding behemoth of a man.

“How—”

“Practice,” he replied before I could even finish my question. “Months, even years of practice. Chimera, your costume is rated for aquatic activity, yes?”

“Uh,” I thought for a moment. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure it is. It’s not a wetsuit, but I don’t really need that, so…” I trailed off, realizing that I’d run out of things to say. “How come?” I finally asked.

“You’ll see. Out the door in one hour.” He nodded at Taiki now. “Let me know when any updates come in.”

“Roger, boss!” Taiki said, hand snapping up into a salute. Unfortunately, this was the hand that was still holding his fork, and that accidentally catapulted a piece of his breakfast into the air.

And onto Gang Orca’s head.

“… pfft!” I couldn’t keep a straight face at this, and whipped out my phone t—

“If you take a photograph I will snap your phone in two,” he growled.

Damn. So much for that.

* * * * *
The trip down to the harbor was quick and efficient, a far shorter drive than the trek diagonally across all of Tokyo from yesterday. Then again, there’s a big difference between ten in the morning and five in the afternoon, especially as far as traffic is concerned. Plus, the harbor was rather tranquil. Most of the boats that usually moor there were already out for the day, with the exception of this one… wait, is that a yacht? That is a seriously nice boat! Okay, maybe it’s not a yacht, but that’s what it looks like, so I’m going to call it one until I’m given a better term to use.

The *Oki Mariner* wasn’t the largest yacht in the world, not by far, but it was certainly well-cared for. There were signs that it wasn’t a new ship if you knew where to look, mainly around the waterline, but the other usual traces of older boats were missing. I didn’t see a single barnacle growing on its sides, nor any algae or gunk on the bow. I couldn’t see the stern, so the rudder and propellers were outside my field of view, but what I did see was enough to know. Somebody *loved* this ship.

“She’s a beaut, ain’t she?”

I turned to face the new voice… and stopped. Yes, that was a man who looked to be a giant seal in a wetsuit. Yes, there was a woman in a *proper* sailor outfit, not a schoolgirl equivalent, with either fins for ears or a really neat looking piece of equipment. But more importantly, on seal-man’s other side?

“Tsuyu!”

“Kanna-chan, kero.”

I ran over to Tsuyu and wrapped her up in a great big hug, which she’d apparently seen coming because she didn’t stiffen up at the sudden contact this time. She returned the hug gingerly, and I let go before she started to get uncomfortable. I was all smiles, and she was too in her own, more subtle way. The signs were there if you knew how to read her expression: eyes just a hair narrower, shoulders relaxed, an absolutely minuscule smile playing over her lips.

“Please say your internship has been less eventful than mine,” I said, still close but no longer trying to smother her in my grip.

“We encountered some smugglers yesterday.” And with that, Tsuyu poured cold water all over all my hopes of being the only one who had to deal with this nonsense. “They had tentacles, kero.”

Well. That was a mental image I really didn’t want.

“Alright you two!” The woman next to Gang Orca and the Amazing Seal-Man clapped her hands, drawing our attention. “Let’s get on board the ship and let the bosses do their thing. We cast off in twenty!”

I looked at Tsuyu for guidance, but she just pulled me along with a quiet ‘kero’, and next thing I knew I was standing on a ship for the first time since USJ. The bottom dropped out of my stomach for a moment until Tsuyu took both my hands in hers, looking straight into my eyes to ground me.

“Kero,” she offered. And all was right with the world.
“Innsmouth?” I found myself asking, once Tsuyu had finished recounting her story. “The guy called himself Boss Innsmouth?”

“He was very much like an octopus,” Tsuyu confirmed. “And his henchmen resembled squids, kero.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. “Tsuyu. You realize you and your boss punched out C’thulhu, yes?”

“What is C’thulhu?” She asked by way of answering. I gaped.

“Only the mighty Dagon-sama has my respect, kero.” And now it was my turn to gape again. “Are you trying to catch a seagull, Kanna-chan?”

“You win this round, Tsuyu,” I groused. “Just you wait.”

“You are becoming predictable,” she pointed out, poking me in the cheek with one finger. I made a funny sound when she poked me and mimed trying to beat her away, but we both knew it was a joke. She’d seen me do this with Pony before, though usually one of us was eating something at the time just for added amusement. “Iida-kun is okay?”

“I hope so,” I admitted, unhappy that I didn’t know. “I mean, I guess we’ll find out on Monday along with everyone else. I just…” I sighed. “I hope it works out. If it does, and his brother can walk again?”

“Mm,” she murmured, watching the water rush by as we zoomed further out to sea. “We have to be patient.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” I grumbled. Tsuyu took the chance to poke me again.

We lapsed into a bit of small talk from there. Tsuyu talked some more about her brother and sister, while at the same time taking the opportunity to poke fun at my abysmal cooking skills by describing what she tended to make them for dinner. I could’ve probably turned it around by asking about recipes for frog legs, but that was just too mean. And besides, I knew she didn’t mean anything by it aside from some light-hearted ribbing. My culinary deficiency was pretty well-known by now, and I’d had time to come to grips with the fact that if I were to start living alone, I’d either be eating the same three things, eating out a lot, or keeping three fire extinguishers handy at all times.

Another fifteen minutes passed like this until we both felt and heard the engine cut off, and slowly we drifted to a bit of a stop on the surface of the water. Selkie’s men sent the anchor down to keep us locked in place, and the seal himself headed towards the back of the boat, Gang Orca next to him.

“Well, we’re at our destination!” He proclaimed loudly. “And now it’s time…” Selkie hunched in on himself almost, flipper-hands coming up to just beneath his chin, head tilted slightly, eyes closed, and smile spread out far wider than it had any right to be. “For whale watching!”

“Boss, stop trying to be cute!” Sirius yelled from all the way on the other end of the ship.

“So cute…” Tsuyu murmured under her breath. I looked at her and quirked an eyebrow, which had her blushing slightly.
“So… what?” I asked, hand on a hip. “We’re just going to sit here, wait for a whale to show up?”

“Now where’s the fun in that?” Selkie admonished. “Froppy, ready for amphibious activity?”

“Kero!” Tsuyu saluted, and pulled a rebreather out of her pocket while sliding the goggles on her costume down over her eyes. I had a feeling about what was coming next, and with that feeling came the growth of gills on the side of my neck.

“Now I suppose it’s time to go into the water.” Gang Orca walked past me, slipping his shoes off as he did so. I breathed a sudden sigh of relief—then squeaked when I felt his hand close around my tail. “I hope you’re ready for some EXTRA GUIDANCE!”

And with that, he flung me by my tail, sending me flying out into the open ocean. I barely reacted in time to not belly-flop, and shifted my eyes so that they wouldn’t be stung by the salt, followed by my skin and tail to something closer to an orca’s. The chill of the water faded, and with a powerful flick of my fluked tail, I spun myself back towards the surface of the water.

“That looked like fun,” Tsuyu commented when I breached the surface, then hopped down into the water next to me. I worried about her for a moment, the water was rather cold, but once I got closer I noticed just how warm she was. “Heating elements built-in,” she said, answering the unasked question.

“Enough chatter.” Gang Orca and Selkie leapt into the water at that, surfacing a mere moment later. “Chimera, shift for ultrasound capability. Froppy, Selkie tells me your ‘visor’ should have an adapter to lower ultrasound to audible range for you.” Tsuyu nodded with a small ribbit, and reached up to fiddle with something on her goggles, which turned out to be an earbud on a cord that she slipped into her left ear. In the meantime, I shifted a little more, opening up those odd little sacs in my sinuses that would let me produce ultrasound, while also augmenting my lung capacity. I was never going to get the raw volume that Gang Orca could, but I could reasonably approximate it, at least. I just… didn’t have much control over it.

“Alright, down we go!” Selkie announced. “Follow me, and stay close!” With that, we all took deep breaths and plunged beneath the waves.

Selkie and Gang Orca led, their powerful strokes producing just enough of a wake in the water for Tsuyu and me to coast in. We dove down probably about thirty, forty meters before stopping to float in the water, and a quick check of Selkie’s dive computer (which he then turned to show the rest of us) confirmed it: thirty-five meters. I wanted to ask why he wasn’t making any noise, but he held up a hand and pointed at his ears. With that clue, I closed my eyes, let the ocean currents swim around me, and listened.

It was faint. It was incredibly faint. But it was there. The high-pitched tones, the whistles, the clicks…

It sounded like whale song.

“Follow me,” Gang Orca said suddenly, in the quietest ultrasound I’d ever heard from him. “Stay close, and stay quiet.”

The four of us moved as one now, Gang Orca at the helm, Selkie bringing up the rear of the diamond. This was the open ocean, with predators and all, but I had the sudden feeling that none of them wanted to approach for very good reasons. The undersea song grew louder as we swam on,
and I began to glimpse large, dark shapes flitting through the water, swift and graceful.

Then, Gang Orca pulled to a stop… and sent out a whale song of his own. It sounded almost identical to what I’d been hearing as we went through the water, and in its wake, all of the whale song stopped for an instant. A beat passed, then two. And then a new song came. I didn’t know how to interpret it, but there was a sort of… eagerness? It trilled off, passing higher into clicks before repeating.

And an instant later, the source of the song came to us: a full-grown orca, beautiful and deadly, hovered in the water directly in front of us. Gang Orca reached his hand… and the killer whale butted against it, another soft song shared between the two of them.

“They have their own language,” Gang Orca said suddenly, looking at me. “They’ve learned some of ours over the years, but for now, just try to mimic what you heard.”

He looked back to the orca in front of him, but before he say anything else, I felt another blat of ultrasound wash over us. I turned to look at its source, and saw what could only be an orca calf bumping up against Tsuyu, nudging her to play with it. It was absolutely adorable, the way Tsuyu suddenly looked out of her element at the calf’s eager insistence, and soon enough Tsuyu acquiesced, wrapping a hand around its dorsal fin before being spun around in a loop, then the other way. The two began to swim a circle around each other, with the calf trying to nudge Tsuyu’s back, and Tsuyu trying to grab its tail, all while Selkie and another orca watched with care.

“Try to copy me,” Gang Orca said, pulling my attention back to the orca—scratch that, orcas, plural, in front of us. It wasn’t just a few, it was a whole damn pod! “This is how they greet each other.” Gang Orca trilled, a high song that pitched downward at the end before rising higher than it began. Sort of a plateau followed by the trough and peak of a sine wave, if I had to characterize it. I frowned, trying to feel for the specialized chambers I’d shifted my sinuses into, and tried.

I ended up with something that was far too low at the beginning, and rang so high at the end that I think I hurt my own ears.

There was an odd squeaking sound from the orcas. A juvenile, somewhere between the calf that was still playing with Tsuyu and the adult hanging next to Gang Orca, flicked its tail in my direction, and I felt a wall of water wash over me, knocking me off balance.

“Keep trying,” Gang Orca said, reassuringly. “Don’t be discouraged. It’s not as simple as we make it seem. Master this, and we can move onto human speech.”

I nodded, and tried again. And again. And again. The calf playing with Tsuyu dive-bombed me, with Tsuyu still hanging onto its tail, and smacked me with its snout after a particularly bad attempt, but what I think I’d identified as a happy laugh from the rest of the orca pod was enough to keep me from getting too discouraged.

I’m not sure how long we spent down there. I finally managed to say ‘hello’ in this pod’s dialect, and Gang Orca had me moving onto some other simple, useful terms, like ‘here’, ‘there’, ‘food’, ‘air’, ‘happy’, and ‘danger’. That last one was an accident, actually; a shark swam a bit closer to the pod than I’d expected one to, and swiftly found itself… well, I’ll omit that part.

Let’s just say that Tsuyu, Disney Princess that she was, hand-fed an orca calf.

Use your imagination.
Decompression is a pain, but necessary after spending extended amounts of time underwater. The Bends are a rather horrible affliction to suffer from, so it’s best we don’t risk it. Gang Orca had me try a few more terms in ultrasound on our way up, and even had me try a single word in Japanese on the way up: “Hai”, yes.

“It’s almost like ventriloquism,” he said as we hung three meters below the water’s surface, waiting another five minutes before being allowed to surface. “Maintain a constant pitch for the ultrasound, and whisper the word at the same time.” I frowned, trying to picture it. Whispering… with my sinuses.

Did he mean I had to talk high and nasal, almost? Just whisper nasally?

I gave it a few tries. I wound up with something that sounded a little bit like “I” or “ai”, but getting the ‘h’ sound in there was beginning to feel impossible. I had to shift my sinuses back to normal before we surfaced, and closed the gills up once I was breathing normally.

Tsuyu and I practically collapsed on the deck. Sirius came out from the cabin with towels in hand, handing one to me and one to Tsuyu. Selkie and Gang Orca seemed to not care at all, conversing about who knows what while the two of us interns watched the waves.

“Wow,” I breathed. “That was… just, wow.” I was, for once, at a loss for words. There’s a lot of experiences that are just so incredible, so magical, that they defy description. This was one of them.

“Look, kero.” Tsuyu pointed at the water below. I followed her gaze, and saw the orca calf and what I could only guess was its mother, looking up at us, some of its clicks somehow audible to us. Tsuyu and I both waved, and the calf gave us a wave with its tail as it went back underwater, its mother guiding it back to the rest of the pod.

“Tsuyu?” She looked at me. “I think you made a friend.”

“Kero!” Tsuyu agreed, smiling as wide as I’d ever seen her, a light blush on her cheeks.

“Kero indeed,” I murmured, leaning into her. She leaned back into me, and as Selkie’s men pulled the anchor back up and set the ship headed towards port once more, we watched the ocean grow brighter and brighter as we pulled closer to land. “Kero indeed.”
On Monday, I sent out one of my only good evening dresses to make sure it was pressed, cleaned, and ready for whatever it is Gang Orca wanted me to have it for. Now, on Friday, what I got back…

“What. The. Hell…?”

… was decidedly not the same dress I’d send out.

I stomped out of my dormitory, down the hall to the elevator, and from the elevator over to the front desk, where Taiki already sat. He looked up, giving me a bemused expression.

“Aren’t you up a little early?”

I flung the garment bag over my shoulder and onto Taiki’s desk, draping the covering over his computer so he could see inside the bag.

“One Monday, the dress I sent you was a satin, one-shoulder, knee-length, teal dress.” I pointed at the bag. “What. Happened. To my dress.”

With a flourish, I pulled the dress free of the garment bag. It was a sleek, floor-length, deep crimson gown, and the feel of the material left no doubt in my mind that this thing was made of silk. And not cheap silk either; if you want to know what that feels like, go find the silk neckties that are somehow cheaper than polyester ones. No, this one was made of silk so soft that if I’d had this material for my bedsheets, I would be impossible to wake in the morning. The gown was backless, held up by a loop of material that was meant to go around my neck, and had a slit up most of the length of a leg for mobility. Oh, and the most important part of all of this? The designer label.

My dress, the one I’d brought, was a somewhat ‘meh’ label, and only cost about seventy-five hundred yen. This dress was a Highmountain dress. That name probably doesn’t mean much to a lot of people, but oh it definitely does to me. It went from being a more obscure and niche label to suddenly exploding in popularity in the last seven or eight years, and that’s due to a somewhat sudden change in the design philosophy. Instead of trying to follow fashion trends, Highmountain began to predict them, even make new ones. This sent the price skyrocketing, and the demand rising even higher. Which, again, leaves me with a couple issues.

One, this dress had to have cost somewhere in the range of five-hundred-thousand yen. That’s about $4,500 or so, by the way. And two, I know the creator of the Highmountain fashion label. Oh, do I know her.

After all, I’m dating her FUCKING son!

“Oh, that dress?” Taiki shrugged. “It came back from cleaning yesterday; I put it in your dorm’s closet. That, though?” He pointed at the one-of-a-kind piece in front of me. “Did you read the note that came with it?”

“… what.”

“There was a note,” Taiki said, talking slowly like he was explaining to a five year old, “that came with the dress.” He zipped up the garment bag and carefully lifted it off his desk, then handed it back
to me with that same level of delicacy. “Now why don’t you go read the note, then come back down in twenty minutes? You’re going on daytime patrol with the boss today.”

“… what.”

Taiki gave me a sardonic smile. “Didn’t you read the schedule?”

“You mean the one you only gave to me yesterday?” He had the grace to look sheepish, at least. “Great. Alright. Be back down in twenty.” He gave a half-hearted wave and went back to his computer while I tromped back upstairs, back into my room, and then looked on the floor for wherever this note could have gone. But first I checked to see if my dress was actually in my closet.

And yes. It was. Along with the note that had come with this new dress, sitting on the floor after I’d apparently knocked it loose from where it was taped onto the garment bag. I grabbed the note, sat on my bed, and flipped it open to read.

Hey kid!

Apparently there’s some big thing for Jeanist’s clothing label in Ginza on Saturday, but my own damn son can’t wear my label to help promote it! So, since he told me you and your boss are apparently invited, you get to rep my label instead! Normally you’d have to give the clothes back after the event, but eh. Tailoring for you is a pain, so keep it.

Oh, and when you see Katsuki, make sure to give him a good smack upside the head for me. I saw he got mouthy with a couple of kids, and I know I raised him better than that!

—Mitsuki

I read the note again. And then I read it again. And then I threw the damn thing onto my pillow and changed into my costume, because yeah, I’m not dealing with that right now.

That crazy woman.

Who the hell does she think she is, my mother in law?

* * * * *

A quick look at Gang Orca’s patrol schedule tells you… absolutely nothing about the man’s habits. While his weekly daylight patrol is always either a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday, his other patrols are about as predictable as the damn three-body problem… which, uh, takes some explaining. The three-body problem is what happens when you try to calculate the orbit of three celestial bodies that are all in each other’s orbit. Fiendishly difficult, that one. There is a pattern… it’s just devilishly hard to find it.

The same holds true with Gang Orca’s nighttime patrol schedule. The only pattern to it? There is no pattern. He actually rolls a four-sided die to determine when the next nighttime patrol is, and the moment it starts to look like a pattern might be emerging, he deliberately changes the result. And if people start to think that the pattern behind his patrols is that there is no pattern? He does follow a pattern temporarily, specifically to throw off the people who think he won’t. It’s clever, it’s effective…

… and it means absolutely bupkis, because here we are on a daytime patrol, just… sort of walking the streets of Shinagawa Prefecture.

“So… why are we doing this?” I asked after about twenty minutes of walking, meeting-and-greeting, and getting many a picture of ourselves taken. I kept checking my reflection in the mirror to make sure my hair wasn’t getting into disarray, and wow do I need a trim look at all those split ends, I may
have to do that before tomorrow night.

“Three reasons,” Gang Orca rumbled. I looked at him, waving a hand to try and prompt him, but he just turned and gave me a look with one beady eye.

Oh. I’m supposed to be guessing, aren’t I?

“Alright, uh, let’s see.” I thought for a moment, bringing a hand up so I could count these off on my fingers. “One, a sort of ‘hearts and minds’ thing, see and be seen, let the citizens know that we’re actual people they can talk to?”

“That was the first two.” Gang Orca looked up as we crossed the street, catching the gaze of a little kid who’d been staring, who immediately took the opportunity to look away from the ‘scary man’, as he called my boss to his mom, to which I couldn’t help but giggle slightly. “I’m not that scary,” he murmured, more to himself than anyone else.

“Boss, I’ve been ambushed by villains since I was five years old.” This time, it was my turn to fix him with The Look. “Your ambush scared me worse than the villains at USJ.” Okay, not the whole truth. USJ was more shock leading into fright, while Gang Orca was a jump scare.

“The third reason,” he prompted, changing subjects.

I floundered for a bit. Okay, clearly there was the whole ‘hearts and minds’, letting people know we were around, being approachable… what was I missing? I feel like this is going to be something ridiculously obvious that I should have thought of instantly, but I don’t know. I was blanking. Completely and utterly blanking.

“Aw c’mon Boss, another one!? You replacin’ me already!”

I pulled to a complete stop at the new voice, looking around to try and locate it. No, not behind us, not around the corner, where was—

Gang Orca poked me in the shoulder and pointed across the street, catty-corner to our current location. And once again, I froze.

Yeah, no. I’m calling bullshit on this one. I definitely don’t want to believe what I’m looking at, cause it’s a little ridiculous. What is it, you ask? What’s so ridiculous that I’m saying that that’s enough for today?

Well, I’m pretty damn sure that the guy in front of me is none other than the fucking Rhino.

Horn? Check. Pallid gray skin across almost all of his body, except it might be a suit and not skin? Check. Massive as can be, rippling with muscle? Check. Sounds a bit like a delinquent? Yup, check.

None of which explained why he was helping an old lady carry her groceries across the street. Or what he’d just said. There’s no way this guy is—

“You had your years as a sidekick,” Gang Orca rumbled to the newcomer, who, again, could only be the Rhino. “You of all people should know how I work, Rhino.”

Oh, look. Confirmation.

I suddenly feel a little faint.

The Rhino finished up with helping the little old lady cross the street, and only after she took her
grocery bags back did he turn towards us, straightening up. And up. I was craning my neck to look this guy in the eyes; heck, if I was estimating this correctly, he was almost three full meters tall, and probably half that broad. If some people in my own damn class made me feel small (looking at you, Satou, Shouji), then… well?

I understood just a little bit more of what it felt like to be Mineta Minoru.

“So this’s da newbie, huh?” Massive arms crossed over an equally broad chest, the Rhino looked down at me to give a once-over, hunching over to get a better look. “Bit more tiny than your usual, I’d say!” He held out a hand, which surprised me, since that was very much not a classically Japanese thing to do. “Tsunohana Daigo!”

“Chimera,” Gang Orca chuffed, a sense of amusement in his tone. “Show him.”

I smirked, and my own hand, just as massive as the Rhino’s own, clasped his. “Yaseiki Kanna,” I introduced myself, giving him a firm, silverback gorilla’s handshake.

“Heh! Neat trick!” He gave my hand one more squeeze before letting go and crossing his arms again. “Betcha ain’t got dis though!” A thumb came up to point at the horn on his forehead, which now that I looked… yeah, that was natural. The horn wasn’t a part of the costume, the costume instead went around the horn. Huh. Still.

I waved my tail in his face. An instant later, and I was waving a stegosaurus tail in his face, complete with all the thagomizers I’d need to seriously tenderize even this big guy.

“I’m part dinosaur,” I quipped. “Your argument is invalid.”

Much as I’d expected, the Rhino only leaned back and guffawed, which soon became an ear-to-ear smile on his face.

“You even talk like the boss! Ha, he sure knows how to pick’em!” He leaned in, going down on one knee with a hand over his mouth. “Don’ gettin’ too comfy! He’ll kick ya out after a couple years, so no slackin’!”

“And if I didn’t,” Gang Orca interjected, walking over, “some of my former sidekicks still would be.” He fixed Rhino with a look, who seemed to read some unspoken cue that I didn’t catch, and stood at attention. “ Evening patrol?”

“Four out!” Rhino replied.

“Hm.” Gang Orca paused, seeming to think. “Can you make it one?”

“Huh?” Rhino seemed to flounder for a moment, but recovered quickly. “Oh, sure! I got dat for ya!”

“My thanks.” Gang Orca looked back to me, then gestured off to the side. “Come, Chimera.”

I nodded, then turned to the Rhino. “It was a pleasure to meet you!” I gave a bow, hands at my sides, bending straight at the waist, and was quite flustered to see the Rhino blushing and waving, a little flustered at the sudden formality. “Have a good say, sir.”

With that, we went north, and the Rhino went south. Our patrol continued in amicable silence for two or three blocks, and I mentally noted the location of a hair salon on the route; I’d have to check its reviews and see if it was any good.

“It’s fortunate I got to that young man when I did,” Gang Orca said all of a sudden. I faltered for a
moment, nearly tripping over my own hooves before looking up at my boss in confusion. “Some people with heteromorphic mutations aren’t well-suited for society. A consequence of their changed biology, perhaps. Can you imagine him at a desk job?”

I paused, trying to picture it. The Rhino trying to squeeze himself into a suit, then into a dinky desk chair, then tapping away one massive finger at a time on a normal-sized keyboard? I couldn’t help but shake my head at the thought. No, that wouldn’t work well, or even at all.

“No matter how hard society tries to normalize, our Quirks still define us. You cannot handle somebody like Rhino the same way you would Taiki. And yet, the law tries to anyway, which would have driven Rhino to villainy.”

“And instead,” I interjected, “now he’s a hero.”

“Mm.” He continued walking, and I followed. “Intimidation.”

“Huh?” I asked, eloquent as ever. He simply gave me a look of amusement.

“The third reason for these daylight patrols. Intimidation. Letting those who would do villainy know that we are heroes, that we are watching… and that we are here.”

I sniffed, trying not to let it sound disdainful, and probably failing. “You sounded a bit like All Might right there.”

Gang Orca gave me The Look. “We are here. All Might is everywhere.”

“All Might’s in Musutafu,” I retorted. “Teaching.”

Once again, Gang Orca gave me The Look.

“Fine!” I raised my hands. “As far as you care, All Might is basically—”

“Stop, thief!”

We heard a voice cry out from just around the corner, and while Gang Orca was galvanized to instant action, I froze for a moment. That moment was all it took for Gang Orca to position at the blind spot of the corner, and with a single movement, he grasped the apparent thief’s midsection in one massive hand, pressing him firmly but carefully against the wall. The thief… the thief was a kid. He was young, probably younger than me, dressed in a gakuran but clearly not at school. Dangling from his hand was a purse, which I took the opportunity to dash in and liberate from him. A woman came running down the block as quickly as she could in three-inch pumps and a pencil skirt, who proceeded to somehow thank both Gang Orca and myself profusely while also not saying a single word… which, let me tell you, is absolutely dumbfounding. I mean, she didn’t say anything, but I very clearly got the impression of an immensely grateful thank-you… but again, no words. Dumbfounding.

Turning back to the young thief, I crossed my arms over my chest, unsure how this was going to play out. This was… well, my first collar. Except it wasn’t mine, because it was Gang Orca’s… but I was currently his intern, or sidekick, or something to that effect, so I guess it was also mine?

Gang Orca stared the boy in the eyes. The boy stared back for just an instant, before looking away and slumping. Gang Orca pulled his hand away from where it held the boy to the wall… and shoved him along.
“Get back to school,” he said, his tone practically glacial. “And for your own sake, don’t do this again.”

My jaw fell. It stayed there until the boy was out of sight, and Gang Orca had finished placing a call to what I can only hope was the local koban, or truancy officer, or something.

“W-why!?” I finally blurted out, pointing at the direction the boy came from. “He committed a crime! You caught him! Why did you just let him go!?”

Gang Orca closed his eyes, a spurt of air forced from his blowhole a close approximation to a frustrated sigh. “The crimes of Quirkless individuals are a hard, if arbitrary, limit to what we heroes can do.”

I froze. “… he was Quirkless?” I asked. Gang Orca nodded. “Bu—that doesn’t make what he did okay! Why does he just get off scot free because he doesn’t have a Quirk?”

“Because that’s the law,” Gang Orca declared.

“Well that’s stupid and counterintuitive,” I retorted, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Like I just said,” Gang Orca replied, beginning to walk again. “It’s the law. The law is slower to change than society.” He gave me a glance, and his gaze softened. “You’ll find that the law doesn’t always work in your favor. And unfortunately, there is little we can do about that. Either change the law, or find a different one that applies.”

I frowned. “Can we at least call the police to deal with crimes by Quirkless people? Just because they don’t have powers doesn’t mean they can’t be held liable.”

“That’s what the police are for,” he replied, humor coloring his voice now. “And given that this was that boy’s third such offense, I do believe he will find his day has become considerably worse.”

I blinked, processing that for a moment before grinning. “So he doesn’t get away with it just by being Quirkless.”

“He gets away from heroes.” He gave me a fanged grin of his own. “Nobody gets away from the police.”

* * * * *

Patrol ended, and the rest of the day continued much like the other normal days had. Training in the late afternoon and early evening, leaving me tired, sore, and purpling. Thankfully a nice, hot shower, with a little help from the axolotl, had my muscles and bruises healing up far faster than they would have otherwise, and I was actually presentable when I left through the aquarium to seek dinner… and snapped a discrete picture of Taiki with Umiko, which I promptly sent to the boss.

Saturday dawned bright and early, but there was no training on the agenda.

There was only preparing for whatever the event in Ginza was this evening, whose purpose I still hadn’t been informed of, other than that it was something to do with Best Jeanist’s fashion label, Onigashima. And talk about a way to advertise to males: Demon Island. Yeah. That’s one heck of a name.

Either way, tonight I was going to have to present myself to an audience. Which meant going to get my hair done, because I wasn’t dealing with these split ends anymore and I didn’t have Pony around to help me with it.
And—ugh—getting more makeup than just the eyeliner and lip gloss I’d brought with me. Because, again. Major event for a fashion label. Which reminded me!

>So when did your mother decide that I’d be playing model for her tonight anyway?

I stowed the phone away and strode into the hair salon, put on the robe they use to keep cut hair off your clothes, and eventually got called over to get my hair washed by a very flamboyant young man. He ooh’d and aah’d at my minor celebrity status, and all of five seconds later called over his boyfriend to clear room on his schedule, and fit in an appointment for a manicure. And I was also informed that no, this was not optional; if I was going to be putting in the effort to make myself look good, then I owed it to myself to look like a queen. His words, not mine.

And trust me: when the fashion-savvy gay man starts telling you what to do, and your own fashion sense is limited to “this is comfortable and looks good, therefore I’m getting it”, you listen to the fashion-savvy gay man.

I left the salon an hour and a half later, hair properly styled and nails freshly manicured (“I’m sorry darling, I don’t know what I even can do for those hooves of yours, but trust me, you look fabulous~!”), and finally pulled my phone out to check my messages.

>said clldnt tell u
only told me last night n e way
Kanna
oi Kanna
CMON
SAY SOMETHING
GFDI
SHIIIIIIT
I’m sorry. ok?
C’mon
Pls
KANNA
K A N N A
You know, I kinda feel bad for that.

>Sorry, was getting ‘dolled up’.

>its not for 7hrs

>You know how they say girls take a while to get ready, Katsuki?
For every hour of extra-formal event you want us to be ready for, it’ll probably take about THREE.

>k

And that’s all he wrote. A simple ‘k’. I think he just had a world-shattering revelation there: suddenly, the reason he and his dad were always waiting on his mom made sense. Ah, context. Such a wonderful, wonderful thing.

I arrived back at HQ to see Taiki and a detective from Shinagawa’s police precinct poring over a few sets of documents, Gang Orca hovering in front of them. The boss turned to see me, and gestured that I come over.

“That the audit?” I asked in a whisper.
“Audits, plural,” Taiki clarified. He and the detective I still hadn’t been introduced to both looked up, gave me a look, and instantly disregarded me to return to the documents before them. “One of them is on letterhead from the regional headquarters in Hosu. The other is from the international headquarters. In Germany.”

“Wow,” I deadpanned. “A German company has its headquarters in Germany.” And it was only then, after the snark had already finished, did the implication sink in. “Wait. Two different, non-identical audits of the same location?”

“Yes,” the detective replied this time. “And every discrepancy we’ve found is for controlled substances, or precursors. Amphetamines, narcotics…” He highlighted another line on the audit in front of him, looked to the other, and his frown deepened. “Trigger. And in particular, the reagent for the Purple Haze variant.”

“The local audit shows that most of it is there.” Taiki gave me a meaningful look. “The audit from HQ shows that it’s at maybe a quarter of what should be.”

“Enough to set up a display case, but not to stock the actual shelves?” I offered.

“That works.”

“Let us finish with this,” Gang Orca interjected, looking at me. “Chimera. I assume you’re far from ready for tonight.” I blushed a little and looked away, resisting the urge to play with a lock of hair. “We’ll handle this. Go prepare.”

And I did. I took the elevator back up to the second floor, retreated to my room, and sat in front of the vanity before pulling out the cosmetics I’d purchased and beginning what would likely be an hours-long struggle to get it just right. I’m not good at this, not the way Pony is, but a little perseverance goes a long way.

But still. Two audits?

And who doctored the first one?

* * * * *

Seven in the evening came around far sooner than I would have liked. My hair was still in the style that the salon had prepared for me: hair up and in a fanned-out style at the back of my head, somewhat similar to Momo’s own usual updo, though with an asymmetrical touch to it: on the left side of my face, the hair was pinned back, while on the right, a few long locks were allowed to fall free onto my shoulders. Yes, apparently my hair was now going to be a little longer than the just barely shoulder-length I’d preferred in the past, but whatever. I don’t own very much jewelry, mostly hair clips and pins, but I did have a nice enough silver bracelet that Pony had gotten me for my birthday four years ago, so I wore that on my right wrist. No earrings; my ears don’t stay pierced if I change them, learned that the hard way, so this bracelet was the only adornment… oh, wait, no it wasn’t. I also tied a matching satin ribbon on my tail, because I could.

As for my makeup?

It had taken hours of trial, error, and finally giving up and searching for video tutorials on how to get my makeup to that seemingly ‘natural’, ‘little make-up’ look that’s actually rather heavily done. Oh, and frustrated screeching. But I’d gotten it to where I wanted eventually. The eyeliner and very subtle eyeshadow made my amber eyes pop, the pink gloss on my lips was just enough to help, and I’d actually given in and used foundation and blush. I drew the line at mascara; I neither wanted nor
needed that.

And before I forget: the dress was amazing. The way it felt, the way it wore… I’m not sure I want to know how Mitsuki got my measurements, but it absolutely was tailored, and I was going to have to give her a very heartfelt thank-you for this dress.

Oh, and there had been a small matching clutch purse in the bottom of the garment bag. I don’t know how I hadn’t noticed it, but I hadn’t. So… yeah. I really, really, really owed Mitsuki for this.

I made my way out of my room and to the entry hall, where I saw Gang Orca wearing a tuxedo version of his normal costume, while Taiki, clad in his own costume, had a very excited Umiko on his arm. I blinked at that, and a mouthed ‘plus-one’ was all the information I needed… wait. Did that make me Gang Orca’s plus one?

No, don’t think about it, that way lay madness.

“Limousine is here,” Gang Orca announced. He led the way, and watching Umiko teeter a bit on her stilettos had me very thankful that my own lack of feet meant I would never, ever have to suffer through trying (and failing, lots and lots of failing) to walk in those. I don’t need heels to make my legs look good.

I was a little envious of the extra height, though. I can’t even go up on tip-toes to get a little extra height because, well, no toes. But hey. The pros outweighed the cons.

The four of us shuffled into the limousine, with Gang Orca taking up an entire section by himself, and me trying to stay closer to him than to Taiki and Umiko. This was apparently not a first date, he’d taken her out on Wednesday night (after I’d collapsed to sleep) and last night, so… that made this date three in a week? Wow. Yeah, it was about damn time he’d asked the lady out.

“Kanna.” I turned towards Gang Orca, surprised he’d used my name and not my moniker. “This event is being hosted by Best Jeanist. I understand you have a relationship with his intern.” I blushed, but just crossed my arms. “I trust that you’ll behave yourself. I only ask that you at least try and make sure he does as well.”

“I’ll try,” I offered with a slight smile. “Katsuki is… strong-willed.”

“That’s all I ask.”

The rest of the ride passed in companionable silence on our end of the limo, with constant nervous and excited chatter from Taiki and Umiko’s end. It wasn’t long until we arrived at our destination though, and soon enough, the car door was being opened onto an honest-to-goodness red fucking carpet. Butterflies went alight in my stomach, and I turned wide eyes on my boss.

“This is just another part of being a Pro Hero,” Gang Orca admitted, somewhat chagrined himself. “Merchandising and press events.” And then he gave a fanged grin. “Just think of this as some early extra guidance.”

With that, Gang Orca exited the limousine.

And then it was my turn.

Chapter End Notes
The next chapter will not be coming until AFTER October 16. That's the day of my one midterm as a 1L, in my Civil Procedure class. It's only worth 15% of my grade at the most, possibly as little as 5%, but it's also my first chance to see if my study methods work.

As always, thanks for reading! And before I forget... which of you wonderful people went and added a metric ton of stuff to this fic's TVTropes page?

https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/Lamarckian
Have you ever wondered what it’s like to step out of a limousine and onto the red carpet? To suddenly be the center of the world for so many people, at the middle of all that attention, the lights, the cameras, the crowd, the *everything*?

In my first life, I grew up in Los Angeles. Red carpets were a fact of life, and more of a traffic obstruction than anything else, something to try and work around as you figured out which road they closed. They just sort of… *existed*. But actually walking down one?

“… and who’s that behind Gang Orca-sama!? Oh, it’s one of the UA students! Best Jeanist-sama and Gang Orca-sama both have UA interns, amazing! And—”

I froze up. My hooves turned to lead beneath me. It, it was…

If I’d thought that the crowd at the Sports Festival was bad, then this was an entirely different beast.

The cameras kept snapping, the crowd kept roaring, and I just… stood. I didn’t move until I felt a prod at my back, as Taiki finally made his way out of the limousine with a massively blushing Umiko doing her best to hide from the cameras, concealing her face behind a folding fan that I know she hadn’t had before, would definitely not have fit anywhere in her gown, and was too long to have been in her clutch. At Taiki’s prodding, I took a deep breath, gripped tighter onto the deep red clutch in my right hand… and kept walking.

I know the nervousness showed. I kept looking back and forth, flinching at camera flashes. Taiki kept nudging me forward. Gang Orca got so far ahead that he disappeared inside the entrance hall of the Ginza ballroom that Best Jeanist had rented out. But eventually, I made it to the entrance. I made it off the plush carpet threatening to swallow up my hooves. I made it away from the crushing throng, the mass of people and voices and cameras.

“Hey.”

I turned to the voice, the one that spoke the instant I made it through the doorway and past the chaos of the red carpet, the crowd and the cameras and the *noise*… and my breath caught in my throat.

He was wearing a finely-woven, three-piece navy suit, jacket and vest buttoned tightly over a black silk shirt that seemed to shimmer in the light. A red and black tie, knotted into a double windsor, disappeared beneath the vest. Pinned to the breast pocket was a boutoniere, a red chrysanthemum with a white ribbon around the stem.

And in his outstretched hand, Katsuki held what could only be a corsage, an identical red chrysanthemum.

I had to remind myself to breathe, even as I drank in the sight before me. I barely even noticed when he raised my left hand and tied the corsage to my wrist.

“Wow,” I gasped out, finally managing to come to my senses. I looked at the corsage on my wrist,
then to the matching boutonierre on his lapel, and couldn’t help the blush when he offered his arm. I took it, and he led the two of us further into the entrance hall, and from there to what I assume was the ballroom proper.

“You okay?” Katsuki asked, looking down at me with his brows slightly less furrowed than usual, and his customary frown less deep. Concern, from him. I think. “You’re quiet.”

“I-I’m fine,” I said. Katsuki scoffed.

“Fucked up, insecure, neurotic, emotional,” he replied as we approached where Gang Orca stood, giving the two of us an unreadable look. “Pick two.”

“I’ll take the ‘i’, and swap the ‘n’ to nervous,” I fired back, trying to ease back into the quip trading he and I tended to when we spent time together. “I mean…” I tugged on his arm a bit. “I’ve never been to anything like this! This is a fashion event, Katsuki! People are looking at what I’m wearing and grading it!”

“Kanna.” He pulled us to a stop, turned to stand in front of me, and put his hands on my shoulders. “All those people out there? Fuck what they think. The only thing that’s important is you look amazing, so just ignore them, cause they don’t mean shit.”

I opened my mouth to say something, and… nothing. I didn’t know how to respond, other than to try and hide the blush rising on my face. I mean, I’d looked in the mirror before coming here; I knew how I looked right now, and while I thought I looked good, it was something else entirely to hear it from someone that you really, really liked, and who liked you back. And it… well. It felt good. It felt all warm and fuzzy, and I could feel the butterflies dancing around in my stomach at the thought.

“If you two are done contemplating whether to undress one another in public,” Gang Orca rumbled, walking over towards us with thunderous footsteps. I squeaked in embarrassment and jumped away, hands down at my sides, and Katsuki just laughed before grabbing my right hand putting it back in the crook of his elbow. “The ballroom is this way. Best not to keep our hosts waiting.” With that, Gang Orca turned and entered the ballroom proper, leaving the foyer behind. Taiki and Umiko were hot on his heels, and behind them, more and more people filed in after.

I looked to Katsuki. Katsuki looked back to me. And with a shared smile, we made our way to the ballroom entrance.

“This isn’t your first time at one of these, is it?” I asked quietly.

“Mom didn’t step down from the catwalk til she was pregnant,” he replied. “The fuck do you think?”

I swatted him with my tail. “Language, Katsuki.”

“Yeah, yeah…”

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Hotel ballrooms are simple enough affairs. Just enough glitz and glamor to qualify as fancy,
centerpieces that probably cost more than the actual tables they’re sitting on, waiters and waitresses in cheap suits carrying platters of champagne and hors d’oeuvres… you know, the works. Take all of that, make everything just a little more posh and upscale, add a catered meal that actually tastes good. And most importantly make sure the tables don’t wobble.

Now add superheroes.

Getting a better picture?

“I thought you told me your intern was a hothead,” a deliberately poor attempt at sotto voce asked Best Jeanist from across the table. Yes, the boss and I had been seated at the head table. I’m pretty sure it was for one reason and one reason only, namely the one sitting on my right. The same reason whose shoulder I had to put a hand on and give a look to keep from rising to the implied insult.

“I did indeed, Uwabami-san,” Best Jeanist replied, glancing askance at the serpentine Pro Hero. Next to her, Kendo Itsuka, one of Pony’s classmates from 1-B, Uwabami’s chagrined intern (“A commercial? That’s it?” “Well, that and whatever Jeanist-dono asked us here for tonight, but… yes.”), and Monoma’s childhood friend, scooted just a little bit further over in her chair, away from Uwabami and closer to Umiko, who was all too happy to engage in conversation at poor Taiki’s expense. “Bakugou-kun has a temper, and over this past week it’s become clear that I was trying to curb it in all the wrong ways. If I’d that known all I needed was a little help from Gang Orca’s intern, then I’d have been spared many a headache.”

“I resent the implication,” Katsuki muttered under his breath.

“No, you definitely resemble it,” I replied, giving Katsuki The Look (trademark pending). I ate the last bite of the surprisingly amazing cheesecake they’d given us for dessert, and raked my eyes across the table, set my eyes upon my target, and took the chance to speak up. “Uwabami-dono, are you going to eat your cheesecake?” She looked up at me, and I let a snide smile slide across my lips. “I’d be happy to help you watch your figure by taking it off your hips—oh, hands, my apologies.”

Uwabami’s smile slipped only for a fraction of an instant, but beside her, both Kendo and Umiko failed to hide their gasps of shock. Uwabami herself recovered in an instant, picking up the dessert plate and passing it my way, though the smile was more than a little strained as she then turned to Gang Orca, seated to my left… and where I’d been bumping his elbow all night, because the world is not made for lefties.

“Orca-san, how do you keep finding your sidekicks and interns? They’re always so…” She paused, seeming to search for a word. “Ah, feisty!”

“And what exactly are you implying, Uwabami?” Gang Orca asked, sitting straighter in his chair and turning his head to the side to glare at Uwabami with a single eye. Oh crap. He dropped the honorific. “That I seek interns for their own merits, as opposed to squandering them in photo shoots and commercials?”

Oh my goodness.

“W-why I never—!”

“Never what, thought about the disservice you’ve done to Kendo-san this past week?” Gang Orca put his hands flat on the table and stood up, looming over the rest of us sitting there as he cast his gaze to Kendo. “Battle Fist,” he continued, addressing Kendo by the moniker she’d chosen for
herself, “if given the opportunity, would you return to Uwabami’s agency?”

Kendo froze up in her seat, jaw clamped shut at the sudden attention.

“And you, Warhead?” Gang Orca asked. “If he were to offer, would you return to Best Jeanist’s agency?”

“If he’d stop trying to be my personal fucking stylist,” Katsuki grumbled. I swatted him on the arm with a mild admonishment of “language!” once again.

“And you, Chimera?” I turned to meet his gaze. “If given the chance, would you return to my agency?”

“Well, given you’ve already made the offer,” I replied airily. “But even before that? In a heartbeat. And now, I don’t think you even needed to ask.”

“Mm.” I could see the barest twitch at the corner of Gang Orca’s mouth. His anatomy precluded smiling, but even with only a week, I’d begun to pick up on the affectations he used to mimic it. “It seems possible that you forgot the purpose of these internships, Uwabami. They are for your benefit in the long run. For this week?” He pointed to Kendo. “It should have been for her. Not your latest perfume commercial.”

The table fell silent. Taiki let out a low whistle from the other side of it, and from the fact that his hands were very deliberately placed on the table, Gang Orca had stared down an attempt at using his Quirk to hide from any possible attention. Kendo was trying to shrink in on herself, and had scooted so far away from Uwabami that we could probably fit a ninth chair at the table. Next to me, Katsuki’s shoulders shook so hard that he was starting to vibrate the table.

And before the whole situation could explode into a well and truly terrible scenario, the likes of which the hero paparazzi tabloids would have leapt onto for weeks and milked for all it was worth, Best Jeanist stood up. A thread crawled from his pocket into his hand, depositing what could only be a microphone into his palm, which he pinned to the high collar of his outfit.

Best Jeanist left the table, took the stage at the front of the ballroom, and a hush fell over the crowd.

“And everybody, he began, looking out at the crowd. “If everybody would like to stand from their tables, the main event is about to begin.”

I looked to Katsuki and quirked an eyebrow, angling my head at the stage. He took on a smug smirk at that, which screamed that whole ‘I know something you don’t know’ louder than anything he could ever have said. Despite how much I wanted to slap that look off his face (or maybe kiss it off because holy shit the combination of that look and that suit…), I stood from the table and let him take the lead towards the front, the two of us and Gang Orca flanking Kendo, who seemed to be doing her best to distance herself from Uwabami.

Once everybody had stood from their tables, Best Jeanist snapped his hands. The carpet writhed and undulated beneath our feet (okay, fine; their feet, my hooves) before the fibers unraveled, stacking the chairs and tables with expert precision before they seemed to roll away into the corner under their own power. A closer look, courtesy of a very quick shapeshift to an owl’s eyes, showed me that there was cloth wrapped around the base of every table and the legs of every chair, and when the carpeting pulled away that fabric remained.
Damn. He’d had this *prepared.*

Best Jeanist, everyone: solid competitor for title of the greatest showman.

“Now that the area is clear, I would like to point out the most conspicuous absence from this hall.” Jeanist snapped his fingers again, and spotlights illuminated, shining in a straight line out from the center of the stage most of the way through the ballroom. “You will notice that unlike most of my events, there is no catwalk.” With another snap, the catwalk floodlights extinguished themselves. “You have lights and camera, but it would appear that the ‘action’ is missing, would it not?”

Best Jeanist stepped under the spotlight as he spoke, his stance displaying every inch of his outfit for all to see. While the style was identical to his usual costume, that was where the similarities ended, because Best Jeanist *wasn’t wearing any denim.* Instead he wore a charcoal grey ensemble that resembled a cross between his high-collared costume and a suit, which hugged his physique so closely as to have been almost painted on. The only way that thing wasn’t bursting at the seams was if he’d tailored it specifically for himself, or if he was actively using his Quirk to change the fit with every movement. Given the sheer skill with which Jeanist exercised his control over fabric, I was actually going to put my bets on the latter.

“But there will indeed be action. Tonight will be monumental, in more ways than one. For tonight, we unveil the culmination of months—no, *years* of work, for all the world to see. But before we begin.” Best Jeanist waved a hand, and the world grew bright. “Please welcome both my fellow Pro Heroes Uwabami-dono and Gang Orca-dono, and an especially warm welcome to our interns from UA’s Hero Course: Uwabami’s Battle Fist, Gang Orca’s Chimera, and my own Warhead.”

Katsuki pulled me into an expert, almost practiced spin, which conveniently put him between myself and Kendo. A brief movement from the corner of my eye was a signal, and the three of us ended up bowing to the crowd in almost perfect unison. I could feel the eyes on us, and heard more than a few murmured comments about both my dress and Kendo’s own blue cheongsam. The commentary was very much approving, with more than a few whispers about how Katsuki and I looked so cute together (I’m not blushing, I swear, *stop looking at me*!), and once we turned back around towards the stage, I picked out a few more about how the contrast between my red and Kendo’s blue played off each other rather well. Which meant that damn it, I needed to thank Katsuki’s mother, *again,* because looking at everyone else here, my teal dress would *not* have been good enough.

And I thought I’d been developing a decent enough fashion sense. Darn.

“With introductions out of the way… we may begin.”

Best Jeanist snapped his fingers once more, and most of the lights went down. In their wake, a projector screen illuminated, covering the majority of the far wall.

“For nearly a decade, Onigashima has been *the* designer of top men’s fashion.” Images flashed across the screen, before minimizing to form part of a collage. “From slacks to polos, sweaters to button-ups, suits to tee-shirts, blazers to jackets.” Models, *handsome* models flitted across the screen, resolving to either the left or right side of the screen, leaving a blank space in the middle. “But more than anything else, Onigashima has been known for the highest quality denim in the *world.*” A magazine cover of Best Jeanist himself, holding the trophy marking his eighth consecutive win of the Best Jeanist Award for which he’d named himself in one hand, myriad fingers stretching from his splayed fingers and out of frame, filled the space in the middle of the collage. “Onigashima has broken ground, pioneering exciting changes in fashion, and guiding the sartorial development of not just Japan, but the world at large.
“But all of this has been limited. Limited… to one side of the fence.”

One side of the… no.

No fucking way.

“He doesn’t mean?…” I turned to Katsuki, trailing off. Katsuki’s grin was practically ear to ear at this point, and the smugness wafted off of him.

“Keeping this secret has been a bitch and a half,” he murmured back. “But so fucking worth it.”

“Tonight,” Best Jeanist continued up on stage, “Onigashima unveils its first ever line of women’s clothing.”

I started cheering. Kendo started cheering. I’m pretty sure just about every other woman in the audience started cheering, because oh my god this is beyond incredible holy shit. It’s… I don’t think it’s possible for me to overstate just how awesome this is, and I know that may seem odd, but let me try and put this in perspective using something else as an analogy: video games and exclusives.

Imagine for a moment that you only had enough money to buy one of three competing systems. You have access to that system’s exclusive titles and anything shared between them, but no matter what you do, you cannot play any of one of the other system’s exclusives. Add to that the fact that one of the other system’s exclusives is quite literally the absolute best example of one specific genre, and that nothing on your system ever has or ever will match up to that one game. Now imagine that out of the blue, a perfect, hundred percent faithful port of that exclusive is coming to your system, and you had absolutely zero warning of this.

That barely even begins to state just how important this is for women’s fashion. Best Jeanist wasn’t exaggerating when he said that Onigashima denim is the best in the world. He experimented with his Quirk to find a way to improve the comfort, flexibility, and resilience of denim, all without doing anything more than changing how the fabric was woven, and managed to take the absolute worst samples of the fabric and make them feel like a low-end designer jean. The highest-end Onigashima denim is softer than silk, twice as resilient as normal denim, and dye doesn’t wash out anywhere near as easily. Since Onigashima and Best Jeanist came onto the scene, women have been making do with second-rate denim at best, and I’ve seen more than a few sites dedicated to finding which of their men’s jean cuts fit decently enough on women with certain body types to be worth buying.

Now none of that matters, because we finally get to have these jeans made for our body types. Jeans, jean shorts, skirts, jackets… I was going to be scrounging and penny pinching for the next I don’t know how long because let me tell you, this shit is worth every single yen. I could buy a pair of the world’s sturdiest, comfiest, best-looking jeans, and for the first time, it would actually fit me.

This is before we get into the rest of Onigashima’s catalogue. Best Jeanist may specialize in denim, but that’s far from the only fabric Onigashima uses. The fiber controller pretty much revolutionized the industry, and then he held onto the secrets for the male sex. Well no more. No more ‘misplacing’ one of Dad’s three good Onigashima shirts every time it went into the wash so I could wear it as a sleep shirt. No more laughing as Pony looked up size conversions to see if one of Onigashima’s kids’ polos would actually fit on her… wait. Does… does this mean Onigashima is gonna eventually try its hand at lingerie?

I tried to banish the thought, lest I begin to drool at the thought of the most comfortable
underwear *ever*.

“Before any esteemed members of the press here with us tonight rush for the doors to write up their stories!” Best Jeanist called out, silencing the audience immediately. “Two things. Firstly, stores across the country will have the women’s line up for sale *tomorrow.*”

Murmurs ran across the crowd, and I was taken aback a bit; how *exactly* had he managed to keep this a secret? Unless he’d sent out the clothing supply without actually telling anyone what was inside?

“And second. That was only the *first* announcement of the night, and in my opinion, the *lesser.*”

Dead silence.

The *lesser*? What—Best Jeanist had just announced a women’s clothing line for Onigashima, the first the label had ever done in the *eight years* it had dominated the men’s fashion sphere. What could *possibly* be a bigger announcement compared to *more than doubling* their *style portfolio?*

“Over the years, Onigashima has collaborated with many companies. Record labels, animation studios, film studios, hero agencies, and more. And now, for the first time, we add Hero Support Companies to that distinguished roster.” The murmurs returned, and I found myself creeping forward, intrigued. “Several months ago, Onigashima was approached by a support company based in Germany, regarding a new breakthrough that could revolutionize how fashion integrates with Quirks. And Onigashima clothing will be the first line of garments to incorporate this new technology. To explain more about this exciting development, I would like to invite to the stage two people from the support company responsible.”

Best Jeanist spread his arms wide.

“Please offer a warm welcome to the man who brought this offer to us, the CFO of Wesenproduktion Germany; and his son, the prodigal young scientist responsible for this breakthrough: Wilhelm and Gerhardt Schutz.”

My jaw dropped. I looked over to Katsuki, who looked back at me with an equally shocked expression. He hadn’t known about this either. And from the stunned silence that preceded a round of applause, it had been equally shocking to everyone *else* present. I watched as the *infuriating*, and infuriatingly *tall* young man I’d met far too many times for comfort took the stage, flanked by a stocky, somehow *taller* man, with graying blonde hair and a well-trimmed beard. The two of them approached Best Jeanist, who actually *offered his hand for a handshake*, which drew more than a few gasps from the crowd. He shook both men’s hands, and then made a symbolic gesture to, in essence, cede the floor.

“The young mister Gerhardt will act as interpreter for his father, and will be doing the bulk of the explaining,” Best Jeanist explained. “So please, do not fret that the young man seems to be speaking over his father and elder.” I heard many nervous chuckles from the audience, but my gaze was firmly fixed on the stage. The older man, Wilhelm Schutz, placed an earpiece into his ear, and I saw Gerhardt do the same before affixing a lapel microphone to the white lab coat he wore over his shirt instead of a suit jacket. (Also, *really*? We get it! You’re a scientist! *Ditch the lab coat!*)

“Testing, testing, wunderbar!” The voice I’d come to know and dislike came over the speakers, and attention returned to the stage. “Thank you for having us today. It is mein vater’s first time in Japan, and he has been enjoying his stay immensely! But we both know that is not what you are here for!” I
frowned. Didn’t he have an accent last time we spoke?…

The elder Mr. Schutz began to speak, and moments later Gerhardt spoke over his father’s baritone German, in an admirable performance of simultaneous translation for our benefit.

“Several months ago, an intriguing compound came to our company’s attention. Those of us back in Berlin were at a loss for what to do with the substance; it had some marvelously unique properties, but they seemed limited to the medical field,” he explained. “It was purely through a fortunate accident that we learned of the other wondrous effects this substance has, and for the first time I am thankful for my son’s inability to simply let things lie without throwing everything and the kitchen sink at a problem.” I couldn’t help but chuckle at that, though my own laugh was more at the slight blush that began to spread over Gerhardt’s face. After the way he’d managed to make me uncomfortable in almost every meeting I’d had with the young man, this felt like some much-deserved comeuppance. “But ah, you have heard enough pontificating from this old man! I will leave it for my son to explain his triumph, and join Herr Jeanist on the sidelines.”

Mr. Schutz brought an arm across his chest and bowed deep, then moved off to where Best Jeanist stood, leaving Gerhardt as the center of attention.

“Before anything else, I would like to show you the star of the show!” Gerhardt reached into the breast pocket of his lab coat, and retrieved… a dull purple vial.

The breath caught in my throat. That was the additive responsible for the Purple Haze variant of Trigger, wasn’t it!?

Did… did that mean that for the first time, something good was going to come of the Wendigo’s existence?

“On its own, this is little more than a small amount of purple liquid. But this enzyme has a remarkable property.” Gerhardt smiled, flashing a perfect white smile to the audience. “It interacts directly with Quirk Factor.”

The murmurs grew, and Gerhardt seemed to revel in the intrigue.

“The science would take a long time to explain, so instead, would you say that a demonstration is in order?” Gerhardt waved to Best Jeanist, who stepped forward once more.

“I was initially at a loss for who to ask for help with this demonstration,” Jeanist explained. “Until the perfect assistant landed right under our noses. Kendo Itsuka-san, Battle Fist.” Next to me, Kendo stiffened up, even as a spotlight shone down on her. “Would you lend us a hand with this demonstration?”

“Y-yes!” She practically yelled out. “O-of course, Best Jeanist-dono!” At that proclamation and a gesture from Best Jeanist, the carpet beneath her slippered feet danced, and a fabric stairway rose up to the stage. Kendo tested it gingerly with one toe, and finding it firm, practically floated onto the stage. Oh, but there were stars in her eyes.

“If you could demonstrate your Quirk for us, Frau Kendo?” Gerhardt asked gently. Kendo looked to Best Jeanist for confirmation, who merely nodded. Then, she turned towards us, and in an instant, her hands enlarged to be many, many times their original size. She clapped, and the pressure wave from just her clap nearly sent me back a step. “As you can see, our helper here possesses a transformation-type Quirk.” Gerhardt reached into another pocket and procured a pair of cheap,
simple fabric gloves. “And as with many such Quirks, finding clothing for it can be… a difficult proposition at best. Frau Kendo, if you could put these gloves on, and then use your Quirk?”

“I—um, if you insist?” Kendo replied, feeling a bit sheepish. She slipped the white cotton gloves on one at a time, and then once on, she activated her Quirk. Once more, her hands grew to many times their original size. But the gloves?

The gloves tore apart, unable to grow with their wearer.

“As you can see, if this aspiring young hero wishes to use her Quirk, she cannot wear gloves!” Gerhardt tutted. “Regrettable, as some armor or armament on her hands would make her an even more formidable fighter. But ah, what’s this? A solution!” Gerhardt held the vial up to the light, and whirled to face his temporary helper. “Frau Kendo, I need a DNA sample from yourself. Would a hair suffice?”

Kendo seemed to flinch back at the sudden demand, and only a further reassurance from Best Jeanist gave her the confidence to reach to her bangs, single out one strand of hair, and pull it free. She offered the hair to Gerhardt, who uncapped the vial and placed that one strand of ginger-orange hair inside.

“The consumer version of our product will be much easier to use, I promise.” With the hair inside, Gerhardt shook the vial, and then procured yet another strange item from his lab coat: a plastic bag, with a ball of some kind of thread inside. He brought the vial to his eye level, and I saw that the color had changed from a dull purple to a much brighter violet, almost lilac in color. Gerhardt uncapped the vial, poured it into the bag of thread, sealed the bag shut, and shook it. “The product is designed for use alongside detergent, so that you can… hmm, I suppose ‘attune’ the garment to you on the first wash pre-wear. Once the fabric has been fully soaked with the fluid, or water with the fluid in it, it is ready.”

Gerhardt tossed the bag of thread to Best Jeanist, who opened the bag and used his Quirk to withdraw the thread. He retrieved a small measuring tape from a pocket, and after some rather impromptu measurement of Kendo’s arms (which was, well… unexpected, to say the least), he hooked his fingers into the ball of thread, and set to work.

Before our eyes, the thread unspooled, wove itself into fabric, and then began to take shape into a pair of midnight-blue opera gloves, with a dragon motif running along each glove to mirror and match the equally midnight-blue cheongsam Kendo wore. Maybe twenty seconds later, Best Jeanist held the finished opera gloves out to Kendo, and replaced a now-soaked handkerchief that he’d used to extract the moisture into his pocket. With some trepidation, Kendo slid the gloves on, and they came to a rest halfway up her biceps, fitting… well, actually, not like a glove. They fit like a second skin.

But that’s what you get when Best Jeanist hand-weaves clothing perfectly tailored to you. No, I’m not jealous. Okay, fine!

I’m jealous.

“Now, Frau Kendo, if you could please use your Quirk?”

“W-what?” Kendo gasped, hands folding in protectively towards her chest. “B-but—”
“It’s okay, Kendo-san,” Best Jeanist assuaged. “Go ahead.”

With a deep, calming breath, Kendo closed her eyes, held out her hands, and activated her Quirk. Her hands ballooned to many times their original size.

And the gloves grew with them.

Gingerly, Kendo opened her eyes… and gaped. She stared at her hands as though seeing them for the first time, moving her fingers one by one, the grace with which she manipulated her mammoth mitts rather surprising given their size. Her hands began to shift in size, growing, shrinking, one finger enlarging at a time. But no matter what she put the opera gloves through, they remained perfectly intact. It was… wow. I need to get myself a new costume. One with that stuff. A costume that changes with me as I shapeshift?

Game changer.

“A shapeshifter whose clothes change with them. A pyrokinetic whose entire wardrobe is naturally immune to their own flames. And that is just the beginning.” The implications sunk in quick.

“Armor,” Gerhardt continued. “Armaments. Costumes. Equipment. But this is not only for our heroes. If your clothing dislikes your Quirk, or is difficult to maintain because of your Quirk, no more. Starting one week from Monday, hero agencies will be able to send their costumes and designs to Wesenproduktion, along with an accompanying DNA sample, for augmentation. Two weeks from Monday, Onigashima denim will all come with an included phial of our detergent additive, for no additional charge.”

Gerhardt bowed, and ceded the center stage to Best Jeanist.

“Please offer a round of applause for Schutz-san.” At his prompting, the audience erupted, and I couldn’t even stop myself from joining in. I mean, shit! I didn’t have a clue what could top the announcement of Onigashima’s women’s line, but this? This wasn’t just a game changer for fashion.

This was a game changer for all of Quirk society.

“Thank you all for your attention,” Best Jeanist said. “I would like to thank—”

The ground rumbled beneath us. I shifted on my hooves, and glanced to Katsuki. He shrugged.

“I suppose even the ground beneath us has something to say about this!” Best Jeanist quipped, drawing laughter from the audience. Japan and earthquakes go together like peanut butter and jelly. So many earthquakes, I swear; nothing below a 4.0 on the Richter scale even wakes us up. “As I was saying—”

The ground shuddered again. This time though, the tremors were stronger. Closer. An uneasy muttering sprung up from the crowd, and I could feel a bit of worry myself. Aftershocks aren’t supposed to be stronger than the initial earthquake, unless it was a cluster of multiple—

The ground trembled, shook, and roiled beneath us. I nearly lost my balance, only kept up by my tail and by Katsuki’s suddenly wider stance. More than a few high shrieks came from the ballroom as what I could only assume was several women in heels lost their balance.

And then the screams started.
From the corner of my eye, I saw spires of some white substance rupture the ground around the walls of the room, interlocking with each other as they folded around the entirety of the room. The spires sealed the doorways, and as the crowd screamed in shock and surprise and **fear**, it started to collapse in towards the middle of the ballroom. Behind the stage, more of the stuff pierced the ground. Gang Orca pulled me and Katsuki closer to the wall before hopping up onto the stage to survey. I took the chance to get a closer look at the stuff… and froze.

It was bone.

At the back of the room, an inky black swirl of **nothingness** sprung into existence, and from the void, a hand emerged, covered in reticulated bone claws. And with it, a voice spoke, low and cold. In **English**.

“**You had no right…**”

He wore camouflage army fatigues and combat boots, the jacket unzipped to reveal the latticework of old wounds and thick, ropy scar tissue around his neck. His hair was cut in a classic army high-and-tight style. And as always, no effort was made to hide the ruined mess on the left side of his face, all that remained of the eye that once lay there. But unlike last time, he wasn’t emaciated.

Whole and hale, the Wendigo had come.

“**You dare!**” The Wendigo **roared** as he stalked forward from the portal, the crowd parting before him like the Red Sea before Moses. “**It is my right!** All that’s left of them, all that I have to show of their sacrifice!”

Behind him, another pair emerged, malformed, twisted, and wretched. **One crawled along the floor**, its claws digging furrows into the carpet and the flooring beneath it, its tongue lashing through the air, the saliva dripping from it hissing and spitting where it touched the floor. **The other lumbered forward**, its every step cracking the ground beneath it, and flames wisped along the surface of its skin.

“**Martinez,**” the Wendigo continued as he stalked towards the center stage, eyes fixed squarely onto Gerhardt. “**McCullough. Hanson. Rose.**” Bone burst from his skin, white blades growing along his arms. “**They died for it. They died for me.** I only have one thing left to show for them. **And you stole it from me you filthy Kraut!”**

I could feel my eyes widen. Then… he was here for that?

“**Nobody** will get that ‘breakthrough’,” he growled. “**None of you will EVER use what is mine!**” He lashed out with one arm, spears of bone flying from his arms, burying themselves in the bone wall that he’d raised, lone eye sweeping across the crowd. “**You will NEVER spit on my men’s deaths! You fucking—**”

He paused in his sweep of the room, freezing entirely.

“**Well. Ain’t that just convenient.**”

The Wendigo turned most of the way back towards the stage. And his lone eye settled just off to the right of the stage.

**Squarely on me.**
“Fancy seeing you here… *Injun.*”

Chapter End Notes

And so begins the three-chapter climax of the Stain/Work Placement Arc.
“Fancy seeing you here… Injun.”

Icy talons reached into my chest and squeezed. I couldn’t breathe. My heartbeat roared in my ears. I couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, couldn’t do anything, what do I do he’s HERE—

Beneath us, the carpet roiled and writhed before an ocean of cheap, coarse fabric leapt up, reaching and grasping for the Wendigo and the two Noumu that flanked him. It bound Mason, fibrous ropes trying to bind him, force him into a position of immobility, but he stood firm and unflinching against what I could only assume, from the sound, was an immense amount of force. The tall, bulky Noumu’s muscles rippled, and a corona of flame erupted around it, burning away the fabric that Jeanist sent its way. The small Noumu with the acid spit chittered and leapt straight up, all the way to the ceiling of the ballroom, a good ten meters above, and hooked in with its claws. Even as Jeanist tried to wrangle the thing, it kept moving, limbs contorting in ways a humanoid body was never meant to.

Mason clicked his tongue against his teeth. A moment later, he seemed to vibrate, something rising out of his skin. A moment later and the carpeting binding him fell away, what looked like a large amount of teeth sinking back beneath his flesh.

“You don’t want to get in my way,” Mason warned, turning to level his lone eye at Best Jeanist. “I’m here for the Kraut and the Injun, Jap. I’d rather not hurt anyone else, but if I have to, I will.”

“He’s lying,” I whispered, unable to stop myself. Katsuki stiffened in front of me, head tilting ever so slightly to listen. “H-he’ll do everything he can n-not to. U-unless he’s going to die, i-it’s the one thing h-he has left…”

“Not taking that risk,” he murmured back to me. “Handy, get the whiz kid to stay down. He’s Quirkless, he can’t help.” Behind us, Gerhardt sucked in a breath. I think he wanted to say something… but he was in as bad a state as I was. It’s one thing to know, intellectually speaking, that villains of this caliber existed. It’s another thing entirely to be in the same room as them… and that is far below being the villain’s target. “Kanna, if he says shit and it’s important, translate, but otherwise it doesn’t mean shit. But other than that, stay the fuck back.”

I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to yell at Katsuki, tell him I wasn’t some damsel in distress to be tucked away and protected, to do something to show that I wasn’t helpless…

But I couldn’t. He was right. The Wendigo wanted me dead… but so long as I was close enough to Katsuki, the collateral damage wasn’t something Mason wanted to risk. It was the only weakness I knew of. It was our only chance.

“You do not want to do this.” Best Jeanist spoke suddenly, in halting, heavily accented English. “It will not be long until more heroes come, and when they arrive, you will fall. Retreat now while you have a chance.”

“I don’t think so,” Mason said. “And you know what? I don’t think you can stop me.”

His face suddenly twisted, teeth bared in a rictus grin.
“Noumu.”

The larger one bellowed a war cry and charged forward, wreathed in a corona of flame that destroyed any cloth that Jeanist threw in its way to impede it. Gang Orca intervened, darting in to land a strong, straight punch into the Noumu’s sternum before blasting it away with a burst of ultrasound, shaking his fist out.

“Jeanist, the small one!” Orca yelled. I tried to find where the smaller Noumu had gone, tracing the pathway of claw marks on the ceiling over to—oh no, the civilians!

“I have it!” From the corner of the room, tablecloths flew seemingly under their own power, interposing themselves between the smaller Noumu and the crowd of civilians. With a gesture from Jeanist, one of them unraveled and rewove itself into a net, weighted with larger knots at the end, and flew at the small Noumu. It ensnared the beast, but a single lick from its tongue had the fabric dissolving into nothingness, and Jeanist had to resume keeping it away from the civilians with tablecloth baffles and reaching with the carpet beneath him.

“Kanna.” I looked to Katsuki, who was flexing his hands experimentally. “Brace my shoulders with yours, and my right elbow with your hands.” He had his left fist cupped against the palm of his right hand. Both were sticky and dripping with nitroglycerin sweat. I was right; Katsuki was scared too. But the fear might have given him a temporary boost, just like envenoming him had at the Sports Festival. The more he sweat, the bigger the boom.

And I wasn’t the only one in a cold sweat. Behind Mason, Gang Orca tried to approach, only to have the large, burning Noumu interpose itself between him and us. It lashed out with a sloppy, telegraphed strike. But where normally I would have expected the boss to have grabbed the strike and used that to grapple and cripple the Noumu, like he’d done with the one in Hosu, instead he dodged, darting back in to try and return a blow of his own… and balking at the last second. It was the fire. It was drying him out just being near that Noumu, and while I think he probably could have taken it, that wasn’t a risk any of us could afford for him to take. Not when there were three hundred civilians in the room. Not when he still had to get to the much greater threat.

“Now then.” The Wendigo, walked towards where Katsuki, Kendou, Gerhardt, and I stood, the bones already protruding from his body growing longer, sharper. Deadlier. “I’m going to give the two of you a choice. Give me the Kraut and the Injun, and you get to live. If you won’t, then—” I felt the recoil from Katsuki’s shoulder and elbow before I saw the blast or heard the noise. What had to be the largest explosion I’d ever seen him make, carefully shaped into a solid bar of light and heat, slammed into and through the Wendigo, finally stopping all the way at the far end of the ballroom. The sound reverberated through the impromptu arena, bringing everything, even the two Noumu, to a dead halt. As one, we looked to the Wendigo.

An almost perfectly circular hole had appeared in his midsection, most of his abdomen just completely gone, his upper body supported by his somehow still-intact spine. Steam or smoke or something wafted out of the hole, blood only just barely beginning to flow, like it had taken his body a moment to catch up to what happened to him.

“I said if I ever got the chance,” Katsuki whispered to me, arm and shoulder shaking, his breath heavy with exertion, “that I’d tear his guts out and feed them back to him. That was just step… step
My eyes snapped back to the Wendigo, eyes widening as I saw what had Katsuki so horrified. My initial assumption had been wrong: blood hadn’t begun to flow out of the wound. There was no blood flowing out at all.

That had been the Wendigo’s regeneration beginning to work, and before all of our eyes, the hole in his abdomen shrank down to nothing. Barely fifteen seconds had passed since Katsuki bored a hole into him. The heat of his Quirk should have been enough to cauterize the Wendigo’s wounds and slow his healing. A year and a half ago, that had been enough to slow his regeneration to barely a quarter of his arm in two months. But now? Something that should have cauterized the wound didn’t work. No, worse than that. It hadn’t done anything.

Mason cracked his neck one way, then the other, and finally stretched his back, the freshly healed skin no different than the rest of the flesh on his body.

“I gave you a chance, boy.” Mason leaned forward, posture low and deadly. “Just remember that you asked for this.”

And then the Wendigo was upon us.

* * * * *

Jeanist focused on the Noumu crawling across the ballroom and the assets at his disposal. Seventy-five discarded suit jackets, tossed aside by considerate men who knew what he needed for his Quirk; the lot of them flew over to his position and unraveled, the finer wools being interwoven with the coarser, sturdier carpet fibers into something that would respond more swiftly to his Quirk, and sheathed in silk to possibly resist the Noumu’s corrosive saliva. He couldn’t be sure if the protein sheathing that he could make with the silk would be enough, but it was worth an attempt. Every single swatch of denim he’d given out glided along the floor back to him as he tried to assemble some measure of an arsenal.

He split his attention four different ways. A fraction of his focus rest with Gang Orca, using the man’s own clothing to smother any flames that caught before they could impede him. Another fraction on Bakugou and the other interns, with a third fraction paying total attention to the Wendigo’s clothes, subtly pushing and pulling to keep them out of range and safe from harm. It wouldn’t have been enough on his own, but he was sure in his trust of Bakugou’s combat acumen. All the boy needed was a little help here and there, which made it a good thing that that was all Jeanist could provide.

The fourth and largest fraction of his attention was on the Noumu. That skittering, crawling thing. If the information from USJ and Hosu were accurate, this hideous, twisted thing used to be human. It used to just be another person, taken and twisted and warped until nothing remained but the monster.

In the crowd, Uwabami had produced several pairs of fine scissors from her clutch purse and distributed them among the other women, who had begun to cut at their gowns and dresses and shawls, leaving lengths of fabric for him to use before passing them along to the next in line. Floor length gowns suddenly had their skirts shortened to a ragged knee-length, or even shorter, just to provide him with an arsenal. He would have to compensate them all for their sacrifice and offer Uwabami some thanks, he mused. Silk was the most common fabric among the ones the women
wore, and it was all but the most difficult fiber for his Quirk to manipulate, second only to spider silk. But it was also strong, and fine, and all it took was a brief exertion of will to form a gossamer weave.

It took only a brief instant to shove a few more wads of silk down the Noumu’s throat, choking and stunning it long enough to wrap layer after fine layer of silk along its entire body. Jeanist frowned and narrowed his eyes as he bounced the creature off of another tablecloth and back onto the ceiling, his frown twisting into a grimace as it ran its tongue down the tablecloth, its corrosive saliva disintegrating the cheap cotton. For all that no remnant of the person it used to be was left in the Noumu, it clearly possessed some measure of if not intelligence, then pure bestial cunning. It was denying him the most plentiful resource, even as it continued to try and get to the people he was protecting.

The Noumu bounced to the ceiling, running its tongue along the top of the ballroom, paint and wood crumbling and cracking where it passed. It turned an impossible, eyeless gaze to Jeanist—and then past him to the arsenal of denim, wool, silk, and polyester he’d managed to amass, tongue coiling and dripping. Jeanist’s eyes widened as the Noumu leapt; if it managed to get close enough to corrode his arsenal—!

From off to the side, Jeanist heard a crackle, a pop of what seemed like electricity. Something flashed past him, and the Noumu squealed, its grasp on the ceiling lost. But it did not fall.

Instead, it hung, suspended by the ceiling from a steak knife buried in its tongue, still crackling with actinic remnants of electricity.

“It vould not stop moving.” Strongly accented English came from the CFO of Wesenproduktion, Wilhelm Schutz, as he approached. Sparks leapt from his fingers as he shook his hand out, the other one holding a container filled with dirty forks, butter knives, steak knives, and more that had apparently been left behind by a particularly lax member of the catering staff. “My aim not vhat it vas.”

“New plan.” Jeanist eyed the few layers of silk clinging to the Noumu; they were nowhere near enough. It would have taken five dozen more to let him do what he’d wanted, but now… “I bait. You shoot.”

“Ja.” Wilhelm procured a fork from the container and aimed it at the Noumu. Sparks built along his fingertips, and an instant later, it blasted out of his hand with a crack.

The Noumu caught it out of the air, crushing the cutlery in its hand.

“Were it so easy…”

* * * * *

Katsuki shoved me away and brought both hands together, firing off a burst of light and sound from his hands straight into the Wendigo’s face. The monster’s one eye snapped shut as he lashed out, but Katsuki seemed to flow away from the blow with little more than a few tears in his jacket to show for it.

“Handy!”
Bakugou brought one hand to the other and fired off a smaller shaped charge, this time spearing out
at the Wendigo’s leg and burning a deep, smoking gouge into it, and though it began to fill back up
and mend mere moments later, that was long enough to make Mason’s leg buckle for the sudden lack
of muscles holding it up. Kendou took her chance and stepped forward, bringing her hands down
well away from Mason before they suddenly expanded, and the center of a powerful hammerblow
slammed him into the ground. Katsuki pulled her back before she could go back in for another blow,
tearing her cheongsam but possibly saving her hands as Mason’s back erupted into a mess of spiked,
bladed bones.

I pushed myself up and focused, feeling the tingling and pressure in my fingertips and the beds of my
nails as they changed. He’s regenerating. We can’t do anything meaningful so long as he just heals
back up, but if that healing were to stop, he might be too used to being able to shrug off damage to
do something. I rushed forward, leonine claws sliding out from the tips of my fingers, their tips
dripping with clear venom—

“No!” Katsuki grabbed me by the arm and swung me in a circle, dragging me out of the way of a
sudden burst of movement from Mason. He rushed past the two of us, and I felt a line of fire run
across my back. “Shit, Kanna!”

“I-I’m okay!” I stammered back. “I-it’s just a scratch!”

Mason stopped and turned, seeing Quirkless, defenseless Gerhardt in his white coat sitting there on
the floor, lab coat pooled around him and nobody around. He snarled and advanced. Shit, wasn’t
Kendou supposed to be—

A table flew over from the side of the room, landing in front of Gerhardt and propped up by one of
halves of its legs, opened up before the toss. Kendou stood by the tables, breathing heavily, another
of the pieces of round furniture clutched in each hand, like a giant frisbee.

“Get one of those to Orca!” Katsuki yelled. Kendou nodded and tossed it across the room to where
my boss was fighting the fiery Noumu before grabbing hold of the remaining table with both hands,
wielding it as a shield or a bludgeon.

Mason tossed aside the table that had protected Gerhardt, but that obscuration had been enough for
him to slip around to the side of the stage and find some cover. Katsuki distracted him with another
of those flash-bang blasts, and I took the opportunity to stab and envenom—

“Aah!”

I struck, but he didn’t bleed. I did.

My claws broke, and my fingers bled. I undid the shift as quickly as I could, but the bleeding
remained, emanating from just above the nail bed. That was one of the issues with my shifting: the
injuries don’t go away. They just change location.

“Nice try, Injun.” The Wendigo turned, and I got a glimpse of what I’d struck. Bone. A smooth,
flawless layer of bone, articulated at the joints, now covered the entirety of the Wendigo’s upper
body. He’d managed to create that entire thing in the space of a few seconds.

We weren’t going to be able to stop him from healing.

“Move!” Katsuki grabbed me by the tail and tugged. I flew back as the Wendigo exploded into
action once more, eyes widened as his claws passed bare centimeters from my face, clipping a few strands of my bangs, and gasped in shock as the same follow-through caught Kendou with a strong backfist and sent her flying towards where Gang Orca and the burning Noumu had last been fighting.

“Handy!”/“Kendou!” We cried out after her, but had to refocus when Mason set himself into a more normal posture. Then the man glanced off to the side… and sneered. He rushed towards us. Katsuki pushed me away again. But I wasn’t the target this time.

*Katsuki* was.

“G-GAHI!”

A spike of bone erupted from Wendigo’s palm and through Katsuki’s right shoulder. Then it expanded rapidly, throwing Katsuki back and spearing him against the wall of bone at the side of the room. He screamed in pain and grabbed at the spear sticking him to the wall, blood staining his shirt and jacket.

“*Katsuki!*” I shrieked, but anything more died in my throat when the Wendigo turned towards me and shattered the bone spear coming from his palm, leaving Katsuki stuck to the wall.

Just then, a sickening squelch filled the air, followed by a death knell.

Gerhardt screamed.

“*VATER!*”

* * * * *

Another gout of flame from the Noumu ignited his jacket. A moment later the garment roiled on its own, extinguishing the flame and leaving naught but a singed spot on the fabric. Seven times he had landed what should have let him convert to a death blow. Seven times the Noumu had lashed out with fire to prevent the follow-through.

The skin on Gang Orca’s hands was cracked and dry, painful to move. Small rivulets of blood dripped between his fingers, and the scent of copper and rust filled the air. He couldn’t keep this up, he realized. The fire was dangerous enough in this enclosed space, but combining that with the brute strength and the enclosed space…

It was the perfect counter, he realized, chuckling to himself. Gang Orca didn’t know whether to praise or curse whichever madman created the Noumu for his foresight; Orca wouldn’t have been surprised to know that there was a Noumu designed specifically to counter every single one of the country’s ranked second to fifteenth heroes, given that All Might’s had come close, but not quite succeeded.

Now was not the time for idle musings, though. He needed some way actually *hurt* this thing, but it’s not like solutions just come flying out of nowhere—

Out of the corner of his eye, Gang Orca saw movement. He reacted before even thinking, grabbing the table that had been flung his way on its edge and slammed the ‘frisbee’ into the charging Noumu,
slamming it back into the bone wall surrounding the room. Spiderweb cracks ran up the bone where
the Noumu had impacted, the beast’s wreath of flames charring and crumbling the bone around it
even further.

A shrill scream from above caught his attention. The table dropped to the floor, and with a mighty
leap Gang Orca took to the skies, grabbing a coughing Battle Fist from the air and landing in a roll.
He made sure she was okay before putting her down and refocusing on the Noumu.

“Orca-sa—”

“Focus!”

He picked up the table by its edge, fingers digging handholds into the cheap material to let him heft
the furnishing as a bludgeon. He advanced upon the Noumu before it could pull itself out of the
bone, and hammered at it. The table impacted the Noumu and the bone behind it, again, and again,
and again. Something had to give.

The table splintered and warped, but it held enough. The bone, already cracked and scorched
through by the Noumu’s flames?

The bone gave way, and both the Noumu and Gang Orca found themselves in the kitchen.

The Noumu fell on its back and scrambled to get up, but Gang Orca was faster. With what little
remained of the table, he batted the Noumu back, grabbing some of the leftover rags the catering
chefs had left behind in their mad rush to flee as he went. The Noumu found its back pressed against
an industrial freezer unit with a heavy metal door, and with his hands wrapped in the thick, fire-
retardant rags, Gang Orca finally had what he needed to end this thing.

With a mighty kick to the creature’s sternum, he lowered it down to the floor, and took the
opportunity to open the freezer door. With one hand, he picked the Noumu up by the throat,
throwing it partway into the gap between the open door and the unit next to it.

Gang Orca slammed the door onto the Noumu’s body. Then he did it again. And again. And again. The metal bent and warped at the edges, both from the sudden heat and the force of impact, but
Gang Orca persisted. Again, he slammed the door, brackish blood erupting from the Noumu. Again,
he opened, letting it fall slightly before slamming it again, pincering the Noumu between the hard
edges.

One last heave, one final grunt of exertion, and Gang Orca managed to fully close the freezer.

The bottom half of the Noumu, improperly bisected by his blunt and improvised weapon, slumped to
the floor, its blood spilling out across the floor. One last time, Gang Orca opened the freezer, and
confirmed that without its heart, the Noumu’s top half had stopped moving.

“O-oh my… t-that…”

Gang Orca turned to see Kendou Itsuka, Battle Fist, looking at him from the opening he’d made
through the wall of bone. She looked green around the gills, a hand held to her mouth in what he
assumed was an attempt to keep her dinner down.

“Uwabami is with the civilians,” he said. “Find her and let her know that there’s a point of egress
through the bone and the kitchen. She can get the evac effort started.” He fixed his gaze onto her.
“Come, we have a fight to finish.”

A shrill scream carried from the suddenly too-quiet ballroom. Gang Orca cursed under his breath, and hurried out of the kitchens.

Don’t let him be too late…

* * * * *

The swift, leaper Noumu was bleeding now, but it showed no signs of slowing down.

“Almost empty!” Wilhelm warned Jeanist, showing him the cutlery box. Three steak knives were all that remained, and they didn’t have enough to show for it. Jeanist would have needed another twenty-five layers of silk to just crush the Noumu, or another ten to move it as he wished, and any other fabric was just too heavy and noticeable.

“I can hold it in place for two seconds,” he said to Wilhelm.

“We need it to commit,” the older man agreed. Grimly, he reached into the container and retrieved the three steak knives, holding them splayed between the fingers of his right hand. Then, he straightened up, brought his left hand to his mouth… and whistled.

The Noumu on the ceiling stilled, turning towards the suddenly wide-open Wilhelm. An instant later, and it moved.

Jeanist’s eyes widened; it was much faster than he’d expected, he wouldn’t be able to—!

Wilhelm buckled, one of the Noumu’s clawed hands buried in his side. Wilhelm’s left hand came up to grab that clawed limb, and Jeanist took his chance. The silken strands surrounding the Noumu constricted suddenly, locking up both its ability to move and its position in space. Wilhelm brought his right hand, with the three knives splayed out, up to the Noumu’s neck and head.

An actinic crackle, a sickening squelch, and the Noumu’s head had been split down the middle in a ragged cut. Three steak knives shook where they had lodged themselves in the ceiling, blue sparks burning the blood off of the blades.

“Finish this…” Wilhelm looked Jeanist in the eye, and slumped over, the dead Noumu’s claws still buried in his side.

“VATER!”

* * * * *

“VATER!”

Gerhardt stood from behind the side of the stage, shaking, trembling, and pale, staring at where his father was slumped over on the other end of the ballroom. I wanted to run to Katsuki, to get him down, to help him, but Mason was between us. I couldn’t see Gang Orca. Jeanist’s Quirk wouldn’t
be able to stop Mason for more than a couple of seconds. I was now the only one present with a Quirk that could actually hurt Mason.

And no matter how hard I tried… and tried! I… I couldn’t move.

I shook. I gasped. I could barely breathe.

I was the only one left who could help us. And…

And I can’t do it.

“Nobody left to rescue you kids,” Mason gloated, turning and stalking so Gerhardt and I were both in front of him. “Any last words? Go ahead. I won’t interrupt.” He… he was… I wanted to laugh, or cry, or something. I’m going to die to a fucking Bond villain.

And I couldn’t even force myself to do anything!

“The f-funny part is, i-it wasn’t even the main purpose of my research, do you see?” I inadvertently turned towards Gerhardt in unison with Mason, and only now caught sight of something clutched tightly in his white-knuckled hand. “This product we just offered. It was a byproduct. Nothing more than your whey, Herr Mason.” Gerhardt, Quirkless, defenseless Gerhardt, speaking in lightly accented English, stepped towards Mason. A flick of his thumb sent flying off of the object in his hand, and in the dim light, I saw the glint of a metal needle. “It was a curiosity. A side project to the true aim of my research.” He spun the syringe in his fingers, thumb on the plunger. “That was never the end result. This was.”

Mason moved in a flurry, one hand reaching to grab Gerhardt’s and twist, the other grabbing the syringe before it could drop to the floor.

“No!” I yelled, barely able to find my voice. “Let him g-go Mason! I-i-it’s—” I swallowed hard. “It’s m-me you w-w-want!”

“So eager to die, Injun?” He sneered at me, then turned back to the syringe he’d stolen from the wide-eyed Gerhardt. It glowed a bright violet, the light casting Mason’s features in a grim light. “What was this supposed to do, take away my Quirk? My strength?” Mason snarled.

Then he plunged the syringe into the side of Gerhardt’s neck, and depressed the plunger.

“NO!” I shrieked. Mason laughed the laugh of a madman.

And to both—no, to everyone’s great surprise, Gerhardt joined him. The violet glow had started to spread through his veins from the injection site, pulsing in time with his heartbeat as it spread through his body, and he began to spasm as it did.

“What’s so fucking funny, Kraut!?” Mason snarled, grabbing Gerhardt by the throat and lifting him.

“Y-you seem,” Gerhardt coughed, but managed to speak through it somehow, “to be laboring under a false assumption!” Gerhardt brought a hand up and covered the Wendigo’s with his own, pulsing purple in time with his heartbeat… and then it began to grow faster. “You believed the syringe was meant for you.”

Beneath the lab coat, Gerhardt’s body continued to spasm and ripple, practically gleaming solid
violet now.

And then he began to grow.

Flesh tore, revealing muscle aglow with violet light bulging, swelling, *rippling* in an unnatural fashion. Gerhardt’s hand on the Wendigo’s spasmed, rippled, and expanded, the tendon and bone visible where they had burst through skin that hadn’t managed to catch up.

“It was always,” Gerhardt said, his voice dropping in pitch as he spoke, “meant for *me*.”


‘Twas the weekend before Christmas, and all through the dorms—

“Hashire sori yo~”

—not a creature was stirring, not even—oh screw it, rhyming is a pain in the ass and who needs it anyways.

“Kaze no you ni~”

Point is, the week before Christmas was also the last weekend for people to go and get gifts for it, given that Christmas was falling on a Wednesday this year. And let us not forget that UA’s winter break came right after Christmas, starting on the 26th, and lasting until the 6th of January. So no, there was no break beforehand, meaning that this weekend was the last chance for people to find gifts.

“Tsukimihara wo~”

Some people already had all their gifts picked out, though. And those people really, really wanted to just sleep. It was a weekend. Weekends are for catching up on sleep. But no, some people just refuse to let that happen. Such as, for instance, the ridiculously peppy girl currently skipping down the halls, belting Christmas carols at the top of her lungs.

“PADORU PADORU!~”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” At the end of the hall, two very disheveled, very angry bedheads glared out. Ashido Mina froze in place for just a moment, Santa hat still firmly stuck on her head and caught on her little horns, after which she raised her phone to take a picture. Bakugou Katsuki was not a fan of being woken up, and Yaseiki Kanna just hated Christmas music in general. But the part that most caught Mina’s attention?

The both of them were sticking their heads out of the same door.

Mina’s camera flashed. Bakugou and Yaseiki both seemed to realize what had just happened, ducked back into Bakugou’s room, and slammed the door behind them.

“Hoooolyyy shit,” Mina breathed. Then she ran down the hall to get to the elevator and down to the lobby again.

She couldn’t wait to tell everybody!

* * * * *

“So~” A butt found its place next to me on the sofa’s arm, and I could only roll my eyes in annoyance when Tohru’s invisible, pyjama shorts-clad tush snuck in on the other side of Mina’s, pinning me against the far side of the sofa. “You and Bakugou are sleeping in the same room now, hmm? Isn’t that against the ruuuules?”
“I came down ’cause apparently there’s something for the whole dorm planned,” I said. “But, if all you’re going to do is grill me on my relationship, I’m going elsewhere.”

“No no no wait wait!” Jirou showed up from the kitchen, a ballot box (I swear UA has a neverending supply of the damn things and just hands them out at random) in one hand and a bunch of pieces of paper in the other. “Tohru, Mina, you two leave her be, I need this to go off without a hitch!” She paused. “Or at least be more like the boys are about it.” A quick look over at the other side of the lounge showed Katsuki sitting in an armchair, face buried in his phone, and steadfastly ignoring both Sero and Kirishima either offering congratulations, ribbing, or something else. I would’ve expected Kaminari to be with the two of them in haranguing Katsuki, but… instead, he was following Jirou around. Not sure why, really.

“Alright everyone, listen up!” Jirou had one of her Earphone Jacks plugged into a portable speaker, and it was somehow pumping her voice out through the auxiliary port. That… that’s a new trick, actually. I thought she could only do that with her heartbeat! “It’s the weekend before Christmas, so with Aizawa-sensei’s permission, we’re going to be hosting a 1-A dorms Secret Santa!”

“Secret Santa?” “Awesome!” “Oh dear, and on such short notice?”

“QUIET!” Kaminari yelled. Whoa. That was… unexpected. “I’m gonna be bringing around this here box!” He raised the ballot box Jirou had brought in, “and you’re gonna reach in and take a name! I’m gonna start oveeeeeeeer…” Kaminari closed his eyes and spun in a circle, finger out. He spun, and he spun, and eventually he stopped, with his finger resting on—”There! Bakugou’s first!”

“Fuck you.”

“Nah, someone else has that covered!” Kaminari fired right back at Bakugou. My jaw dropped, and I could feel my cheeks reddening a little in slight embarrassment. That cheeky little bastard!

“Anyway, Jirou and I already pulled ours, perk of setting it up, so we’re just gonna go right down the line and make sure everyone gets a name!” I sighed and slumped down in the couch, crossing my arms. Great.

With where Kaminari started, that meant I picked last.

“Couple of rules while we’re getting names given out!” Midoriya reached in and picked out his name, paling and then going red, then right back to pale when he saw the name he’d picked. Next to him, Uraraka took hers, and she instantly turned around and started typing away on her phone after getting it. “First off, try to avoid going over two thousand yen, with three thousand as the upper limit! If you stay at or below two grand, Aizawa-sensei says he can get Nedzu to reimburse us, so keep that in mind!” Another bit further down, Tokoyami reached in to get his, but Kaminari refused to move on. “Dark Shadow gets a name too, you just get double budget between the two of you,” he said. Dark Shadow popped out of Tokoyami’s torso, reached in for a name, and seemed to give a happy yip at what he saw.

“Fumi, I get to be Santa this year!”

“Revelry in the dark…”

A few of us chuckled at that interaction. I swear, despite being a literal living shadow, Dark Shadow is much more lively and upbeat than Tokoyami is.
“And the most important rule!” Kaminari finally got the box around to me, and resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I reached in for the last slip of paper, not bothering to open it yet. “If you want Yao-Momo to use her Quirk to make something for you, ya gotta go out and buy the raw materials you’d need! No cheating the economy, folks!” With all the names drawn, Kaminari tossed the ballot box over his shoulder, where Jirou caught it, as if rehearsed.

“Alright folks, you have your name, four days, and two to three thousand yen to come up with something! Make it good, and be back here on Christmas morning!”

I took the dismissal and got up, thankful to no longer be sandwiched between the arm of the sofa and Tohru, then made my way back to the elevator. Online shopping was always a good place to start for this kind of stuff, anyway.

“Kanna-chan.” I turned around and smiled.

“Hey Tsuyu.” She gave a small ‘kero’ in response. “Any ideas what you’re gonna get your person?”

“One joke and one serious,” she answered. “What about you?”

“I haven’t even looked at the name,” I admitted. The elevator dinged, and Tsuyu moved to step off. “If I need any ideas I’ll come to you, though.”

“Kero!” The elevator doors closed, and it headed one more floor up. I went into my dorm room, locked the door, put on some music, then sat on the bed, leaning back onto Theo-Bear Roosevelt the absolutely massive teddy bear. Now that I had some peace and quiet, it was time to see who my Secret Santa was. I unfolded the paper, and took a good look at—

… Kaminari and Jirou, you magnificent fucks.

* * * * *

Finding a gift is a tricky, tricky process. I mean, if you want to get technical and pedantic, finding a gift is as easy as going online, getting a gift card that works for just about anyone, and saying you hope they put it towards something they enjoy. So now that that’s out of the way, let me clarify:

Finding a good gift is a tricky, tricky process. Devilishly so. Getting a gift that’s both good and actually useful?

I had to call my dad for help on this one, especially with regards to the logistics. But now I had what I hoped was the exact right gift to give.

Wednesday morning came fast, and surprise surprise (not really), Word of Nedzu came down that in the spirit of Christmas, our winter break was to start one day early. So on that morning, the twenty of us (twenty-one if you count Dark Shadow, which I definitely do) all grouped back up in the ground floor common area, wrapped gifts and bags in hand.

“And the most important rule!” Kaminari strolled up bouncing his gift in one hand and holding an actual microphone in the other. Where did he?—right, Jirou’s got a room full of music equipment, forgot. “Alright folks! You can open the gift up right here, but you don’t have to. That outta the way, whoever wants to go first, stand on up and give your
“Ooh, me me me!” Mina jumped up and brought a surprisingly large package out from behind the sofa, tossing it over to Sero. “Here you go!”

“Ah, sweet!” Sero wasted no time opening the package up, revealing a large, brown cardboard box. He opened that up to reveal… a really, really, really big banana.

No, I’m not kidding.

“It’s a banana hammock!” Mina exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “You can use it as a sleeping bag or a hammock!”

“Heh.” Every single one of us looked straight towards the kitchen, where Aizawa-sensei had just finished pouring himself a cup of coffee. He pointedly walked past all of us and gave Sero a pat on the shoulder before he paused. “So, who’s my Secret Santa?”

“Oh, I think Present Mic got—”

There was a sudden crack, and the next thing we knew, Aizawa-sensei was gone.

“I think he broke the sound barrier just then,” Tsuyu said. “I thought he wasn’t included in the Secret Santa though, kero.”

“He wasn’t.” Kaminari confirmed. “I just wanted to see what would happen! Hey Sero, what was the pat for?”

In response, Sero held up a pamphlet that had managed to find its way into his pocket: Sleeping Bag Afficionados of Japan.

“(… I don’t even want to know,” Jirou said, taking the chance to steer things back on track. “Next!”

“Right, mine’s for you bud!” Sero tossed his package to Kaminari, who wasted no time opening it right up. “Headphones that can charge off your Quirk! You’ll never run out of batteries now!”

“Ah, sick!” Kaminari gave Sero a one-armed hug, then grabbed his tiny package and tossed it to Kirishima. “Merry Christmas, bud!”

“Thanks, man!” Kirishima grabbed Sero’s one-armed hug, then grabbed his tiny package and tossed it to Tokoyami. “A gift for you!”

“Make sure to give your gift first!” Kirishima shrugged, tossed his over to Tokoyami, and ran off to go check out whatever it was.

A few more exchanges ensued: Tokoyami got the complete works of Edgar Allan Poe in Japanese, and gave Tsuyu a frog-patterned calligraphy set. Tsuyu gave Kouda a bird feeder with a small motion-activated camera, and he gave Ojiro a monkey-themed parka. Ojiro’s gift went to Tohru, who received a hair band and hair ties that are only visible under ultraviolet, which is pretty cool.

It was while Tohru was giving her gift to Dark Shadow that Kirishima came barreling down the stairs, wrapped Kaminari in a massive bear hug, and was practically spinning him around.
“Holy shit dude, how did you know?!”

“Kaminari,” Jirou said, voice low, “what exactly did you get him?”

“Adjustable… barbell… set!” Kaminari barely managed to get that out through the bear hug, and had to catch his breath for a second. “All the barbells in one small footprint, perfect for dorm life!” Most of us gave him a look. “What? I was already getting him a present, may as well just make it better right?”

“Alright alright, next up!”

“My turn!” All of us turned towards Dark Shadow… who was now wearing a ridiculously ostentatious Christmas sweater, complete with illuminated LED’s and a flashing red nose on the Rudolph.

“Dark Shadow, please take that off.” “No.” “Then please turn that off.” “No!” “Dark Shadow, please.” “C’mon Fumi, this thing is great! Oh right, Satou!” Dark Shadow reached down and grabbed a package, then carried it over to Satou, who actually buckled a little under the weight. “Whoops, sorry!”

“No, it’s fine!” Satou opened up the package, and stopped. “Oh wow. A new cast iron skillet? And a chainmail scrubber for it!”

“Revelry in the dark,” Tokoyami murmured, eyes closed and head consistently turning away from where Dark Shadow wanted to show him what I could definitely agree was the best sweater ever. It looked great on Dark Shadow, too!

Satou went next, and gave his gift to Aoyama ("Where did you learn the recipe for sachertorte, mon ami?” “I have a cookbook, if you want to borrow it!” “S’il te plaira!”), who in turn gave Tenya a new set of frames for his glasses, complete with repair kit. Tenya’s gift to Todoroki was… well. “A… meat tenderizer.”

“Indeed!” Tenya stood up, one hand pressed to his glasses, which reflected the light from the wall sconces and turned opaque. “To better facilitate the crushing of hands in the future!” Todoroki choked, but so did Midoriya, before the three of them all cracked up at some joke we didn’t have the inside scoop on.

Once the three of them had gotten themselves under control, it was Todoroki’s turn, and he slid a large package over to Shouji, one that actually sat on a wheeled cart.

“Some tatami mats for your room,” he said. “I noticed it was rather… bare.”

“I appreciate it. Thank you.” Shouji brought a large package out from behind him and tossed it to Ashido, who opened it to find a pink and purple polka-dotted parka.

“H-hang on!” Uraraka said suddenly. “It went around in a circle, but six of us still need to…” She trailed off. “A-ano, I have Deku-kun!”

“Uraraka-s-san!” Midoriya said, flustered. “Ah, I h-have you!” He brought out his gift and gave it to her, and she handed him hers in return. The two of them looked at each other, then down at the gifts in their hands, and their blushes turned luminescent.
“You don’t have to open them here,” Jirou reminded. The two of them quickly took the out and stowed their gifts away still wrapped, still blushing, still refusing to look at each other. Yeah, they were being adorable.

“So there’s four of us left,” I said. “Jirou, let me just take a wild guess: you and Momo have each other.” She looked at me for a moment, and a sly little smile spread across her face. “Yeah, I had a feeling. Let me and Katsuki go first, and then Momo, and we save you for last?”

“Fucking finally!” Katsuki shot up off his spot on the armchair, gift in hand, and actually walked over to me and handed me the gift instead of tossing it like so many others had done. “Called in a favor for this one, so… yeah.”

I took the small, flat box, carefully pulled open the wrapping paper, and opened the gift up.

Then I had to stifle a gasp while pulling the gift out of the box so I could show the other girls.

“That’s—” Tohru’s breath caught in her throat. “That’s from Jeanist’s line—!”

“Figure it’s a little cold for a skirt now,” Katsuki said, that smug, smug smile on his face. “But you’ve got some Jeanist denim for spring now.” He paused. “Some more Jeanist denim,” he said, and I felt the cold, burning glare from most of the other girls on my back. Except for Yao-Momo. She can afford any and all of it whenever she wants.

More important, though, was the note underneath the skirt: *This isn’t the main event.*

“My turn then, hm?” I reached down and pulled out a package, similarly flat, but differently shaped. “Guess we’ve got a few plans for spring now, huh?”

Katsuki opened the box up, and removed the contents one by one: a climbing harness, a set of ascenders, and a pamphlet plus reservation details for a rock climbing trip to Mt. Fuji once spring came. A little more pricy than the amount Secret Santa asked for, but still. I was already getting him a gift.

Katsuki closed the box and grabbed me in a hug. I took the opportunity to spin us around, sit his tush down on the sofa, and claim his lap for my own.

“Alright lovebirds, let the last two have their exchange!” Mina said, promptly ruining the mood, in my opinion. Katsuki and I both turned to scowl at her, but we did give our attention to Momo and Jirou.

“If I may?” Momo stood, a slim, rectangular package in her hand. “I noticed you do not have many wind instruments in your room Kyouka-san, so… I figured a new addition would be appreciated?” She handed the gift to Jirou, who opened it up to reveal a beautiful, shining flute. Jirou took the flute in hand, brought it up to her mouth, and played a few scales before settling on a simple tune. We gave some polite golf claps before Jirou pulled a cloth that had apparently been in the box, wiped the flute down, and took out her own gift.

“So, uh.” Jirou… Jirou *blushed.* Wow. “This was… yeah. I mean, what do you get the girl who has, can have, and can *make* anything? Like… I guess I just had to go and make something only I can, so…”
Momo opened up the box, and inside was a small MP3 player with headphones. “There’s only one song…?” She looked to Jirou, who just nodded. At the prompting, Momo put in the headphones, sat down, and pressed play. The lot of us waited with bated breath, watching Momo’s face go through a full range of emotions before what little sound we could hear leaking from the earbuds ended. Momo removed the earbuds calmly, and placed the MP3 player back into the box.

Then in one swift movement, she grabbed Jirou’s face in her hands and kissed her full on the lips.

“Well damn,” I whispered. “She up and wrote a damn love song.”

“Tch,” Katsuki murmured. “I could do that.”

“Don’t ruin the mood,” I said, then smacked him upside the head with my tail.

Momo and Jirou came up for air, finally. And then Momo had… I guess her new girlfriend? And then Momo had her new girlfriend in a princess carry straight towards the elevator.

“W-well, that’s all I guess!” Kaminari said, trying to wrest some semblance of control back. “Merry Christmas, everyone!”

* * * * *

“A new harness, to boot,” Katsuki said, shaking his head with a grin. “You called my mom and asked about that, didn’t you?”

“How do you even tear a climbing harness?” I asked, closing the door to Katsuki’s room behind me and sitting down next to him on the bed. “Those things are tough.”

“Jagged rock,” he said, lifting the left leg of the shorts he was wearing to show a pale, yet somewhat large scar I hadn’t noticed before. “Fucker gashed me pretty good too.”

“I can imagine,” I said, rolling my eyes. “So. How about that rigged Secret Santa, huh.”

“Not gonna complain about shit,” Katsuki said, then opened his nightstand’s drawer and pulled something out. “I, uh.” I looked at Katsuki, and saw a small blush on his face. He met my eyes, then looked down at his hand. “S’for you.”

I took the small box from him and unwrapped it carefully, revealing what could only be a jewelry box. Looking back to Katsuki, he was very pointedly not meeting my eyes, and still blushing incredibly hard. I opened up the box, and brought a hand to my mouth in a gasp.

Inside the box lay a pendant, hanging from a finely-wrought silver chain. The pendant itself was in the shape of a pair of wings, curled around some invisible something between them.

“Just wanted to get something… fuck, I don’t know,” he said. “Something nice. Special, not just clothes or shit. And I saw that, so—”

“Help me put it on?” I interrupted, holding the unclasped pendant out to him. He paused, then took it from me, expression still a little shocked. I turned around and lifted my hair out of the way, letting him clasp it around my neck before releasing my hair, which was now falling around the upper-
middle part of my back. With careful fingers, I reached up to feel for where the pendant sat just below the hollow of my neck, and couldn’t keep the enormous smile off of my face.

“It looks—” Katsuki stopped himself, swallowing. “You look good. It’s good on you. Shit, I mean —”

I captured his lips with my own, cutting him off and knocking him flat on the bed. His hand reached out for the drawer and the lamp on the nightstand, and after retrieving what he wanted from the drawer, we cut off the lights. And then?… well.

Let me just say that it was a very merry Christmas indeed.
“G-Gang Orca-dono!?”

Gang Orca looked up from where he sat, beneath a powerful stream of water from the kitchen’s faucet/handheld sprayer, at the unknown socialite that had spoken. His eyes narrowed, and he shifted subtly, further hiding the corpse of the Noumu behind him, angling the spray to further wash the blood away before they could see it.

“Do not worry about me,” he rumbled, voice gritty and scratchy from dehydration. “Keep moving. Give the others more room to fight and work with.” His eye landed on the woman, who stiffened before making her way towards the emergency exit, high heels dangling from her hands as she walked barefoot through the kitchen, careful not to step on any of the broken porcelain his tussle with the Noumu had left behind.

It rankled. He should be out there, fighting that monster. But whoever was responsible for creating those Noumu had chosen well. The fire… Gang Orca took a deep breath. If not for the timely intervention of the Kendou girl, he could have been in some much more serious trouble. As it stood, he was incapacitated. He needed time to rest. Time to recover.

And he worried that this was time they did not have.

* * * * *

“Don’t!”

Jeanist kneeled down next to Wilhelm Schutz, whose hand was clasped tightly around the wrist of the small, spindly Noumu, its claws still buried in his midsection.

“Have… fire?” Wilhelm said, his English further broken by pain, brow furrowed in concentration and agony. “Burn shut… help my son—!”

“Sit.” Reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket, Best Jeanist retrieved the emergency supplies: surgical suture, still sealed within its sterile packaging. It was difficult to manipulate, very fine and slim, and could do more harm than good if he was not incredibly cautious. But that was what an intensive, two-year course in battlefield triage had been for, the first time he himself needed stitches and had to be excruciatingly careful not to control them unconsciously. He unsealed the package and retrieved the thread, carefully inspecting the wound with his cell-phone’s light.

“Be ready,” Jeanist said, in halting, accented English. “This will hurt.”

Across the room, the fight raged, but he could not focus on that. The wound had to be sealed and treated, or Wilhelm Schutz could die of blood loss or internal trauma. Battlefield triage was a poor substitute for proper medicine, but it would have to do for now. And as he worked, Jeanist had to keep his mind off of what the man said, delirious with pain.

He had to ignore the tone of pride and horror as he spoke in his native tongue. He shut it out.
He had a life to save.

* * * * *

Skin split. Muscle warped, spasmed, and grew. Bones crunched, morphing and warping with the muscle above them. But through it all, there was no blood. It looked agonizing; from experience, having your body warp and shift like that was agony of the truest sort. Yet through it all, Gerhardt stood there, his ever-growing hand dwarfing the Wendigo’s until he looked to be holding the entirety of Mason’s forearm within one meaty fist. The purple glow thrumming beneath Gerhardt’s skin pulsed in time with his heartbeat; a sudden muscle spasm in his leg sent him to a knee, carrying the Wendigo down with him.

“You—!” Mason extruded massive claws from his free hand and ran them across Gerhardt’s midsection, clearly aiming to disembowel him. I suppressed a gasp, but when I looked beneath the shredded remnants of what might once have been a fine dress shirt, there was nothing. No damage. Just whitish-purple skin, growing back in to cover rippling, growing muscle, untouched by the now-broken claws that had tried to carve it away.

Mason continued his offensive against Gerhardt, but nothing seemed to touch him. Blades, claws, spikes, they either bounced off, slipped along his rejuvenated flesh, or splintered and broke. And through it all, Gerhardt still held Mason by the arm.

“Rraaaagh!” With a great heave, Gerhardt whipped Mason over his now massive form, slamming him back down in to the floor that had been reinforced with a layer of the villain’s own bone. It cracked under the impact, large splintering breaks spreading along its length.

Mason got one hand underneath him, and in a swift motion he dislocated his own shoulder, spinning to face towards me. I froze in place once more as his free hand came up to point at me, a shaft of bone emerging from the center of his palm—

“Nein.” Gerhardt interposed his free hand between Mason’s own and myself. The bone spike pressed against the hand, but all that did is lever Mason out of position and send the spike spearing into the floor as Mason hung, suspended by his own dislocated arm. He was… the Wendigo was losing. Or at least, he wasn’t in a position where he could win. Gerhardt still had a grip on the man’s arm, even after all this. And if I was right, then nothing he had available was going to work. My hands flexed and that familiar feeling under my nail bed returned, extruding. I’d made a mistake before, trying to go deep. I had a very small window to make this work, but if it did, then the fight was over. The cheetah enshrouded me, and in an instant, I was off, dashing past where the Wendigo hung suspended. One hand reached out, negligently grazing against his side. The venom pumped in, just below the surface of his skin.

And Mason roared.

“You little Injun BITCH!” He let the spear of bone extending from his hand fall away and raised it towards me, moments before Gerhardt threw him on the ground and stomped. A cage of bone sprung from Mason’s ribcage and grasped Gerhardt’s foot, throwing it away and sending the lumbering German giant back, breaking his grip on Mason in the process. I called the cheetah once more and ran, interposing Gerhardt between Mason and myself, and the bone spikes that had been racing towards me splintered and broke as they struck his violet, spasming flesh.
If I lingered any longer, I would become a liability in this fight. I raced over to my other priority: Katsuki, still pinned to the wall, who had used his core to hook his legs up and onto the bone pole to keep pressure off of the wound in his shoulder.

“C-careful,” he said as I got close, inspecting the bone. His face was drawn and tight; I knew he was in pain, and he was trying not to let it win. “Bone splinters if you try to c-cut it.”

I looked over to the other end of the spear; it was buried into the floor, probably anchored in such a way that I wouldn’t be able to just lift it up or pull it out of the floor, and same with the one holding Katsuki to the wall through his shoulder. I wasn’t going to be able to just pull it, and he was right: trying to cut or crush bone could splinter it, which would do nothing more than send a bunch more slivers of bone stabbing into Katsuki’s shoulder and making a massive mess of it. The bone had to be cut, but with an edge so impossibly sharp and fine that it wouldn’t impart any crushing force, or so slowly that there couldn’t be any. We didn’t have time for the slow solution.

“Free hand against the wall,” I said. He didn’t protest. An instant later, the long-familiar transformation took hold of my insides, and I called for a formless totem.

And I fed it.

The totem darkened, iridescent green darkening to storm-cloud grey. An instant later, liquid lightning ran through my veins, and I inspected the bone in front of me. This crude, disgusting, pathetic weapon. This is what I was so afraid of and worried about? This nothing? A negligent swipe of my totem’s wings severed the segment Katsuki, that lovable, cocky idiot, and I caught it before letting it down. The ends of the bone rod burnt black, fractal patterned burns reaching up from the ends where I’d severed it. Effortlessly. All that effort, all that worry, all that fear, for this nothing—

“Let it go!” Katsuki yelled into my ear. I humored him, the silly little boy—and the wind fell out of my sails, and I collapsed to my knees besides Katsuki, who pulled me back up with his free arm. “Shit, Kanna!”

“Keep it in!” I hissed, holding his arm down from going to the foot-long rod of bone still embedded in his shoulder. “Not until the medics—”

“Fucking KRAUT!”

 Barely a minute had passed, and in that time, a veritable armory of bone had managed to litter the ballroom where Gerhardt held off the Wendigo. Gerhardt was barely clothed, the torn remnants of his pants all that was left to shield his modesty. A fist grabbed Mason by the bone he was extruding and pulled, bringing Mason in closer. He brought his hands up to Gerhardt’s face, spears of bone flying from his fingertips to Gerhardt’s eyes—!

The bone struck, pushing Gerhardt’s head back at a speed that would give anyone whiplash. And yet, when next we looked… his eyes were perfectly intact. No damage, whatsoever. He was untouchable.

“I am getting very tired of this,” Gerhardt ground out, his voice oddly deep and flanging. “If I am Kraut, then you are wretch!” He rushed forward, grabbing Mason’s legs and slamming him into the floor. “You are monster!” A spasm of Gerhardt’s leg sent him to a knee, but he still flung the Wendigo overhead, and back down to the floor, cratering it and leaving a fair amount of blood
behind where he impacted. “By your actions, you have made yourself Untermensch!” Gerhardt whipped the Wendigo over his head, and at the apex, his arm spasmed like his leg had just a moment ago.

And he let the Wendigo fly.

I saw Mason break through the ceiling. I heard him break through the one past that, and the next one past that, and then a fourth ceiling past that one. Katsuki and I both turned towards Gerhardt, who seemed to be looking at the hole with rapt interest for a moment. He turned from the hole to his hand, to Katsuki and me, and then to where Jeanist was picking his father up from the ground. Gerhardt took one heavy, ponderous step towards his father.

And then he fell face-first onto the floor, body spasming and twitching, the purple pulse of his heartbeat slowing and fading to a low, thunderous beat.

* * * * *

The official response came maybe three minutes after Mason went flying through the ceiling. Searches were underway within moments, but from the faint scent of whiskey on the air, those in the know knew he was already gone to parts unknown. Of all the things to come out of the USJ incident, the way to identify Kurogiri’s portals was probably the only net positive.

“All right, follow my finger.” I tried not to roll my eyes at the paramedic just doing his job, and dutifully followed his finger as he waved it side to side, then up and down, then diagonal. It was one of the ways to test for a concussion without a brain scan, and people had seen me being tossed around a little bit, so it was warranted. I clutched the ‘rescue blanket’ they’d given me tighter, but I think I was past the shock of it. Mostly, anyway. I was still wrapping my head around it.

I’ve heard tell that there’s no such thing as coincidence. And yet, I know for a fact that I wasn’t the target. Mason didn’t even notice that I was there at first. He was clearly after Gerhardt, or more specifically after the people who’d used his… well, flesh, to create their new serum-slash-detergent-slash-wonder chemical. I was… just dumb luck, I guess. It feels wrong. It feels like this was something else… but no matter how I look at it, I can’t find anything to substantiate that. I’d look like some crazy conspiracy theorist if I did, and that wouldn’t help anyone.

“Is she stable enough to give a statement?” I looked up to see a familiar detective walking towards the paramedic and me; the paramedic looked up and was about to answer before I stood.

“I can talk,” I said, standing up from the chair I’d been sitting in, though I did use my tail to help keep myself steady. What I did earlier, with the Thunderbird? I’d barely called it out for fifteen seconds, and even that felt like I’d gone ten rounds with Gang Orca and lost miserably. More and more, it feels like something I can use, but that I’m not supposed to, or like there’s something I’m missing. I shook my head, and brought my mind back to the present. “What do you want to know, Detective Tsukauchi?”

Tsukauchi Naomasa pulled a chair up to sit beside me, and pulled a notepad out of his trench coat. “Didn’t expect we would be meeting again so soon, Yaseiki-san. I’d hoped USJ was the last we saw of each other until you at least had your provisional license.”

“World doesn’t always work that way I guess.” I offered him a faint smile. “I’ll probably get that
license on the first shot… or at least I’d better, or the boss will have my hide.” We shared a chuckle before sobering up, expressions serious. “Where do you want me to start?”

“At the top is fine, or wherever you feel you should,” he answered. “We do have…” Tsukauchi paused, paging through his notepad. “Fifty-seven more who observed at least the first half of what occurred.”

“Okay,” I said, and began. My recounting of events began with the shudders of the floor, then the bone forest that sprung up from the floor. “It was a lot more than he could do a year and a half ago,” I explained, “back at the Snow Festival. It took him a lot of concentration to do two spears, and they were slow. This was…” words failed, and I just waved at the walls of the room. “It’s an order of magnitude higher. I know he can get stronger, but this is just… it’s obscene.”

Tsukauchi nodded, jotting down notes. “And the Noumu, which I see you’re becoming an unwilling expert in?”

“Two,” I told him. “One big, strong. About the same proportions as the one from USJ, but a lot paler. It was constantly on fire, or at least hot. The other was small, wiry. Acid spit.” I frowned. “Whoever’s responsible for those… things, they’re smart. And there’s one more thing?” I looked Tsukauchi in the eyes. “I’ve seen six different Noumu so far. The strongest, most dangerous one I saw, its skin was pitch-black. The least dangerous Noumu I saw, it was ashen and gray. These two were somewhere in the middle, verging between a normal skin tone and a dark tan.”

“A possible link between melanin production and whatever process is creating these creatures?” Naomasa hummed, pen between his lips as he pondered that, looking away from me. He jotted down a few more notes before turning back to me.

“How are they?” I blurted out before he could say anything else. “I-I mean,” I flushed a little, “Gang Orca, Kats-Bakugou, and the Schutz’s. They’re at the hospital now, right?”

“I’ll tell you what.” Tsukauchi favored me with a small smile. “We’ll finish this up, then I’ll drive you over there personally. Sound good?”

I took a deep breath, counted to three, then exhaled slowly. “Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, it does.” I tried to get a shaky smile on my face, despite the worry. “Alright, Detective. What’s next?”

Detective Tsukauchi led me into the hospital and to the elevator, flashing his badge to get us past the orderlies and up the stairs. The third floor had several armed special forces officers guarding it, though they stood aside and let us pass when they saw Tsukauchi. I paused at the first room, where I saw Gang Orca sitting upright, hooked up to multiple IV’s to replenish fluids. He looked up from where he sat and gave me a nod, along with the slightest parting of his jaws that I’d come to interpret as a smile of sorts. Next to him in the room sat Taiki, who’d managed to make himself scarce during the actual crisis, I assumed through judicious (and probably unauthorized) use of his Quirk; he mouthed ‘next room over’ at me before waving for me to go on.

We moved to the next room, and I couldn’t contain myself. I rushed through the door and ran at Katsuki, grabbing him round the waist in a hug as I rested my chin on his good shoulder.
“Damn it Kanna, they told you I’d be fine,” he grumbled under his breath, hugging me back with his good arm.

“Excuse me for worrying when you get shish-kebab’d by the same villain that wants to eat me,” I said, though there was absolutely no heat in the snark, only worry. “Damn it Katsuki, you know how dangerous he is! And you just… just went for him.” I pulled back from the hug, both my hands going straight to his good one. “Damn it, you… you scared me.” I sat down on the bed next to him, still holding his hand. “He could’ve killed you.”

“Yeah,” Katsuki said, leaning into me. His hurt shoulder was bandaged and in a sling, but he could still hold my other hand with his own. “But if I didn’t do something, he’d have killed you.”

If Katsuki hadn’t been injured, I’ve have smacked him upside the head with my tail. Lightly, of course. Instead, I just wrapped it around his waist, and leaned in closer to him.

“This is the kind of thing we’re gonna have to get used to as heroes, isn’t it?” I asked, more to myself than to Katsuki. “The people we love and are close to, our friends and family, going out and maybe not coming back.”

“We can’t all be All Might,” Katsuki said quietly, voice pensive. “Not even… huh.” I looked over to see him frowning, brow barely furrowed and in thought. “Is that what?…” He shook his head, then pulled me in closer with his good arm. “Fuck it. Think later. Rest now.”

“Yeah.” I looked up, just in time to see Detective Tsukauchi closing the door until it was just barely open a crack. “You’ve got some healing to do, mister hero.”

“It could be worse.” I favored him with a small hum. “Could’ve been my dick.”

“You do know that I can make a bunch of different venoms that could melt your dick off, right?” I asked sweetly. Katsuki choked a moment. “Nice try though, A for effort,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Boys. Come this close to dying and all you can think of is your dick.”

“Oh, sue me.”

* * * * *

He blinked, eyes squinting against the harsh fluorescent lighting overhead. An attempt to lift an arm to cover his eyes failed, both because his arm felt oddly heavy and because of something wrapped around his wrist. Chancing a glance down, he saw an immense expanse of skin, far more than he was ever used to, mottled and purple-grey in color.

Gerhardt let his head fall back down onto… whatever kept his head from laying flat. A low chuckle erupted. He’d done it. He’d actually done it. Never again would he be the weak, Quirkless little boy whose dreams went to die.

“You’ve gotten people in quite a tizzy, Herr Schutz.”

Gerhardt turned, trying to move his body to see who had spoken, and in German, no less.

“No, don’t try to get up. Those are Class J restraints; you spent the first three hours spasming, and
then intermittently; as near as I can tell, it was on every fifth heartbeat. Which, incidentally, has slowed to a pace closer to that of a white rhino than a human, even one of your new stature.” He heard a sound, seeming like tea being sipped from a cup, along with the clink of a teacup against one of the small plates used to hold them. “You still need to be observed for seventeen minutes and fifty seconds, enough time for twenty cycles to pass, before we can deem you safe enough to remove the restraints. But before that happens, I believe we need to have a discussion, young man.”

“About?” Gerhardt asked, his voice rough, guttural. Flanging, he realized, seeming to echo within his throat.

“About laws, loopholes, and how we’re going to keep you from either going to prison or being extradited.” Gerhardt felt a pressure on his chest, and looked up to see some cross between a capybara, a mouse, and an otter perched on his chest. “My name is Nedzu. And it is my hope that we will become well acquainted with each other over the next several weeks, yes?”
The third floor of Hosu Memorial Hospital served two purposes as the hospital’s VIP floor. The first was obviously a more private set of rooms to allow heroes and their families to recuperate without having to deal with the constant deluge of well-wishers, fans, and media that tended to surround them. The second purpose, though, was for the incarceration of villains and criminals who had been wounded in the process of being captured. Mere days before, Kenta had been host to this floor’s hospitality. This time though, he came with a different purpose.

“Native-dono,” the officer on guard outside the hospital room said, offering a brief bow of the head. “Tsuragamae-sama called ahead, said you were cleared to enter.”

“He conscious?” Kenta asked, motioning towards the door.

“I just rotated out twenty minutes ago,” she said. “He was awake then, so he probably is now.” She nodded at the file in Kenta’s right hand, his left still hanging from a sling. “Interrogation, sir?”

“Something like that,” Kenta said, deflecting. The officer nodded before banging twice, pausing, and banging once more on the door behind her. Another officer exited the room, but did not say anything, looking giving a questioning look at the other two before his eyes alighted on Native. “Go get some coffees. All of you look like you need it.”

“Sir!” The officer who had left the hospital room stood to the side, allowing Kenta to pass.

There were bars on the window, lowered down from sliding racks and locked into place. The windows themselves had chicken wire inside, to imperil any potential escapees that would be strong enough to break through the bars. Lights were kept low on the outside of the room, and blindingly bright on the bed. The monitors on the hospital equipment faced away from the bed and towards the door, such that any nurse, doctor, or orderly could check without having to enter the room, and so as to deprive the criminal of any information.

“I was wondering when one of you would come visit me,” the bed’s occupant rasped, voice rough and ragged. “ Hero.”

From his place on the bed, the Hero Killer Stain turned one baleful eye upon Native.

“Come to gloat over your victory?” Stain said, sneering. The muscles in his neck clenched, the restraints on the bed holding him down despite his best efforts. “Revel in your conquests?”

Kenta didn’t reply. He tossed the file he was holding onto a chair, pulled the chair up to the bed, then sat down, taking the file back. Silence reigned for a long minute, the Hero Killer staring at the Pro Hero who’d come calling.

“ Akaguro Chizome.” Stain’s scowl tightened. “Age, thirty-one. Quirk, Bloodcurdle. Nine confirmed kills.” Kenta looked up from the page. “Two failed attacks, on my sidekick Safari and on myself. One left alive. Ingenium.” Kenta stared Stain in the eyes. “That last one is what gets me. The other eleven of us, if I try to run it through your ‘true hero’ filter, I can see it.” Kenta chuckled ruefully.
“After Tuesday, I’d be an idiot not to see it in myself. But that last one? Ingenium? The Pro Hero who takes people that society tells have no place being a Hero or using their Quirks for good, who uses every single loophole to put more heroes on the streets, to protect people? That one didn’t make sense.”

Kenta picked up the file and folded the cover over, then flipped pages over, searching.

“See, thanks to this nice little injury you caused me, I can’t go out and be a hero for a few more days. So here I am. I have nothing to do. And that question is still needling at me. ‘Why Ingenium’? And I thought, maybe there’s something we’re missing. Maybe there’s some deeper reason to why you went for him. Maybe?” Kenta turned the folder towards Stain and placed held it up for him to see. “It’s personal.”

“Where did you—!”

“The Iida are family friends,” Kenta said, as though it explained everything. And it did. “Applicant name: Akaguro Chizome. Age, twenty-five. Quirk, Bloodcurdle. Past work experience, store clerk at Lawson. GPA, not applicable. Expelled from Tokyo-Dai for illegal Quirk use on a fellow student.” Kenta shook the paper. “You applied to Ingenium’s agency to work as a sidekick six years ago. No work experience. No professional references. No classes taken in any Heroics course, even the purely academic disciplines. And a history.” Kenta took the folder back, flipped a page, and turned it back towards Stain again. “And you were rejected. ‘We sincerely apologize, but due to your past history of illegal activity, we cannot offer you a place here.’ That’s what they all said, isn’t it? One mistake meant you didn’t get the chance to be a hero.”

“And yet here you stand, a fake hero, mocking me!” Stain yelled. “You let people die. You endangered innocents. You endangered your family!”

“Yes,” Kenta said. “I did. I own that mistake. And I’ve paid for it.” He looked Stain in the eyes. “My wife kicked me out of my own home. My daughter got into UA’s hero course, and I had to hear it from her godfather. I nearly died on Tuesday, and one of the last things I said to either of them was ‘let me explain’. But I recognized my mistakes. And I’ve worked to fix them. You, though?” Kenta flipped to a different page now. “All you did was cut off your own damn nose to spite the face.”

Kenta’s eyes fell on the ragged hole where Stain’s nose should have been.

“Isn’t that right… Stendhal?”

“You—!”

“Save it,” Kenta spat. “I know what you’re going to say. ‘People can’t change’. ‘They were criminals, I was doing a hero’s work’. ‘They don’t deserve the title of hero’. We all heard your little screed about All Might being the true hero. But tell me, Stain: are you All Might?”

Stain opened his mouth to speak. But no words came.

“You’re probably thinking, ‘I never got the chance to be, not like you fake heroes’,” Kenta said. “But you took that chance anyway when you went vigilante, Stendhal. And you weren’t All Might. You’re holding people to a standard that even you couldn’t match.” Native smirked. “Even if that standard is dropping.”
“… what?” Stain’s tone had changed. Confusion, perhaps. Or denial. But, Kenta thought to himself as he flipped the pages in his little folder, the statistics didn’t lie.

“I wouldn’t have even thought to look for this if you hadn’t gone and lectured everyone, so I suppose I should thank you. Though I somehow doubt you’re going to be thanking me in a moment.” Kenta turned the paper back to Stain. “Here are ten years of data on All Might’s heroics. We have four years of plateau. And then these past six years?” Kenta dragged his finger across the line on a graph. “Down. Down in villain captures. Down in crimes prevented. Down in rescues. And this line, right here?” Kenta pointed to another one. “That’s Endeavor. By all objective measures, All Might, the true hero, is less and less of a hero every day.”

“That’s… that’s—!”

“All Might is in his fifties, Chizome!” Kenta yelled. “He’s getting old. Do you know how long people tend to last as Pro Heroes with even half All Might’s activity? They maybe make it past forty-five. Now where’s that downturn?” Kenta’s finger came down on the line. “Not long after he turned forty-five. And here you are, killing off the people who are going to have to take over once All Might has to retire.”

“I’ve—I’ve been cleansing society!” Stain yelled back. “I’ve made sure only real heroes can—”

“No you haven’t,” Kenta spat. “All you’ve done is made sure that when All Might has to take off his costume, there won’t be anyone left to fight the real villains.”

“You’re wrong!”

“Am I?” Kenta opened the folder all the way up, took the papers out, and placed them all before Stain. “The information is there.” Kenta sat back down in the chair. “It’s funny, you know. Your whole thing is people don’t change. That bad people stay bad. But look at you.” Stain looked up, brows furrowed. “You wanted to be a hero. And now you’re one of the worst villains to ever exist. Only one question remains.”

Kenta got up from his chair, and walked towards the door.

“What do you really want to be? Stendhal? Or a Stain?”

* * * * *

Five floors down, in the hospital’s basement, the OR nurse wheeled the patient’s bed into the operating room. Kimiko lowered the the rails on the side of his bed, and moved around to her patient’s head while the nurse maneuvered to his feet.

“Alright, we’re going to lift you up in three, two, one!” Kimiko and her nurse worked as one, lifting
Iida Tensei from the gurney and onto the operating table. It was fitted with a custom ‘pillow’, allowing him to lay on his stomach with his head laying to the side, a custom-made pillow cradling his neck and ensuring both comfort and ease of breathing. Normally, an operation like this would have had the patient laying on their left side, and though Kimiko was loathe to deviate from custom, this was far from a standard surgical procedure. The proof of concept had worked, stunningly in fact, but there was still apprehension.

“I’m still not sure I can believe it,” Tensei slurred, the sedative in his system keeping him calm, preventing any chance of panic. “Don’t think I will until it’s over.”

“Please believe it, darling.” From Kimiko’s side, her temporary helper, Iida Rei, formerly Hatsume Rei, prepared the custom imaging and neural stimulation equipment they would be using. “It worked on your cute little brother, and it w-went perfectly!” She put on a brave face, but Kimiko could see the tension on her face, the worry. The nerves in Tenya’s hand had been perfect for a practice run, but it was still worlds apart from the spinal cord.

“Has the patient been prepared?” Kimiko turned around to see the anesthesiologist, striding in alongside the man who made this entire endeavor possible. Tzimisce, the Romanian flesh-shaper.

“Yes, Sensei,” she replied, affixing her surgical mask into place, placing the AR glasses Rei had devised over her eyes. The sleeves of her scrubs had been removed, and with a brief exertion of will, her arms shifted, growing chitinous, segmented, each finger tipped with an infinitesimally small, gripping claw. “Neteto-sensei, please anesthetize the patient. Setsuna, please notify Dr. Sola that Operating Room 7 is prepared for scouring.”

“Understood,” both of them nodded, and went about their tasks. A gas mask was affixed to Tensei’s face, the anesthesiologist slowly counting him down from 10. Behind her, Tzimisce set the OR speakers to play classical music. A glance at the observation theater revealed the hospital administrator, as well as multiple top cerebrospinal surgeon’s from across Japan, ready to see an operation would never have been possible without the right confluence of factors.

“Scouring coming, please close your eyes.” Everybody in the OR complied, and a flash of heat ran across Kimiko’s skin. Michelle Sola, Quirk: Scour. It was one of the most dangerous Quirks she had ever come across, creating expansive zones inimical to life below a certain level of complexity. With incredible practice, she managed to control the effects to only killing specific organisms, specifically fungal, bacterial, and viral phages that could litter the area. Her services were normally impossible to acquire, preferring to put her skills to use alongside Tzimisce in Doctors Without Borders.

But when the man had asked for his colleague, she had secured the first transport out of Yemen and come running.

“Patient is under,” Neteto-sensei stated, eyes on his instruments. “I’ll be monitoring constantly. I’m fairly certain how his Quirk will affect anesthesia, but I just want to be certain, especially since we can’t use a nerve block here.”

“Right. Rei-san, initialize the equipment. Dr. Tzimisce, I’m ready.”

“Indeed.” Kimiko sat upon a stool, with Tzimisce sat behind her, his ungloved hand on the back of her neck. The tingling sensation from his hand had made her horribly anxious and ill the first time she’d felt it, but now, she knew what to expect. She took a deep breath, steeled her nerves, focused in.
And her eyes changed. Entire wavelengths of light blossomed before her, ultraviolet, infrared, polarized, these spectrums came to life before her. The mantis shrimp’s visual range was second to none, though its visual acuity left much to be desired. That was where the fine-tuned, tight control of her Quirk came in, and the fuzziness faded away as she directly altered the refraction of her eyes’ lenses.

At the same time, the display built into the lenses of the glasses initialized, a wire-frame outline of Iida Tensei’s entire nervous system blossoming to life before her eyes. Simulated nervous impulses ran from his brain down his spine, out to the rest of his body, but any of them trying to travel down his spine terminated abruptly at the point of severance.

“And so we begin.” Kimiko brought one transformed arm to the surgical tray, and removed a scalpel. The nurse came over to sterilize the surface of Tensei’s back until the anesthesiologist pulled him back. “Nurse Kouma, the OR has already been sterilized better than any iodine wash ever would.”

“R-right, sorry,” the nurse said, stepping back with what Kimiko guessed was a sheepish expression, though it was hard to tell underneath the hairnet, hat, and mask.

“Do not fret, few people are used to Dr. Sola’s operating theaters,” Tzimisce placated. “Now, if you would, Doctor?”

“Yes. Making the incision.” Kimiko brought the scalpel down, the almost mechanical movement of her shifted limbs cutting with nearly robotic precision. What she lost in exactness she regained in closeness, a direct interaction that no surgical robot could match. Moments later, Iida Tensei’s spinal column was exposed, and Kimiko placed the scalpel aside, which the nurse retrieved and disposed of. “Tzimisce.”

“Yes. Make contact.” At his direction, Kimiko lowered her claw-hand to directly touch the vertebra, and before her eyes, a perfectly square section of bone shifted, a tiny spike growing from the top for her to grip as it pulled away from the rest. With careful movements, she extricated the square and placed it on a tray, which the nurse retrieved for preservation, and exposed Iida Tensei’s severed spinal cord to the world.

“Rei-san.”

“Magnifying.”

That small square of exposed spinal cord bloomed, the right lens of the augmented reality lenses blacking out, replaced with a magnified version of what Kimiko was seeing. So powerful was the magnification that she could see every individual nerve ending, the frayed edges and damage along the ends. It was only her Quirk, the changes to her eyes that let her properly take in the full image, the AR interface highlighting each nerve ending such that each was its own wavelength, distinct from any other nerve.

Calming herself, Kimiko reached down, placing the finest extrusion of each clawed hand on the exact same nerve, matching the wavelengths down to the fraction of a nanometer thanks to Hatsume Rei’s interface.

“Hold steady,” Tzimisce said, voice calm and controlled. As Kimiko watched, the severed ends of the nerve crossed the microns-thin gap, connecting, fusing together. “Miss Rei, if you would simulate?”
Kimiko watched with bated breath as the simulated nervous impulse ran down to Tensei’s spine, where they terminated at the cut.

All but one, which traveled down his spine, and to the tip of his big toe.

“It worked,” she said, voice level. “Now, let’s continue.”

They were in for a long operation, after all.

* * * * *

“Allright, everything seems to be in order.” The doctor pulled the stethoscope away from his chest, and Bakugou Katsuki took the opportunity to button his shirt back up. It was somewhat more difficult to do with one arm hanging in a sling, but he knew better than to try and ignore a doctor’s orders. Very few things scared Bakugou. One of them was his mother when she was angry. But another was a doctor that was angry or disappointed with you.

“Just get Recovery Girl to look at that once you’re back at UA, alright? And be careful not to bump into anything!”

Bakugou muttered a thanks and did his best to offer a polite smile. The doctor nodded, bowed, and left the room. Once she left, and he finished buttoning up his shirt, he sat.

And he thought.

He’d known for a while now what it meant to face down a villain; he couldn’t forget his encounter with that slime villain if he tried, and the same was true with the fiasco that was Class 1-A’s visit to USJ. But Bakugou would be hard-pressed to deny that there was a difference, an immutable something to that… that thing. Bakugou wouldn’t call him a man.

No man gets the lion’s share of his major organs vaporized and just walks it off. Three seconds, that’s how long it took to heal. Three seconds. Nothing Bakugou could have done to the Wendigo would have stopped him for more than a few moments at best. Maybe if he’d aimed for the head?… no, he realized. The hole in the Wendigo’s sternum had shown his spine, completely unscathed and untouched. If the strongest, most focused explosion he’d ever unleashed hadn’t even scuffed his spinal column, there was no way he was doing any damage to the monster’s skull.

But more than that, more than the villain’s presence, had been the effect he inspired. A hush had fallen over everybody. Most backed away.

And Kanna froze.

Bakugou had seen that exact reaction before. When somebody was terrified, and they wanted to do
something, anything. To run, to fight, to hide. But they couldn’t, because their own legs wouldn’t listen. They shook like a leaf, shuddering in a cold wind only they could feel. They stood there, completely caught in the headlights, until somebody else galvanized them. Yes, Bakugou Katsuki had seen that reaction before. He’d seen it many, many times over the years.

And that horrified him. The thought that—

“Hakamata!”

Bakugou Katsuki stilled, eyes going wide. He knew that voice, oh how he knew that voice. It haunted his waking hours. It plagued his nightmares.

And it greeted him every time he got home from school.

Carefully, cautiously, and with great concern for his personal well-being, Bakugou poked his head out from his hospital room and glanced around the corner. What greeted him was the sight of his mother, short woman that she was, had Best Jeanist backed up against a wall, desperately looking for an escape. His eyes alighted onto Bakugou, and hope shone for the briefest of moments before Jeanist’s brain caught up, and realized that the young man he’d hoped would be able to help him was his current nightmare’s son.

“Is there something I can help you with, Bakugou Mitsuki-san?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Mitsuki replied, venom dripping from her every word. “Maybe you can explain why I had to be notified by a text message that my only child was in the hospital with a fucking hole in his shoulder?”

“W-well, I—”

“Or maybe you’d like to explain the follow-up that proclaimed that nearly dying was, and I quote, ‘the end to the only good day of this shit internship’?”

“That’s—”

“Oh or perhaps you’d like to explain why my son, the son of one of your rivals and competitors, has been in the media in a rather unflattering light?” Mitsuki leaned forward, a finger pressed into Jeanist’s chest, just beneath the hollow of his throat. “I’ve always thought you were a good, if infuriating man, Hakamata. But I sincerely hope that you didn’t waste my son’s time and sabotage his career in some horrifically misguided attempt to get one over on a competitor. A competitor, might I add, whose biggest market share you just announced last night that you’re breaking into?”

Silence. Bakugou could see a trickle of sweat dripping down Jeanist’s nose. A beat passed where nobody moved, his mother’s accusatory finger still digging into the Pro Hero’s chest.

“… on some, brief reflection—” Mitsuki snorted, forcing Jeanist to collect his thoughts. “On reflection, I can see where this impression came from. Rest assured, this was not my intention.”

“I’ve been keeping track of you this week,” she said. “Your routes. Your actions. For the number three hero, you had a remarkably sedate week, and don’t insult me by saying that shit wasn’t on purpose.”

“Your son is only a first year—”
“A first year who put on a better performance at that goddamn Sports Festival than most of the top thirty pros could have, and don’t lie to me and say you believe otherwise. You and I both know the answer to that one. So why the fuck were you wasting his time, if not to sabotage him? Or sabotage me through him?”

Jeanist deflated. “What do you want, Mitsuki.”

"Want?" Mitsuki scoffed. "Shit, Hakamata, that was just to get you to listen, and now that I have your attention, here's what I gotta say: I understand what you were trying to do for Katsuki. He's a little shit, and needs a serious attitude adjustment, I know; believe me I've tried, but the more I see, the more I know it can't be me. Now, the way you were trying to do it? Shit, I know you really believe it, but clothes don't make the man. You weren't gonna do anything by being cute and subtle about it, or anything skin-deep like that. Katsuki's a smart kid, but for shit like this, you have to beat him over the fucking head with it, you hear? Show him a fuck-up, tell him it's a fuck-up, and then tell him to fix it on his own."

"And then when he fails, show him how to do it right," Jeanist murmured. "I see... it would appear I have done a disservice by your son." He looked at her, shoulders slumping. "I'll have to make amends."

"Just put in a good word for Katsuki with someone more like him... though I won't say no to some good jeans." Mitsuki turned around, a satisfied smile on her face. “C'mon Katsuki, let’s get the fuck outta here.”

“Need to get meds from the pharmacy,” he grumbled, holding up a prescription the doctor had given him the day before. “Antibiotics and painkillers. This shit hurts.” Bakugou resisted the urge to curse at his mother. That shit may fly in the privacy of their own home, but in public? Not only no, but hell no.

“Alright, sit your ass back down, I’ll go get it.” Mitsuki took the prescriptions and ruffled his hair while she did, which he ineffectually slapped away with one hand. As she walked off, Bakugou spared a glance for Best Jeanist. The man looked like he wanted to say something… but Bakugou was in no mood to hear it. He went back into his hospital room, sat down on the bed, and fiddled with his phone.

Just him and his thoughts, for the moment. The thoughts that had plagued him over the past day, running circles in his head.

His thumb flicked over the screen, running down his contacts list. Before he could think twice about it and convince himself otherwise, he typed out a message, and sent it off.

* * * *

On the other side of Tokyo, many miles away, Midoriya Izuku opened his phone to see a new text
message. And then he pinched himself, because he had to be dreaming. But it wasn’t a dream. It was real.

Kacchan
> Can we talk?

* * * * *

He’d bolted the moment the alert reached his phone.

Manual took the steps two at a time, racing to the third floor as quickly as he could. The alarm wasn’t going off, a precaution to prevent panic in the hospital below, but that was a small mercy far outweighed by the gravity of the situation. It had been maybe two minutes since the alert reached him. Two minutes in which everyone could have died.

Emerging from the stairwell at the third floor landing, he raced to room 303, standing in the doorway as he looked on in dread. The first thing he felt was relief.

The second was horror.

“What did you do...?”

Standing there, remnants of the hospital restraints in his hands, was Native. He stood, staring out the window. The window that should have been barred.

The window that now stood bare, the balmy, humid air blowing in from outside.

“I’m sorry. This is why they said not to tell you: that you wouldn’t understand,” Native said, turning now to look at him. Manual wanted to flinch, seeing those eyes, the steel in them. “It had to be done, Mizushima.”

And at the paper he held in his outstretched hand.

“You—you!” Manual pushed past Native to stare out the window, over the rooftops of Hosu. He wanted to believe that the man couldn’t have gone far. But deep down, in his heart of hearts, he knew. He tore the paper from Native’s hand. Scanned it.

Damn them... gods damn them!

“All units,” he said, yelling into the radio at his shoulder. “Maximum priority alert!

“S-class villain Stain has escaped!”
Been a while, I know. Law school is BUSY! But hey, it's Spring Break, so have a chap.
Chapter Notes

I know it's not White Day yet, not until Thursday, but I already have plans on Thursday and don't want to forget to put this up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[Be Mine, Valentine]

“So, Valentine’s day is coming up next Thursday, yeah?” Tohru said, looking at the rest of us. Or at least I think she was, it’s kind of hard to tell when you can’t see her… anything, really. And that tank top meant I couldn’t even tell where her arms were. “Anyone have something special planned? Date night, honmei choco, you know?”

I know I couldn’t see her eyes, but I just knew she was giving me a look. And then I felt the eyes leave me as Uraraka began squirming, followed by a pair of flat looks from Jirou and Momo. And before anyone asks, yes they’re still together, and Jirou is on Momo’s lap.

“What’s the deal with honmei choco anyway?” Kaminari asked. “I mean, I know the gist, you give it to someone you like. But is there anything more to it, really?” Yeah, I thought it was a bit weird that Kaminari was with us girls instead of spending time with Kirishima and Sero, but he is Jirou’s best friend. I guess he’s that one guy with the particular distinction of being in the girls’ inner circle, lucky him. Plus we all knew that for all he occasionally seemed perverted, if actually given the chance to act one those impulses, he would turn away or decline. The Swimming Pool Debacle was a crisis all its own, though it was well and truly surprising just how good Kaminari is at de-escalating a tense situation.

“You’re supposed to actually hand-make it,” Mina explained for him. “Like, giri choco you can just buy from a store and give somebody, and even then a lot of places are telling women to leave even that for special people. Heck, my mom’s office even sent out a memo saying that if a woman feels like she’s being pressured to give giri choco just to score brownie points with a supervisor to report them to HR, because some bosses are using it to try and see who they want to promote!”

“Honmei choco though,” Momo picked up for her, “is something you make with one specific person in mind, and nobody else. It’s something special, a declaration of care and affection.” She looked at Jirou in her lap, and favored her with a soft smile. “Of course, it doesn’t have to necessarily be chocolate, but that’s the tradition.”

“But it does have to be something you make,” I groused, curling up further into the plush armchair I’d picked for myself.

“If you’d like some help?” Tohru offered.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s… look. We all know I’m a horrible cook. I just need to find a recipe that’s just about idiot-proof, and so simple that Aizawa-sensei could do it without coffee.”
“What’s this about me?” All of us looked up from our seated positions to see Aizawa-sensei coming out of the kitchen, a fresh mug of coffee in hand. His hair was pulled up in a ponytail and he had simple lounging clothes on, but he still held himself with that comfortable readiness that indicated he was a moment away from springing into action.

“It was nothing, sensei!” Uraraka said, hands up in an almost placating gesture. “We were just, um, saying how much you like your coffee!”

“You don’t have to try and lie,” he said. “I heard the whole conversation. Yaseiki.” He glanced my direction.

“Yes, sensei?” I asked.

“If you’re going to use the kitchen, let me know when so I can have Satou supervise you.”

My cheeks flushed with embarrassment, but I just nodded. There was no way I was getting out of this one, not with how legendarily bad I was at cooking. I mean, you can only turn instant ramen into a scorched mush once before people decide that it’s best for somebody to do even that simple task for you. Note I said instant ramen, not cup ramen. Cup ramen is fine. I’ve said it before, and I’ve said it again: my problems begin when I have to apply heat. It’s just… I can’t believe Aizawa-sensei would force somebody to actually supervise me, and for it to be Satou of… all… people.

… Aizawa-sensei, I think I love you.

* * * * *

Katsuki is a wonderful, attentive boyfriend, but he does occasionally have issues with jealousy. I honestly don’t blame him, we’re still teenagers, and it’s more a hormonal thing than any personality quirk. But that doesn’t make it any easier when I have to talk with another boy if he happens to be around.

Which is why I got Pony and Ibara to round up a few of the boys from 1-B and get them to challenge Katsuki and his friends to some video games over at 1-B’s dorm. All it took was a couple well-placed comments about how Sero is pretty much undefeated in kart racing games, and that Kaminari is a wiz kid at fighting games, and Awase, Shishida, and Kuroiro whipped themselves up into a frothing frenzy of friendly rivalry.

What this meant is I had a few hours where Katsuki couldn’t come into the kitchen and stumble across what I was up to. So I took my chance, went up the stairs, and knocked on the door to Satou’s room.

“One moment!” I heard him yell from inside. An egg timer went off maybe five seconds later, and I heard him opening the door to his little miniature oven. The smell hit me mere moments later, and I had to put a hand over my mouth and swallow to keep the drool from leaking out. The door opened a moment later, and my eyes went down to the hot tray still clutched in one of Satou’s oven-mitt clad hands. “Oh, Yaseiki-san! Aizawa-sensei said you might be by—oh, one second!” He went back into his dorm room, but kept the door open for me to enter if I so pleased, and set the tray down on top of a wire rack. “The cookies will be cooled enough to eat in five to ten minutes if you want one?”

“I’d suggest bringing those down to the common area, but setting a few aside before Tohru eats them
all,” I said, eyes still fixed on the cookies. “Anyways, um… I was wondering. I had an idea for what I want to make for Valentine’s, and I have a recipe, but, um…” I trailed off, looking away.

“Do you already have the ingredients?” Satou asked. I nodded. “I’ll meet you downstairs then! Should I bring the stand mixer?”

“Oh, that would make things so much faster,” I said. “And um, do you happen to have parchment paper handy? I got some at the store, but… I sorta lost it in my dorm room.” I blushed. “Somehow. I don’t know. I think maybe it’s under a teddy bear.”

“That still leaves thirty possible places to look,” Satou deadpanned.

“Yes, yes, I have a teddy bear obsession, I know,” I waved him off. “Meet you downstairs in five to ten?”

“Yes! Oh, grab a cookie on your way out!” He grabbed a spatula and a paper towel, and lifted one fresh, soft, melty cookie onto the paper towel, which he handed to me. “Wait a minute before eating though!”

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“Okay.” Satou stood before the granite kitchen countertop, an apron wrapped around him, eyes on me. “Before we do anything, make sure you have everything set up and set out. Springform pan?”

“Check,” I said.

“Double boiler?”

“Check,” I pointed at the stove.

“Ingredients, separated by wet and dry?”

“And eggs set aside for when they’re needed.”

“Food processor?”

“Ready to go.”

“Alright,” Satou nodded. “Before anything else, set the oven to 175C so it can pre-heat.” I walked over to the oven, set the temperature… and paused. “Convection bake,” he supplied.

“Right, that’s done,” I said. “Next up, graham crackers into the food processor, and melt the butter.” I went to grab the butter, but Satou put a hand around my wrist and guided me back to the graham crackers. “Fine, fine,” I grumbled, but obliged. With a very sloppy handling of the packaged crackers, I managed to get them decently crumbly before ever entering the food processor, then secured the lid and pulsed it several times. Satou came over with melted butter in a small glass bowl, and I opened up the top so he could pour that inside. With the lid of the food processor back on, I pulsed it a bit more before letting it go for a good twenty seconds.

“Alright, bring it over here,” Satou said, holding up the freshly parchment-papered springform pan. I
took the bowl off of the food processor and removed the blade, wiping any excess crumbs off with a rubber scraper (or spatula... why are there two kitchen utensils that are different, but both sometimes called spatulas?) before emptying the entire contents into the bottom of the springform pan. Satou handed me a wide-bottomed glass, and I rolled crumbs onto the sides of the pan before pressing down what was left into a cohesive bottom layer.

“Alright, so that’s ready for a dry bake once the oven’s heated, right?” I asked. “What next while we wait?”

“I’ll get it into the oven once ready and keep an eye on it, so get the cream cheese into the mixing bowl.” Satou pointed to the stand mixer, and the room-temp packets of cream cheese I’d gotten that morning... which hadn’t been cheap, unfortunately. “Get all of those in there and mix on medium for two to three minutes, then start to add the sugar. Slowly, though!”

I followed Satou’s directions to the letter, very thankful that there was zero heat or cooking to be applied to the majority of the process here. The cream cheese went into the stand mixer’s bowl, I set it on medium, and watched as it changed from four mostly cohesive blocks into a smooth, creamy mass. Then, per Satou’s directions, I mixed in the sugar a bit at a time, making sure it all came together nicely.

By the time I was done with that, the oven door had opened and closed, and Satou now turned on the stove underneath the double boiler.

“While we wait on this, let me get the vanilla bean done.” Satou grabbed a chef’s knife and a lone vanilla bean (from his personal stash, he’d turned up his nose at the vanilla extract I’d bought), which he laid on a cutting board. He made one smooth cut lengthwise before spreading the bean open, and scraping out all of the seeds and other good stuff from the inside with his knife. He came over to the mixing bowl and dropped the vanilla inside, then grabbed the dark chocolate I’d gotten and turned to the double boiler.

While he was doing that, I grabbed the next ingredient, a bit of heavy cream, and poured that into the mixing bowl. Again, this was a Satou modification that I had no idea about, but I trusted him on this. The heavy cream incorporated flawlessly, and I could also see the tiny dark spots of the vanilla bean bits in the mixture.

“Raise the mixer!” Satou said suddenly, coming over from the stovetop. I did as he asked, and he quickly poured the molten chocolate mixture into the bowl before lowering the mixer and setting it to medium speed. “Alright, I’m going to get the pan out of the oven, wait two minutes and then add the eggs.”

“One at a time, right?” I asked.

“And a minute and a half between each egg!” Satou added at the end. He pulled the springform pan out of the oven and set it on a wire rack to cool back off, and I could already smell the graham cracker crust from over here.

I followed Satou’s directions to the letter: wait two minutes, add an egg, let mix in for a minute and a half, then add the next. This process repeated until I’d deposited four eggs into the mixing bowl, and Satou came over to inspect my work. He had a small scraper, which he dipped into the mixture, and scooped a bit off with one pinky finger to take a taste.

“I know you keep saying your issue with cooking is heat, but I don’t think I believed it until just
“Now,” he said. “This tastes excellent. But Aizawa-sensei said to not let you touch the oven or stove, so…” Satou shrugged, apologetic.

“Yeah, I know,” I sighed. “I think we’d all rather not have to wait for Backdraft or the fire department to get all the way over here to put out the fire.”

“But wouldn’t the sprinklers—”

“The last three times I set fire to a kitchen, it was a grease fire,” I interrupted him. “And I started them all three different ways, so… I think it just may be something about me.”

“If you want, I could try to give you cooking lessons?” Satou offered, to which I smiled.

“That’s sweet, but also not fair for me to ask of you,” I said. “It’s not your job to fix my abysmal cooking skills.” Satou slumped, nodding in agreement. Then he looked to the pan and perked up.

“Oh, time to pour!” He gestured to the stand mixer, which I raised out of the bowl, and after scraping most of the mix off of the paddle I unhooked the bowl from the mixer and brought it over. Satou used his scraper to get out those pesky bits of the mixture that wanted to stay in the bowl, and then we had a very ready springform pan, set to go into the oven. “Yaseiki-san, could you get the aluminum foil for me?” Satou asked next.

“Where does it go?” I asked.

“Around the bottom of the pan.” Satou brought another, larger pan to the sink, and filled it up a short ways with water. I blinked, but did as he asked, surrounding the bottom of the springform pan in a layer of foil, making sure there were no tears or other issues with a watertight seal. Satou came over and put his larger pan down, and I set the springform inside, letting it sit in the water. He went over to the sink and grabbed a cup, then poured just a tiny bit more into the pan. “Open the oven for me?” I did as Satou asked, and he slipped the cheesecake into the oven.

“So, how long does it do its thing?” I asked.

“Set a timer for seventy-five minutes,” he told me, “then come back and turn the oven off, but leave the cheesecake inside. Set the timer for seventy-five minutes again, then get the cake out, cover it in aluminum foil, and put it in the fridge.”

“Roger that,” I said.

“I’m still going to supervise to make sure nothing weird happens,” Satou said, to which I crossed my arms and pouted.

It’s a good thing he did though, because after that first seventy-five minutes, I accidentally set the oven to broil instead of turning it off.

Oops.

Thursday arrived, and with it, so too came Valentine’s Day. I had in my hands a much, much larger
parcel than any of the other girls I could see walking into UA, and received more than a few confused looks from my classmates. After all, honmei choco is usually just something small, like truffles, or chocolate in a specific shape. What I had with me was massive, much more so than you would expect.

It was also in an insulated bag meant to keep it cold, borrowed from Satou, whose generosity I am coming to realize knows little to no bounds.

Everyone sat down for homeroom with Aizawa-sensei, who quickly walked up to the front, gave us all a look, and sighed.

“We’re going to get this out of the way now. Girls, give out your giri choco first.” All of us stood up, and I grabbed a few small things from my bag. These ended up on Tenya’s, Midoriya’s, Kaminari’s, and Satou’s desks: one for a friend, two to keep quiet, and a fourth to give thanks.

Eventually we all sat down, and I was rather unsurprised to see that Midoriya and Satou had the largest piles of giri choco on their desk. Midoriya’s just a likable person, and Satou has been keeping us girls furnished in sweet treats since the day we moved in.

“And if you have a honmei choco to give, do that now,” Aizawa-sensei said. Momo and Jirou immediately turned towards each other, and did a very cute display. I couldn’t see what they’d done for each other, but the ‘aww…’ reactions of everyone else in class was more than enough to guess it was super sweet.

Well, let me correct that. The reactions of almost everyone in class, because Uraraka was currently frozen in front of Midoriya, who was also frozen, with her honmei choco sitting between them. I figured it would take two minutes or so for them to unfreeze, but in the meantime, I really just wish they would kiss already.

But now, it was time to completely and utterly upstage everyone. I brought out my big bundle, opened the velcro, and slid it over Katsuki’s left shoulder to sit on the desk.

It was a chocolate cheesecake, with raspberry sauce in the shape of a heart, and above that spelling out “Happy Valentine’s Day Katsuki” in white chocolate icing. I’d needed Satou to draw the heart for me, but the English had to be my own… well, hand-piping, I guess would be the way to put it.

Katsuki looked at it, and just sort of stilled. Then he looked back up at me, eyes very wide.

I just smiled, wrapping my arms around him.

“Aishiteru (I love you), Katsuki. Happy Valentine’s Day.”

The next thing I knew, my back was pressing against the window, and Katsuki was kissing me for all he was worth. I clasped one of his hands with my own, and pressed tighter against his—

“Bakugou! Yaseiki!” The two of us broke apart, flushing in embarrassment as we looked to both Aizawa-sensei and the rest of the class. “You both know better than to do that in class. That’ll be detention. Or…” Aizawa-sensei smiled, holding up a cake knife that I am absolutely, one hundred percent really fucking sure he hadn’t had with him when we got in the room! “You can share a slice with me.”

“I get the first slice,” Katsuki said, and picked up the cheesecake defensively. “You can have some
Aizawa-sensei ended up taking the slice that said “Day” on it. The message remained more or less intact.

So at least there was that.

* * * * *

“Did you mean it?” Katsuki asked suddenly. I looked up at him, but overall refused to get off of the comfiest armchair pillow ever. “When you said you… that you—”

“That I love you?” I asked. He nodded, shakily, and I could feel his hand grip tighter onto mine. “Yes Katsuki, I do.”

“I—”

“You don’t have to say it back right now,” I interrupted, putting a finger to his mouth, “just because I said it. If you’re not ready, that’s fine. I’ll wait.” I favored him with a smile before leaning back against him. “Just don’t keep a girl waiting too long, ‘kay?”

“… M’kay,” he said, wrapping his arms around me and lacing his fingers between mine. “Dunno why you like this movie, it’s shit.”

“Oh come on, you Philistine,” I said. “Cabin in the Woods is a great horror comedy.”

“It’s cliche as fuck,” he said in response.

About an hour and a half later, Katsuki gave a murmur.

“Oh. The cliche bullshit was on purpose the whole time, wasn’t it?”

“Yes!” I said, popping the ‘p’.

“… got any more movies like that?”

“Oh, honey.” I gave him a quick peck on the cheek, and grabbed the remote. “You have asked the right question.”

* * * * *

* * * * *

[As the Driven Snow]

Bakugou Katsuki was not a young man prone to panic, or at least he liked to think he wasn’t. He’d always had the self-impression that even if he was riled up, furious, and hot-headed on the outside, he could remain cool, calm, and collected internally. It was a difficult dichotomy to maintain, and in
all fairness, he wasn’t always successful at maintaining that separation.

One of those times was right now. He was anxious, pacing, worrying. A quick look at the calendar sent his anxiety spiking again, because damn it, he didn’t know what to do.

White Day was less than a week away, and he hadn’t managed to come up with anything to get for Kanna!

He’d tried asking his dad, but limp fish that he was, his suggestion fucking sucked. Come on, white chocolate roses? Chocolate was for Valentine’s, and plus that was lazy as hell! He couldn’t just go out and buy a random something after she’d gone out of her way to cook, to bake for him. Katsuki knew what kind of a terror Kanna was in a kitchen, he knew how difficult it was for her to get anything done in there. And yet she’d still buckled down and made something incredible… and all of that just for him.

So yes, he was panicking. And he didn’t know what to do. So Bakugou swallowed his pride, and did the one thing he hadn’t wanted to.

He asked for ideas, and he asked for help.

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“Why not cook for her?” Sero asked, kicking the soccer ball over towards Kaminari.

“Are you kidding?” Bakugou asked, tone incredulous. “We all know she’s shit at it, it might look like I’m saying I’m a better cook!”

“He’s got a bit of a point,” Kirishima said, receiving the ball from Kaminari, which he kicked into the air and dribbled on his knees. “I mean, my main thought was another teddy bear, but she’s got, what, twenty of those?”

“Thirty-three here,” Bakugou corrected, bouncing the ball off the top of his head after Kirishima hit it his way, then off his shoulders and down to balancing on his ankle. “Plus, she’s already got a polar bear, and it’s more store-bought shit. That’s not personal enough.”

“What about a collage?” Kaminari supplied. The other three boys stopped to look at him, the ball still balanced precariously on Katsuki’s ankle. “I mean, you could probably find a bunch of good photos of you two, and besides isn’t your one-year anniversary, like, a month and a half away?” He blinked for a moment, mouth dropping open. “Oh wow, you two have been together almost that long, yeesh. Like, don’t get me wrong it’s great that it has, but I didn’t expect any of our first relationships to last so much time!”

“That’s…” Bakugou thought quietly to himself, passing the ball back off to Sero so it could get back into rotation. Fuck, Kaminari actually had a really good idea. It wasn’t something store-bought, it was personal, and there were a ton of photos he could pull from. “Think Ashido’s still got the pics from when she spied on our date?” Bakugou asked.

“Dude, I still have them,” Kaminari said. “Oh, also? You should ask Tsu-chan for pictures, I know she’s the one who usually takes them in their group. And ask Pony-chan, cause I bet she has some too.”
“Right, yeah,” Bakugou murmured. “I’m gonna go get started on this shit.”

“Alright, peace Bakugou!” Kirishima said, waving as he kicked the soccer ball higher and higher before bouncing it off his head and towards Kaminari.

Bakugou offered a grin, then turned back towards the dorms. He had a few people to track down.

… but first, he needed to go buy some materials.

* * * * *

“You’ve been acting anxious all day,” I said while looking at Katsuki. “I know it’s White Day, but still, you need to relax a bit.”

“Hard to when every other guy is doing his thing in front of everyone, and I keep getting these looks saying it’s my fucking turn now,” Katsuki groused. “What if I want it to be private?”

“Well, we’re in private now,” I said, gesturing to his dorm room. “I know you’ve had something special planned, so… you have me at your pleasure!” I sat down on his bed and crossed my legs, eagerly awaiting whatever he had in store with a smile.

“Right, yeah,” he said, one hand rubbing the back of his head. Katsuki was much more flustered than I’m used to seeing him… but I honestly can’t blame him. This was probably the first White Day where he actually had a girlfriend, and wasn’t just giving stuff to random girls. “So, I actually asked around for ideas, cause I hadn’t a fucking clue what to do, and got the suggestion to do a collage of sorts.” He opened up his closet, and pulled out a large, rectangular frame. “And I made this.”

He pulled away the protective plastic sheeting, and I couldn’t help but gasp.

At the top, in bold white letters on a black background, it read “ONE YEAR WITH YOU”. Below that was the number one in print, but the number itself was made up of many, many different pictures, all coming together to form that one shape.

I got up off of his bed and stepped closer, then knelt down in front of the frame to inspect it. The very first image, at the tip of the one, looked to be off of a CCTV camera. I’d recognize that location anywhere: it was the day that I’d talked with Principal Nedzu and Aizawa-sensei about who and what I was, and then after I’d finished, Nedzu had called in someone else. I’d almost forgotten that the ‘someone else’ he’d called in was Katsuki.

Next to that was another CCTV image, this time from our first day in Class 1-A, when Katsuki and I were the first to arrive. I could see myself standing in front of him, arms crossed judgmentally, one eyebrow raised and an amused half-smirk on my face.

Well don’t you just look comfortable, small white text said next to that image, standing out against the dark background. It was a greeting I still shared with Katsuki when one of us showed up, a sort of personalized ‘hey, it’s me’ shared between us now.

Then it was a picture of two days after Mason had broken in, when Katsuki stopped me at the door and ruffled my hair. I don’t know who managed to get that picture, but I think the dumbfounded
expression on my face, next to his soft smile, spoke volumes.

The next image, I think has to have come from Aizawa-sensei. It was the two of us out on the training field, arms crossed over my chest and Katsuki’s face somewhere between triumph and embarrassment, on the day when Aizawa-sensei had us practicing Quirkless sparring. I’d told Katsuki to punch me in the boob, and credit to him, he had. It hurt, and he’d been a little uncomfortable with it, but in spite of the pain I hadn’t been able to help but smiling because hey, he actually listened!

And then we were on the bus to USJ. The two of us in each other’s faces, at each other’s throats, teeth bared and brows furrowed and temper practically oozing off of us.

“It’s funny to look at us then as compared to now,” I said, smiling. There was a weird, fluttering feeling in my chest, a warmth that I couldn’t quite place.

“Especially given some of this shit,” he said, pointing now to a picture of when I was chasing him around Cementoss’s impromptu stone bleachers, bear arms bared and ready to hug the life out of Katsuki. “Guess Sensei was right when he said to stop flirting, huh?”

“Pretty sure neither of us realized it at the time,” I said, giggling a little.

The end of our match in the Sports Fest came next, with Katsuki taking me off the field in a bridal carry. We didn’t actually learn this until later, but that, alongside an image of Midoriya and Todoroki’s final clash, came to be two of the images used in UA’s promotional materials for this coming year’s application cycle.

And then it was a picture of us on our date, right at the end, where I’d said ‘screw it’ and kissed him.

“That was my first kiss, you know,” he said, voice soft.

“Yeah.” I leaned over and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “It was mine too.”

There were so many pictures, little moments of our relationship captured in time. The pair of us on the train to our internships, hands laced together. A professional image of Katsuki putting the corsage on my wrist, his soft smile contrasting my clear relief. Katsuki and me asleep on the couch in mine and Pony’s apartment, Pony herself visible in the corner of the image with a smile and a wink. The shared faces of success after our respective final exams, sitting on the ground as we panted with exhaustion writ large on our faces.

The hospital, after our disastrous excursion to the Pussycats’ Forest Lodge.

“Can’t have the high points without the lows, can we?” I asked, tracing my fingers over the image: Katsuki sitting by my bed, roughed-up and ragged as he sat beside the bed, both his hands clasped around mine as I lay there, insensate and unconscious.

“Reminds us to make the good times last,” he said, arm resting over my shoulder as he pulled me in tight.

We looked at the rest of the photos together, heads pressed close. Katsuki showing off his new ‘super move’, and my face warring between being unimpressed and wanting to give him a compliment for a clearly good idea. The two of us smiling as we showed our new provisional licenses to the camera, him dusty, dirty, and a bit singed, me tousled and scorched around the edges.
“That was a dirty trick with the license exam and you know it,” he said, nudging me.

“Too bad, so sad!~” I sing-songed back at him.

Katsuki and me, in front of both our bosses, with our first real villain take-down between us. An image from UA’s Culture Festival, the microphone and bass guitar swinging between Jirou and me as Katsuki juggled his drumsticks behind us. Another pair, one of Katsuki holding me up, another of me holding him up. A picture of me in his bed after Christmas, my hand clasped tight around the pendant he’d gotten me.

“Still wear it every day,” I said, hand reaching to fiddle with the only jewelery I regularly wore.

“I do hope you take it off when your boss makes you go for a swim,” Katsuki says, tone playful.

“Of course I do!” I say, giving him a small slap on the arm.

The final picture in the array was one of the two of us, snoozing on one of the armchairs in the common area lounge. My arms were wrapped around one of Katsuki’s, fingers twined with his, while his free hand was around my shoulders, slightly tangled up in my hair. Kirishima was in the process of draping a blanket over the two of us, though you could only barely see him in frame. I’m not sure who took this photo, but it was perfect.

“Katsuki,” I turned to him, feeling a heat building behind my eyes. My cheeks had begun to hurt from the uncontrollable smile I’d had for the past fifteen minutes. “This is, it’s—”

“Aishiteru (I love you), Kanna.” My breath caught in my throat. “Happy White Day.”

I could feel the first tear spill from the corner of my eye.


He pulled me into a close embrace, and we kissed. It was brief, but it was tender, and there was a sense of emotion in it that was unmatched.

“I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so. Those of you who don’t have any grounding in the Japanese language are probably a bit confused, so I’m going to give a very brief lesson in Japanese.

Why is saying ‘aishiteru’ a big deal?

There are three (3) different ways to say “I love you” in Japanese, and each one denotes a different level of seriousness. The first, and lowest level of seriousness, is “daisuki”, which translates most literally as “great/big like”, and is essentially the first stage of love. Most relationships will end before they ever get past this, and it also encompasses “hatsukoi” (first love), puppy love, really strong crushes, etc.
The second way is “aishiteru”, which… I believe the closest thing to a literal translation is “being in the process of doing love”. Yes, it’s a little silly, but it’s meant to connote a deeper love than “daisuki”. When a relationship is getting serious, this is what you’ll get.

The third way is “koishiteru”, and I don’t actually know the literal translation for this one, but the connotation is essentially “I give my heart to you”. This is the deepest, most powerful, most sincere way to say that you love somebody. It also has a connotation of “I will love you for the rest of my days”, so it’s the one you’d likely hear at a marriage proposal.

Now, your average high school relationship will not get past “daisuki”, so for Kanna and Katsuki to have progressed to “aishiteru” is, emotionally speaking, a big deal. It’s generally a sign of a longer-lasting, stable relationship, or at the very least one that’s stood the first few tests of time.

Anyway, this was your brief little lesson, hope you enjoyed!
Chapter Sixty-Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I took one more look around the room that had been mine for the past week. The bed, made back up and with the giant teddy bear dressed in a copy of Gang Orca’s costume perched protectively atop the pillows. The dresser and closet, drawers and shelves empty, but for a few hangers that once held some of my casual wear. The bathroom, door ajar to let the steam out after my morning shower. The television on its rotary arm, turned into the news, which was playing yet another story from last night.

A week ago, this room had been untouched, sterile. In barely a week, I felt… like it was another home. It felt just as mine as my room back in Hosu did, or the apartment in Musutafu. Maybe it was that my experiences here had held a lot of weight to them. Maybe it’s that this room felt very much like ‘me’. Or maybe that it had been made and prepared for me, by somebody who was making every effort to make me feel at home, welcome, wanted. I reached up to turn off the television, letting the room fall silent, and stood in the doorway to give it one more look.

One week. It had been so short, but at the same time, it felt like this one week had lasted for ages. But that’s just how time is, I guessed. It’s entirely a mental phenomenon. Months can pass in the blink of an eye, or a week can feel like it’s stretched on for a year. In this one week, I’d been horrified, awed, amazed, rushed, excited, frustrated… it had spread the whole gamut of emotion, from the highs to the lows.

“You know this isn’t the end, right?” I looked up to see Taiki coming down the hall. He stopped in front of the room and leaned up against the wall, arms crossed loosely over his chest. “You’re gonna be coming back here once you get that provisional license, you know. Boss is even considering sponsoring you to take it in August, instead of before your second year.”

“Taiki, I…” I paused a moment, trying to collect myself. “I know what you said. He doesn’t take people on lightly, thinks of it as an investment, etcetera. But what you’re suggesting—” I floundered, took a deep breath, and gathered my thoughts. “Taiki, if Gang Orca sponsors me for the exam, he’s staking his reputation on me. And, and after this week?” At this, I couldn’t help the self-deprecating chuckle. “I didn’t exactly acquit myself that well, really. Any help I gave was more… I don’t know,” I shrugged. “Dumb luck. He managed to get the one girl who knew the info he needed, and she was in the right place at the right time to actually help. It was luck, not anything special about me.”


“If you’re trying to drop some nuggets of sagely wisdom,” I said, deadpan, “you’re going to have to just come out and say it.”

“What he’s trying to say,” Gang Orca said in his rumbling baritone, and yes I will admit that I did jump as my giant boss showed up without any sign he was there before, “is that you’re holding yourself to too high a bar.” Orca stopped in front of Taiki and me, and picked up my suitcase with one hand before beckoning for us to follow him. “You’re still in your first semester of a hero program. UA’s work placement program has always been aimed at getting your feet wet, giving students their first taste of what heroics, as a career, is really like. And yes, normally I don’t take
students on for these.” One giant finger pressed the elevator button, and it slid open, Gang Orca letting us all in first before he followed and pressed the ground floor button. “I made an exception. With your Quirk and skill set, I felt there was much I could teach you.”

“And then your plans for the week went off the rails?” I asked.

“That would be putting it lightly.” We walked out the front door of Gang Orca’s office, and back into the aquarium. “But I feel the conversation got off track. The point is, Chimera: you may the child of Pro Heroes, but you are not there yet. And just as I do not hold you to that standard, neither should you be trying to hold yourself to it.” He put my suitcase down, which wouldn’t have been that surprising, except that we were still in the middle of the aquarium. “Now, I believe you will want a last moment with a certain somebody to your right.”

I turned to the right… and my heart melted. There was Umiko, holding the same baby penguin that I’d spent several minutes playing with on the day I arrived, and on Tuesday. Umiko held the little guy out to me, his little flipper-wings waving wildly in my direction. I scooped him up and held him close, reveling in the feel of this adorably cute, super soft and sleek bird being the best little penguin ever, yes he is, yes he is! Umiko beckoned me into the exhibit where I put Tokidoki the baby penguin down, and he ran to go knock around a little beach ball, sending it over my way.

“We have about ten minutes before you need to leave for the station,” Gang Orca rumbled. “Enjoy yourself.”

“Thanks boss,” I said, nudging the little beach ball away with my tail and watching Tokidoki waddle after it, chirping all the while. “I… thanks.”

There really wasn’t anything else to say.

Well. Other than the fact that I very nearly missed the train because I wanted “just one more minute!” of playing with the penguin. What? What do you want me to say? The penguin is adorable!

* * * * *

“Katsuki! Where do you think you’re going, young man!?”

Bakugou groaned; one foot out the fucking door, and already his mom was trying to pull him right back in. “The fuck do you care!? I’m not under house arrest or any shit like that!”

“No,” his mother admitted, stomping to meet him at the door. “But you are due for your ‘make it not hurt like a bitch’ pills, and your antibiotic!” She walked over to him with a little bowl in one hand, and a glass of water in the other. Bakugou grimaced, but took the cup, then the water, and downed his pills. *Fuck*, but he wasn’t looking forward to when this shit kicked in. He didn’t like the way it made him feel. Made his head fuzzy.

But the pain, from the damn *hole in his shoulder* that he’d have to wait until tomorrow for Recovery Girl to handle, was worse.

“And take them with you, cause I’m betting you wanna be out for a little while.” Mitsuki tucked the pill bottles into the sling holding Bakugou’s left arm, then turned him around by his good shoulder and gave him a light shove. “Now go on, get. Go do whatever’s had you in such a tizzy all day. If
you’re not back in time for dinner, I’ll have leftovers in the fridge.”

“… thanks.” Bakugou gave his mother a nod, took the pill bottles from his sling and into his pocket, then closed the door behind him.

It had been plaguing his thoughts for the past day. A niggling little worm, a thread of doubt wrapping itself around his mind. His sleep had been anything but restful, even with the meds pumped into his system to numb the pain doing everything in their power to send him off into a dreamless rest. Here he was, Bakugou Katsuki, first year student in UA’s Heroics program, winner of his year’s Sports Festival… and none of that mattered.

Because deep in the back of his mind, the thought dug in.

*Am I a bad person?*

Bakugou Katsuki liked to think of himself as a strong person. Somebody who could overcome any obstacle put in front of him. But when that obstacle was a stumbling block in his own mind, a brick wall that his very conscience kept ramming itself into, he knew that this wasn’t something he could go at alone. This was a question for which he himself may never have the answers. And the fact that he couldn’t answer the question was reason enough for him to doubt the answer that he so desperately wanted to hear, were it to come from his own mouth.

So instead, he decided that he needed to talk to the one person who could help him put these demons to rest. The one person that he knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, would never be anything less than a good person. In his time of troubles, Bakugou Katsuki chose to talk to the kindest, most generous, most truly good person he had ever known.

Bakugou pressed down on the doorbell, and waited. The door opened a moment later, two sets of eyes looking at him, one in surprise, the other in—

The other in apprehension and some fear, Bakugou noted. That lump in the pit of his stomach grew colder and heavier at the realization.

“Inko-obasan,” he greeted. “De—Izuku.” Bakugou caught himself just in time; he didn’t fail to notice the shock in Izuku’s eyes. “Can I come in?”

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“I, I heard about what happened on the news!” Inko-obasan said as she placed the cups down on the table, steam rising from the surface of the fresh green tea. “And you’re all okay now? It doesn’t still hurt, does it? I, um, I think I might have something in the medicine cabinet if you need something!”

“The docs gave me the good sh—stuff,” Bakugou said, once again censoring himself just barely in time as he withdrew the painkiller’s bottle from his pocket. “Not due for another dose for another five hours. Just uncomfortable,” he finished lamely, for lack of anything else to say. No amount of bravado over his ‘war wound’ would do him any good with Inko-obasan. Bakugou knew where Izuku’s worrywart tendencies came from, and they certainly weren’t from his absentee father.

“I know it’s maybe something you don’t want to talk about,” Inko-obasan said, voice hesitant. “But… what was it like, when it happened? I’m sorry!” She apologized again, eyes widening in
what Bakugou could only guess was embarrassment. “It’s just—you two are out there and you’re fighting, and I’m just… I,” she sighed. “I know I can’t have that same perspective, but maybe the more I know, the less… worried I’ll be. Or more worried,” she added at the end, in a tone of self-admonishment.

“It was…” Bakugou trailed off, trying to find the right words. There was nothing he could really tell Inko-obasan that wouldn’t have her worrying. “Oi, Izuku.” Izuku jumped at the sudden attention, his hand knocking against the mug of green tea, but not spilling it. “Remember USJ? When the Noumu wouldn’t stay down, even without half its body?” Izuku nodded.

“U-um, that thing was…” he trailed off. Bakugou closed his eyes, taking a deep breath before he answered.

“You couldn’t keep it down, didn’t know what kind of shit it could do, and nothing you could come up with would have any effect.” Bakugou looked down into his cup. “But at least the Noumu was too stupid to know that. At least it couldn’t talk.”

It was, on reflection, the largest difference between the Noumu and the Wendigo, Bakugou thought. Both of them were killing machines, monsters that you just couldn’t put down, that no amount of punishment could actually stop short of either throwing All Might at them, or dropping an immovable object in their path, like that scrawny German kid had when he… made a Quirk? Bakugou wasn’t sure. But that single difference, the ability to talk, to show that his foe actually had intelligence behind his actions? That he wasn’t just a mindless beast so incapable of independent thought that it was no better than a robot?

And with the portal that he came through… Bakugou suppressed a shudder. He could think about the League of Villains another time. He’d come here for a reason.

“Inko-obasan.” Bakugou turned towards her, trying to keep the furrow out of his brow. “Could Izuku and I have some privacy? There was… something I wanted to ask him about. Or talk about,” he added.

Inko-obasan looked from Izuku’s confused expression to his own resolute one. She seemed to be weighing him, and for a moment, Bakugou had the feeling that she could see deeper than just the surface, that she could even see his thoughts and feelings. This inspection went on just long enough that Bakugou wanted to start squirming under her gaze before she gave him a nod and stood up.

“ Izuku-kun, I’m going to run to the store and get what we need for katsudon. Just text me when you two are done?”

“O-okay!”

Bakugou and Izuku watched as Inko-obasan grabbed her purse, put on her shoes, and then left the apartment. Now it was just the two of them. Bakugou Katsuki looked to Midoriya Izuku.

Kacchan looked at Deku.

He nearly got up and left right then. But deep down, he knew that he had to say this. That Izuku needed to hear this… and that the boy Izuku called Kacchan needed to know.

“When…” Bakugou trailed off, looking for the words. Izuku didn’t try to say anything, even as Bakugou took a sip of his green tea to try and gather his thoughts. “When it happened yesterday.
You know who I was with, yeah?"

“U-um, the photos are everywhere on the internet, so.” Izuku finished with a nod rather than saying anything.

“Yeah,” Bakugou said, nodding back. “Well that villain, they’ve got history. And when he showed up, she, uh.” Bakugou sighed, running a hand through his hair. He wasn’t sure how to say this, but he had to, had to. “She fuckin’ froze, and, it… she…”

Fuck, fuck, fuck! He could feel his shoulders tensing. He didn’t want to be here. He wanted to be elsewhere, anywhere but here. He shouldn’t have come, this was, this was a mistake, he—

“Kacchan?” Izuku asked, suddenly worried.

“She froze like you did!” Bakugou yelled, curled in on himself, unwilling to look at Izuku. “She froze the same way you always did, whenever I… whenever we… I… fuck!” He pushed away from the table and stood up, both hands fisting up in his hair. Bakugou could feel his heart pumping out of his chest, a sick feeling rising up his gorge. Why? Why was this so fucking hard?

“K-Kacchan, I don’t…” Izuku trailed off. Bakugou could hear him pushing his chair back, to… to what? Offer him some comfort? Some solace?

Fuck, he thought. Deku always was too good for his own… well, good.

“D-don’t!…” Bakugou turned around, but he couldn’t bring himself to look Izuku in the eye. “Don’t try to, to say that shit was okay! That it was anything other than what it fucking was, Deku! I…”

The wind all fell out of Bakugou’s sails. All that was left was the words, stuck in his throat.

“I know.” Izuku sat back down at the table. Bakugou could hear it, even though he wasn’t looking. “I think, deep down, I always knew. And just lied to myself. I wanted us to be friends again, Kacchan. Even after… even after the doctor said I was Quirkless. When he said I should just give up on my dream.”

“… he said that, huh?” Bakugou couldn’t help the mirthless chuckle. “Doc Tsubasa always was the fuckin’ worst. Then he just vanished, and… fuck.” He was letting himself get off track. That was just running away, letting this win.

Katsuki, he’d been named. The one who seizes victory all by himself.

What a fucking laugh.

“I was horrible to you,” he finally said. “I made your life hell. I hurt you, I beat you, I tried to knock you down and kick you so you wouldn’t get back up. And that’s not just a fucking metaphor either. The worst part is?” Bakugou looked at his hands. The hands he’d used to hurt somebody so badly, somebody who’d only ever wanted Bakugou to call him a friend. “I couldn’t even tell you why. Like, you’d think if I was so dead-set on making somebody’s life hell, I’d at least have a reason, wouldn’t I? But no.” He shook his head. “I can’t even think of it. You didn’t do shit to me. I didn’t have any real reason to want to do any of it. Just… petty shit that a five year old would’ve thought up.”
“… you’re right.” Bakugou looked up to Izuku, who was staring hard into his tea. “I wanted to be your friend, Kacchan. I’d always thought of you as one, even when… but I think, deep down, I know it was just wishful thinking. That if I could just tell myself often enough that we were friends, that it was all just roughhousing, that I could convince myself it was true.”

Bakugou… he didn’t know how to respond to that. It was the truth, the naked truth. And it hurt.

Izuku got up now, holding up a hand to tell him to wait there. Bakugou walked back over to the table and pulled the chair back out before sitting down, and took a sip of his tea. It had gone cold.

A moment later, Izuku returned with a notebook. No, not a notebook. A **Notebook**, Bakugou mentally corrected. With Izuku, there were his notes, and then there were his **Notes**. And anybody who knew Izuku would know to make the distinction. Izuku opened up the notebook, faced so that Bakugou could see what was written, and began to flip through the pages. Bakugou Katsuki, the very first page read in childlike script. Izuku flipped the page, and he could see the kana refining, and being joined by kanji. One more page flipped, and Bakugou felt a metaphorical fist knock the air from his lungs.

It was a page dedicated to how best to treat and **hide** wounds caused by Bakugou’s Quirk. An **entire page** sectioned off for this one task.

He wanted to look away. To deny what was in front of him.

He couldn’t.

The two of them sat there for a while. Izuku got up and took both of their cups, replacing the cold drinks with fresh tea. Bakugou closed the Notebook, having read all that he needed to. All that he could handle, really.

“… I don’t know what to do,” he said, their cups half empty before he’d finally found his words again. “I keep seeing it in my head. I see him, and then her freeze. And then my mind just keeps swapping him for **me**, and her for **you**. And it…” he sighed. “Am… am I a bad person?” Bakugou finally asked.

“No.” The way Izuku said it rang with finality. Unlike so many things Bakugou had heard him say, this had none of the tremulousness and self-doubt he could so often recall hearing in Izuku’s voice. “I don’t think you’re a bad person. I think you want to be a good person… but you don’t know how to get there.” Izuku smiled. “That’s why you came to me, isn’t it Kacchan?”

“I know you’re a good person,” Bakugou said. “The whole fucking **class** knows you’re a good person. Hell, fucking **All Might** knows you’re a good person!” He sat, looking into his reflection in the tea. “I… I want people to be able to say the same about me. To not look at Bakugou Katsuki and say, ‘there’s the angry fuck, don’t piss him off’. Cause I saw what happens when you’re that kind of person.” He looked up at Izuku. “I don’t want to be the villain. I don’t want to be **your** villain anymore. I don’t want you to look at me and worry about what kind of shit I’m about to do to you, or if I’m gonna beat the shit out of you cause I was in a **bad mood**. I don’t want to be that person.”

Bakugou got up out of his chair, and walked around the table to Izuku’s side. And then, he did something he thought he never would.

Bakugou Katsuki got down on hands and knees. He lowered his head almost to the floor.
“I know you might never forgive all the bullshit I did to you. All the ways I made your life hell. But I want you to know I’m sorry. For whatever it’s worth.”

Bakugou Katsuki apologized.

And it was possibly the hardest thing he’d ever done.

* * * * *

By the time I got home from Shinagawa, Pony was already back and hard at work making dinner. Apparently she had the thought that after last night, some good old American comfort food was in order… though I’m afraid I don’t know how or where she managed to get a deep fryer. Unless she brought it back with her from Hosu. That was entirely possible.

“Do I need to get you an alarm?” she’d asked when I walked in the door. “So you can press it when everything goes sideways and Murphy’s Law decides to be evil? Because I swear, Kanna, your family has been a magnet for trouble this week!”

“Not my fault,” I muttered, pulling my suitcase in the door before digging around inside of it. “Oh yeah, this is for you. Got it from the aquarium gift shop.” Pony turned, and I tossed a small bag marked with Shinagawa Aquarium’s logo at her.

“Ooh, I love presents!” Pony opened up the bag and pulled out my little gift to her. “A plush seahorse? Really, Kanna? Are we scraping the bottom of the barrel for puns now?”

“Hey, it’s cute!” I argued. “And it’s not like I could bring Tokidoki the baby penguin with me, so this’ll have to do for now.”

Pony rounded on me, tongs in hand. “If you’re about to tell me that you got to play with a baby penguin, then I’m not giving you any fried chicken.”

“Alright,” I said. “I didn’t not get to play with a baby penguin,” I said. “Three times.”

“You can buy your forgiveness by taking me with you next time!” Pony said, brandishing the tongs in my direction as a weapon. “You can’t keep all the baby penguin cuddle times to yourself, you know!”

“Fine, fine,” I said, throwing my hands in the air in false protest. “Dinner almost ready?”

“Just let me make sure the chicken isn’t greasy,” she said. “Also, I know it’s your turn to do the dishes, but don’t touch the deep fryer. I’ll handle it.”

“Do you seriously think I’m going to burn the apartment down by handling an unplugged and powered off deep fryer?” I asked, almost incredulously.

Pony’s resultant glare told me everything I needed to know.

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Dishes were done, everything was unpacked and put away, and I’d gotten a school uniform set out and hanging on my closet door for tomorrow. Pony was in her room, posting on message boards and probably just looking up memes, or who knows what. I know she’s been doodling and drawing more often of late, and the little sketches on the sides of her class notes had gotten much better than they used to be in the past year or so. But this left me at a bit of a loss for what to do… so I went with an old standby: classic movies and texting friends.

… or at least it would have, if my phone didn’t decide to blow up right then. No, not literally. I mean it sounded like an explosion. Which means there was only one person it really could be.

> u free?

I frowned, but picked up my phone and hammered out a quick response.

> Just relaxing at home. School night.

I saw that he read the message, but he didn’t start typing, so I plugged my phone in and put it down before heading to the small sofa in our main room and turning on the TV. Then of course I would hear knocking on the door right as I’m about to pick out what I want to watch, so I get up with a huff and go to the door.

When I opened it, I blinked. There was Katsuki, just… kinda standing there. And wow, he looked miserable, like somebody had told him his puppy died.

“Hey,” he said. Then he crossed the doorway and gave me a one-armed hug, because his other was still in the sling. I wrapped my arms around him in a hug of my own, more than a little surprised at this, because I’m really the one who initiates hugs. So this was an interesting role reversal… but it was nice. Or at least it would be, but something was definitely up with Katsuki.

I closed the door behind him and guided him over to the couch, then plunked him down on the left cushion before sitting on his right and taking his hand in mine.

“You okay?” I asked, rubbing small circles on the back of his hand with my thumb.

“I will be,” he said. “Just… wanted to spend time with someone who…” he trailed off. “Is it weird if I say you make me feel like a good person?” Katsuki asked.

I waited a moment. It was… not the weirdest question I’d been asked, but it definitely ranked up there. And said some rather disturbing things about where Katsuki’s head has been today. That said, if he was here instead of at home, where his mother could see him, I don’t think he was in the mood for me to pry. And if something was still bothering him later this week, I could just get it out of him then, and that’s only if he didn’t just outright tell me first.

But I could tell that right now, he wanted an answer that would help reassure him after what was definitely a less-than-stellar day.

“Nah, not really,” I said. “Funny way to phrase it, but I think I know what you’re getting at. But that’s beside the point; I was gonna watch some old movies to chill. Wanna watch with me?”

“Eh,” Katsuki said, shifting to get comfortable. I let go of his hand as he reposition his free arm so it was over my shoulders, then adjusted how I sat so it wasn’t pushing my tail against the back of the
couch. “What’re you watching?”

“Star Wars!” I replied happily, pressing the play button, and settled in when that classic John Williams theme started with the opening crawl.

“… the fuck is Star Wars?”

If the universe had background music, then it would’ve cut off in a record scratch just now. I just sat there for a moment, and finally gathered my wits in time to pause when “EPISODE IV — A NEW HOPE” crossed the screen.

“Katsuki,” I started. “I find it *very* hard to believe you don’t know what Star Wars is.”

“Believe whatever the fuck you want,” he said, finally giving me that insufferable (and also obnoxiously attractive) smirk. “Never heard of it.”

“And I still don’t believe you, especially since whatever city planners helped rebuild Japan after Quirks showed up were clearly all die-hard fans,” I said, nudging him in annoyance.

“And what gave you that idea?” Katsuki asked, perplexed.

“… I’m from Hoth,” I began, freeing both hands so I could start lifting fingers with every name. “My parents’ house is on Amidala Street, and I use Dantooine Station and the Tauntaun bullet train route to get here. Meanwhile, you live in Mustafar, went to Alderaan middle school, go through Tatooine strip mall to get to and from school, and use Mos Eisley station to take the Kessel line. You took me to an arcade named after Darth Sidious on our date. UA’s student apartments in town have a street address that’s basically Yavin IV. And last but not least, thanks to its address, you could theoretically call UA Skywalker Academy,” I finished.

Katsuki looked at me for a minute. He looked at the screen. Then back to me.

“You could literally have been talking Greek and it would’ve made more sense than that shit.”

“… that’s it,” I said, and cupped my hands over my mouth. “Pony! Katsuki hasn’t seen Star Wars! It’s movie night!”

I waited a moment. Then I heard what could only be Pony either rolling or falling off of her bed before she stomped to the door, her hoofsteps muffled only by the carpet.

“He hasn’t seen Star Wars!??” Pony asked as she slammed the door to her room open, absolutely aghast.

“He hasn’t seen Star Wars,” I confirmed mournfully. “And he lives in Mustafar and went to Alderaan middle school.”

“That’s it!” Pony clopped over to the kitchen, opened a cabinet, then started playing with the microwave. “I’m making popcorn, get the movie started!”

“Please say there’s at least subtitles,” Katsuki groaned, realizing he was gonna be in this for the long haul.

“Or you could just do the best you can, and tap me for translation when you need it!” I chirped.
“C’mon, you’ll like it. Trust me.”

“Alright, alright!” Katsuki said. “Fine. Let’s do this shit.”

I pressed play. The opening crawl continued along, with Katsuki asking for clarification only a few times during it. Then Pony plopped down on the couch, a great big bowl of popcorn in her hands, and all was right in the world.

Not that long later and Pony was dying of laughter on the floor, because according to Katsuki it turns out Ben Kenobi was one hundred percent correct: Mos Eisley absolutely was a wretched hive of scum and villainy.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back!

First year of law school is over. Got my first grade in; constitutional law was a B+. It was an evil exam too; three full hours, but a 2500 word limit.

The rest of my essay-only exams were all in excess of 5000 words, with the longest peaking at 8400. Just for comparison’s sake.
Chapter Sixty-Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The school day came, bright and early. Way earlier than either of us would like, really: Pony and I had been up until rather late last night, marathoning the original trilogy of Star Wars. I’d only really had to pause the movies during Yoda’s scenes, and that was rather understandable considering the difference in his speech patterns versus the norm. Still, it was impressive. I’ll have to get him to sit down for the sequel trilogy and the Clone Wars… well, once I find the Clone Wars. Sure, it was all public domain now, so it was free to use and download. But that only mattered if I could actually find somewhere to download it from. Really, that’s the most difficult part of enjoying older media nowadays: not all of it survived. So it’s cheap, it’s plentiful, but if you’re looking for something specific then you have to hope somebody actually had the presence of mind to preserve it. That said, some media wasn’t a big loss. Nobody shed a tear when the overwhelming majority of reality television shows was lost to time.

Anyway, back to the morning. Pony beat me to the bathroom again, as per usual, so I was stuck waiting for her to finish up in the shower. It took a little longer than usual, so when I finally got into the bathroom, I turned the shower on, stripped in front of her, and hopped into the still-cold water with a yelp.

“You couldn’t wait fifteen seconds for it to get warm?” Pony asked, incredulous. “Also thanks for the yelp, now I have to redo my eyeliner!”

“This is why I prefer eyeliner pencils!” I gloated, trying to work the shampoo through my hair. I know, I was due for a haircut, but… I don’t know. I kinda wanted to try and let my hair get a bit longer. I’ve never actually let it go any longer than shoulder-length, might be nice to see how it feels to wear my hair a bit longer. Once I was satisfied I’d gotten all of my hair clean, I rinsed the shampoo out and reached for the conditioner bottle. When I tried to get something out of the bottle, though, it sputtered.

“Uh-oh, what are we out of?” Pony asked. “And who’s turn is it to go get more?”

“Well it’s my turn no matter what,” I said. “I’m out of conditioner now.”

“You mean the conditioner that almost turned my hair brown when you told me to try it?” Pony asked.

“Hey, it’s not my fault!” I said, affronted. “I didn’t know it would do anything weird to blonde hair! And hey, it washed with shampoo didn’t it?”

“Still blame you,” Pony said. “Right, I’m gonna get some breakfast ready, hurry up in there!”

“I’d be done already if you hadn’t taken so long!” I called after her. Pony only blew a raspberry my way in reply.

* * * * *
“Hope you all enjoyed your change of pace,” Aizawa-sensei said to the class right after he walked in. “Second half of the semester starts now, so back to the grind. I’m passing out some papers; I want you all to fill them out and bring them back to the front when you’re done.”

The papers made their way around the room, starting at the front row and circling around to the back. I took one off of the pile and passed the few remaining back to Momo behind me before taking a look at the sheet itself. It was… a work placement experience feedback report. Huh. Okay then.

“Hey, Sensei!” Mina waved a hand and half stood out of her desk as she said this. “What kinda stuff are we supposed to write anyway?”

Aizawa-sensei gave her a look for a moment, closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand. The other hand came up with another one of those applesauce or juice packs he’s always sucking dry in the morning. He drained the damn thing in what felt like one go before finally looking at Mina to give her a reply, but when he laid it down on the desk, I saw it wasn’t actually juice, or applesauce, or even food.

It was cold brew coffee.

“About midway through the week,” Aizawa-sensei said, “we received word from a couple of students that their work placement sponsors were… misusing the program. If your Pro Hero sponsor was having you perform functions that were out of line with what a Pro Hero should be doing, let us know. If they paraded you around for PR purposes, let us know. And even if they were a perfect work placement sponsor, let us know that too.” He gave us all the evil eye, just without his Quirk for once. “We haven’t had to give out these feedback surveys for the past four years. We’re more than a little disappointed at having to do it now.”

I looked back down at the form, pulled out a pen, and clicked it on.

What kind of duties did your work placement sponsor assign you?

What type of training did your work placement sponsor have you undertake?

Did you patrol with your work placement sponsor?

Did you enter into any combat scenarios with your work placement sponsor?

Did you engage in any PR events with your work placement sponsor?

Did your work placement sponsor ask you to undertake any duties not mentioned above? List below.

The last two questions, if you ask me, were the important ones. I had to list out everything Gang Orca had had me do during the week, and yes, that included a pair of PR events: the swimming lessons and the gala on Saturday. But I left the last section completely blank. I did it with confidence, with satisfaction. Aside from the heart-rending terror and horrible circumstances that happened on Tuesday and Saturday, it had been wonderful, and it’s not like Gang Orca’d had any control over that. But the fact that the question existed at all was revealing.

I couldn’t wait to see what the responses to that one were. I had a feeling it would be rather enlightening.

“Oh. And one more thing.” This time, Aizawa-sensei did activate his Quirk, and that baleful crimson
gaze burned into our souls. “None of you are to discuss your work placement experiences until tomorrow. We’ll have the results of the feedback survey for you to see then, and both classes 1-A and 1-B will be having a joint session to discuss it.” Wow… uh. That was, well. Big.

Looks like somebody had fucked up. Somebody had fucked up big time.

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Lunch came and went with surprisingly little fanfair. The inability to actually discuss our work placements meant that we were limited to small talk and other minor bits of conversation, so lunch had dragged a lot more than it usually did. The only real thing of note is that when Tsuyu went to enact her Froggy Tax on somebody’s plate, Momo had caught Tsuyu’s tongue with her chopsticks. It was mainly surprising because nobody had seen Momo actually move. One moment she was about to get some more soba. The next, her arm was extended all the way diagonally across the table, stopping Tsuyu’s tongue maybe a centimeter or two from Ibara’s donburi. Even odder was her response. Momo looked at Tsuyu, gave her a smile, and let her go.

This is all before we get to the fact that Momo pulled out a second set of chopsticks after doing this, like she’d planned this.

Now we were back in our classroom, waiting for whichever teacher would be handling our hero track classes for the day. I’d gotten up from my spot and was sitting on Katsuki’s desk, waiting for him to go over my math notes from this morning and fix any errors I might have made in the practice problems Ectoplasm-sensei had us doing at the end.

“You screwed up on the derivative here,” he said, using a red colored pencil to mark the spot on my notes. “You should’ve done this.” He brought a blue colored pencil now and wrote something else into my notes, and I took a peek afterwards to see what changes he’d made.

“Thanks again for this,” I said. “I swear, calculus is the worst.”

“I could make a bad at math joke right now,” he ventured. Then he managed to deflect my tail when I brought it around to give him a light thwack.

“Oh, he’s learning!” I said, teasingly. “Guess I’m just gonna have to—hang on, what’s Midoriya doing?”

“Huh?” Katsuki turned, and I pointed at Midoriya. He’d looked at his phone, and now he was going to the back of the classroom, where the storage lockers that held our costumes switched out for large glass windows. I’m not sure how the construction in UA worked, but it was just windows in the back, which raised interesting questions for where the storage lockers holding our costume cases went when they were out of use. But none of that additional rambling mattered, because for some reason Midoriya had just opened the large window in the back of the classroom. Not just a tiny bit either, it was wide open now.

“Uh, Deku-kun?” Uraraka asked. “Why did you open the—”

“I AM—!”

All of us stopped right then and there. That was the single most distinctive voice in all of Japan. As
one, we turned towards the window, and looked at it expectantly.

“COMING THROUGH THE WINDOW, LIKE A CLASSIC SUPERHERO!”

All Might shot through the window in a flash, skidding to a stop along the floor. He lost all momentum right as he touched the far wall, and stood up straight in a classic superhero pose: hands on his hips, chest pushed out, chin held high, and smiling for all the world to see.

“Midoriya-shounen!” All Might turned and favored Midoriya with a thumbs-up, and I could swear the light glinted off of his teeth. “Thank you very much for keeping me from running late!”

“I-it was nothing!” Midoriya yelped, arms down at his side, a smile on his face from ear to ear.

“Now then!” All Might clapped, and a small pulse of air washed over us. At the same time the storage banks on the walls opened up to reveal our costume cases. “Everybody get changed, and head to Cityscape A! You’re in for something very familiar, but at the same time, altogether different.”

“All Might-sensei!” Mina stood up again, arm waving. “How did you get the racks to slide out without the remote!?” All Might was about to answer her, but somebody beat him to it.

“When All Might-sensei clapped, the air pressure gave just enough force to open the latch inside the wall,” Momo explained, costume case already in her hand… wait. I was looking right at the racks, and I didn’t see her grab it at all. “How much practice did it take to get that right, sensei?” She asked.

“Too much!”

There was a moment of silence… and then we all started to snicker and giggle. It was something so silly, a little parlor trick. And yet here was All Might, looking so proud of himself. I never expected to see somebody of his stature beaming over something so small and silly.

Let it be known, folks: All Might is human like the rest of us.

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“Now then!” All Might clapped his hands, drawing everybody’s attention.

We’d assembled back down in the basement of the same cityscape building we’d relocated to after Midoriya and Katsuki blew up the first one, and where the rest of our combat trials had all taken place. I was waiting for the moment that All Might reached behind his back, while wearing that orange pinstripe suit of his, and mysteriously procure a ballot box from behind his back that very clearly hadn’t been there before, just like last time. He did reach behind his back again… but he didn’t pull out a ballot box. Instead, he had a comically oversized remote.

Which also could not have been there before. This was getting ridiculous. There had to be a trick to it. Some special part of UA’s teacher training…

“Everybody, please assemble yourselves into the same pairs you had last time, pairs A through J!” Next to me, I could see Katsuki snort in derision. “Ah, except for Pair A. Iida-shounen is not yet
allowed to return to hero training until Wednesday, leaving Bakugou-shounen without a partner. If anybody would like to volunteer to go twice, and partner up with Bakugou?”

To nobody’s surprise, I raised my hand. Also to nobody’s surprise, Kirishima raised his hand.

To everybody’s surprise, Midoriya raised his hand. I boggled. Uraraka boggled. Tenya boggled. Most of the class boggled. Katsuki didn’t.


He looked down at me, gave a half shrug, and mouthed ‘tell you later’.

“You do not have to select your partner yet, Bakugou-shounen!” All might said, drawing attention back to himself. “Now, as for your task.”

He pressed the button on his overly large remote, and the screens down here in the ‘command bunker’ lit up. Each of the screens had one of the pairs on it, first with the letter label, then its names. Katsuki’s name sat alone under Team A. Momo’s and mine appeared next to each other under Team C. I scanned for Momo and met her eyes, giving her a small smile.

“Last time, these were your partners,” All Might continued. “Today… they are your opponent.”

The smile on my face turned brittle, and I caught the instant that steel slipped into Momo’s gaze.

“I will randomly assign you all as heroes and villains… now!” All Might pressed that same damn button again, and our names began to move to opposite sides of our screens before the headers appeared. My name fell under the “HERO” category.

“We will go in reverse alphabetical order for the groups,” All Might said, putting the remote away. “Kirishima-shounen! Please go upstairs and begin your preparations. Sero-shounen! As the hero, please head outside; Kirishima-shounen’s five minute prep period will begin shortly!”

Internally, I quailed. Momo had prep time and planning time. This was going to suck.

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Sero v. Kirishima ended in a somewhat expected manner. It really didn’t matter what kind of preparations Sero had in place when Kirishima’s hardened state could just cut through Sero’s tape, though All Might did tell Sero that he could’ve won if he’d taped the bomb to a high enough ceiling and just stalled.

Tohru v. Ojiro was slightly surprising. It also gave all of us a new-found appreciation for just how terrifying Tohru’s Quirk can be, and just how genuinely good she is with it. The instant Ojiro set foot inside of the building, Tohru bound him with his own capture tape. It had taken less than ten seconds, all told.

Tsuyu v. Tokoyami… as much as I love Tsuyu, I’m sorry to say that this one was very much stacked against her from the beginning. The inside of the building was dimly lit, meaning Dark Shadow was
stronger. Tsuyu put up a good fight, but Dark Shadow managed to harry her enough that Tokoyami could slip past her and capture the bomb, using the rest of Dark Shadow’s bulk as a living smokescreen to hide what he was doing and where he was going. That particular course of action was enough to know that he’d learned from his mostly-defeat at Momo’s hands, and earned an approving nod from All Might.

Things started to get interesting, though, starting with the next match.

“Kaminari-shounen!” All Might spoke into the microphone in his hand. “You may begin, hero!”

Kaminari reached into his jacket’s pockets and pulled out two small, mostly metal objects, which he then slid onto his hands. A moment later, he slammed his fists together much like Kirishima would, sending sparks flying between what I could now see were the knuckle dusters that he wore. He also brought a hand up to the little device he wore on one side of his head, and I saw that it had been upgraded to have a little visor over one eye. A tap seemed to engage something, because even from here we could see its semi-transparent display change, and Kaminari began looking for something on the walls.

A moment later, he stopped. He rolled his shoulders, hopped a few times… and then he punched the wall. The knuckle dusters on his hands were probably what let him actually do that, I mused. Kaminari reached inside the hole he’d opened up in the wall, and a moment later, his body sparked like lightning.

Every single light in the building sparked, popped, and burst in a shower of light and glass. Up with the bomb, Jirou ripped her earlobe jacks out of the concrete, shrieking in what sounded like pain, and huddled in a corner to hide from the sudden rain of glass falling on her. It took a little bit for whatever pain she’d felt from hearing what Kaminari had done to fade, and for her to begin getting back up.

Kaminari hadn’t been idle, though. The moment he’d finished what he had planned, he bolted up the stairs, heading for the bomb.

He got there before Jirou was able to mount a defensive.

“Hero wins!” All Might announced over the intercom system. “Everybody please relocate to the next building over; this one’s electric system is going to have to be replaced.”

At least Kaminari had the grace to be a bit sheepish about it, despite his pride at winning. And to his credit, he did help get Jirou up and to Recovery Girl’s medic-bots, who cleaned up the scrapes and cuts she’d received from the falling glass before giving her a more-or-less clean bill of health.

But dang… Kaminari fighting smart is terrifying.

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Satou v. Kouda came next. And that was back to being a… mostly normal battle. Satou had a very poor match-up against Kouda, especially since Kouda was the villain and got to prepare.

Poor Satou didn’t get to take more than a few steps into the building before the squirrels showed up.
“Villain wins!” All Might turned to us. “Aoyama-shounen, please head upstairs to begin your preparations. Ashido-shoujo, please head outside!”

“This is gonna be good!” Mina crowed, heading for the basement exit with a swagger in her step. Aoyama, surprisingly, didn’t actually say anything in response. He crossed his arms over his chest, offered the rest of us a sly little smile, and then pushed his stylish glasses up the bridge of his nose. I couldn’t help but narrow my eyes at him as he headed upstairs; Aoyama clearly knew something that Mina didn’t, or had something up his sleeve especially for her. But whatever that something was, he wasn’t sharing.

Aoyama set himself up in the bomb room, did some light stretching and a bit of calisthenics… but he made no other preparation. Outside, Mina busied herself by doing almost the exact same thing. Seeing the two of them performing such similar prep with no way to know what the other was doing? Well, it was a bit eerie, but also amusing as hell.

“Ashido-shoujo, you may begin!”

Mina instantly slicked up the bottom of her shoes with a weak acid, and slid into the building. Not much later, she came face to face with Aoyama, who stood before her with his arms crossed over his chest and a small, but smug, smile.

“Alright sparkles!” Mina taunted, which we all heard thanks to the microphones. “Let’s get th —whoa!”

I will say this now: good on Aoyama! He didn’t let Mina keep talking. Nope, he fired off a blast with his navel laser, forcing Mina to dodge to the side, and then settled into a more normal ready stance. Mina recovered quickly and began her approach, sliding in an unpredictable zig-zag pattern as Aoyama tried—and mostly failed, save for a tiny glancing hit he got on Mina’s right shoulder—to hit her with his Quirk. He was taking full advantage of what I could only guess was a fiber optic network inside of his armored costume, directing his laser to a different one of its various outputs every time. What probably would have taken Mina maybe fifteen seconds had already lasted well over a minute as she kept having to dodge from a different angle, or a different size beam, and on a few occasions two separate lasers that crossed over each other, forcing Mina into a limbo to duck under it.

But eventually, Mina did reach Aoyama.

“Gotcha!” Mina cheered, dodging to the side of Aoyama’s final blast, straight from his navel this time. She crouched down into a windup, and then let loose with a vicious uppercut!

Which Aoyama dodged.

“W-wha—?”

Aoyama didn’t let Mina finish voicing her surprise. From that same ready stance he’d been in the whole time, he lashed out with a quick right jab to Mina’s face, sending her off balance and opening her stance. He followed up by burying his left fist in Mina’s gut, flowing seamlessly from one movement to the other. Mina buckled over, eyes suddenly bulging in pain and surprise. And then Aoyama dealt his coup de grâce.

Aoyama sent Mina’s opening uppercut straight back to sender.
All of us down in the bunker heard the hit, and almost as one we winced. We watched on screen as Mina staggered back one step, then two… and then fell down hard on her ass. She set herself down flat and smacked the floor twice, groaned, and then just laid there, breathing heavily.

“V-villain wins!” All Might announced, his voice slightly tremulous.

Aoyama looked straight into the camera, gave a flare of his cape, and smiled.

“W-well!” We all turned back to All Might again, though I know I wasn’t the only one still shocked at what we’d just seen. “Bakugou-shounen, you will select your opponent after everybody else has gone once, in case one of them wishes to withdraw or is sent to Recovery Girl in their bout. Which means!” He clapped his hands. “Yaoyorozu-shoujo, head upstairs to prepare! Yaseiki-shoujo, please head outside!”

Momo sent me a sly, evil little grin, and I felt a shiver run down my spine as she walked out. Katsuki gave me a pat on my shoulder and a chuckle.

“Have fun!” He said, sarcasm practically dripping from his voice.

I smacked him over the head with my tail.

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I’m going to be honest here. Compared to my friends, I’m a pessimist. Pony and Ibara are endlessly optimistic, Tsuyu is somewhere between an optimist and a realist, and somehow Monoma, Momo, Tenya, and Katsuki fall under the blanket of cautious optimism in one way or another. I consider myself to be a realist, but that does mean being honest with yourself about what you are and (more importantly) are not capable of doing.

And if I’m going to be completely honest, I have serious doubts about my ability to defeat with-prep-time Momo.

Now, to be fair to myself, the reverse is probably just as true. Giving me prep time can be just as devastating as giving her prep time. And in reality, this five minute waiting period is giving both of us that prep time. But the difference here is that whichever of us has to defend gets the home field advantage, and that’s the clincher. If I were in there, I’d be remodeling the interior by breaking apart walls and tossing the rubble into haphazard patterns, making Momo’s approach intensely difficult. I’d try to get the floor coated in sticky spider silk (which I think I’ve finally gotten a handle on) or some other hazard, then adhere myself exclusively to the walls and ceilings. Hell, I’d probably be moving the ‘bomb’ out of the way and stashing it somewhere. And I’m not even very good entrenching myself.

Momo, on the other hand, has the Quirk for that job, even better than Todoroki’s instant ice fortress. With him, you know exactly what you’re getting into. Momo is an entirely different ball game every single time you go against her, and that is the problem. I know what we did the first time, but there is a precisely zero percent chance she’s going to repeat that. Additionally, I have no idea what kind of training she got up to in the last week, so my information on what she’s capable of is probably woefully out of date.

That said… I suppose I owe Gang Orca a number of thank-you’s. After all, he gave me exactly the
tools I need to figure out roughly what Momo has in store for me.

“Yaseiki-shoujo, you may begin!” All Might’s voice rang out over the loudspeakers.

“Understood, but All Might-sensei?” I turned towards where I saw the camera and microphone above the door. “You may want to tell everyone down there to cover their ears. Especially Jirou.”

With that said, I pulled up my costume’s hood, and activated its hearing protection. Then I performed the requisite shapeshifting for this little trick, took a deep breath, and called up a totem.

Sperm whales are the single loudest animals in the world, capable of producing sounds of up to two hundred and thirty decibels. But since I need its biological structures to actually make the ultrasound I want, I can’t layer any other whale’s totem on top of it to boost the volume higher. And for reasons I will probably never decipher, my killer whale totem counts as another whale, which goes completely against the biological fact that killer whales are actually just a really large species of dolphin, but whatever, it’s just my damn Quirk, who am I to complain!? Ugh, no, getting off track. Point is, sperm whale was just half of the puzzle. To get this trick pulling double duty, I needed to supplement it.

Enter the bulldog bat. It’s as ugly (or cute, up to you) as its name suggests, and it’s the loudest bat there is, clocking in at a hundred and forty decibels. If I could, I’d switch the two around, and use this thing’s biology for a morph, but I’m too experienced with using cetacean ultrasound for mapping; it would disorient me to try and switch to something brand new. So instead, I’d be using this to take my personal volume dial… and turn it up to eleven.

I faced the building.

And then, I shrieked.

I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the only person in the building that had even a chance of hearing me was Jirou. But just because they didn’t hear my voice, that had no bearing on their ability to feel it. I wish I had a microphone with a decibel reader nearby, because I would love to know just how loud I was. What I do know, though, is that I was clearly loud enough for my ultrasonic scream to penetrate through the entire building, and even into the one next to me. The mental picture built itself in my mind: in the basement level, everybody huddled down with their hands over their ears; Jirou had plugged her earlobe jacks into a recent addition to her costume, maybe a noise cancellation unit, but this was still clearly louder to her than anyone else. On the ground floor, my echolocation found booby trap after booby trap, enough for me to decide on another point of ingress. The upper floors, though?

This is where it got confusing as heck. I found four separate bombs, all essentially identical to my senses.

I also found four separate Momo’s, each defending a bomb. And each of them was positioned in front of a lumpy object that I couldn’t quite make out, but what I could tell is that the objects were a complete blank spot to my echolocation.

She’d probably covered them in some sound-dampening material. Which meant she got to keep a great big surprise in store for me. And this is before we get to the part where, oh yeah, there are FOUR of her!

If I had more time, I could probably figure out which Momo was the real one. But I was running out
of breath, and this had already taken a large enough chunk of time that if I wound up to do it again, Momo would just change her plans. I had enough information to go off of, so I had to begin now.

First thing’s first: back to human normal before changing anything else. A kidney, my gallbladder, and my appendix all shifted into one of my favorites, an electric eel’s zappy bits. I enshrouded myself in a gecko totem, hopped on the wall, and started to climb.

I’d managed to determine that Momo had no bombs on the ground floor, three on the first floor, and one on the second. I wanted to eliminate that single bomb first, and hopefully figure out why I detected a person of Momo’s build four separate times in the process. None of the bombs were in the same room as a window; they were inside of completely interior rooms, connected only by long hallways with not much cover. And posted in front of each bomb was a Momo, and a bulky thing. And I realize that I’ve been procrastinating. I wasn’t going to be able to avoid this, so it was best to not try.

I hopped in through the window, brought out the ironclad beetle totem to protect myself, and advanced into the hallway. Just around the corner was the first Momo, and whatever surprise she had in store for me. Alright… time to suck it up.

I rounded the corner. There, at the end of the hallway, stood Momo. But something about her was… off. Her expression was still, her eyes dead. It finally hit me when she started moving. This wasn’t Momo.

It was a robot. Momo had used her Quirk to make an honest-to-goodness robot in her own image, and it clearly had some actual programming. It ripped the covering off of the object, grabbed the crank on its side, and began turning.

I barely made it back into the hallway before the gatling gun began firing. I had my hands pressed over my ears to block out the sound, watching as the bullets impacted the wall and—bounced off? One of them ricocheted in my direction, and I picked it up, inspecting it carefully.

It was a rubber bullet.

The sound of shots firing from the gatling gun faded out until all I heard was the cranking as the Momo-bot kept doing what it was programmed to do. I stepped around the corner again, and watched the automaton just… keep doing the same damn thing. At this point, I figured it was safe to approach. I darted down the hallway and knocked both the gatling gun and the Momo-bot aside, being careful not to slip on the way too many shell casings on the floor beneath me, and approached the bomb, putting a hand on it.

It fell over, and the flimsy whatever it was made of broke apart into pieces.

Damn it. I don’t know how much time I just used up, but now I need to take a wild guess at which of the three on the floor below was actually the real—

There was a sharp, painful pinprick in my tail.

I turned around, nearly stumbling in the process, and saw Momo—the real Momo—standing behind me.

“My apologies, Kanna-chan.” Momo held up a syringe in one hand. An empty syringe. The world listed, and I found myself stumbling slightly. “You did look like you could use a nap, though.”
I tried to swipe at Momo, but my Quirk wouldn’t listen to me, and she just ended up batting aside a lazy swipe of my hand. Her little counter overextended me, and I fell to the ground, the padding on the knees of my costume protecting me from the concrete. My eyes felt heavy, and… I tried to get up, but—

* * * * *

I opened my eyes to see Recovery Girl smiling down at me, holding an uncapped syringe in one hand, a bead of liquid hanging off of the tip.

I was pressed up against the side of the infirmary bed’s railing in an instant.

“Well, I’ll take that as confirmation that you’ve fully recovered,” she said, capping the syringe and sliding it back into a pocket of her lab coat.

“How long was I out?” I asked, pushing myself up from the bed. A quick look around showed me that my classmates weren’t here, so either it was a really short time, or a really long one.

“Thirty minutes,” Recovery Girl told me. “Remind me to tell Yaoyorozu not to do that again, though. I know she was confident in her math, and given her intellect I can also be fairly confident that she did it correctly, but tranquilizers are just too dangerous to be using in a class exercise.”

 “… tranquilizers,” I half-asked, half-said. “Great,” I groaned, flopping back down onto the bed. “As if I didn’t get enough animal jokes with my Quirk!”

“Oh believe me, I’m fairly certain her pharmaceutical of choice was a joke,” Recovery Girl said, shoulders shaking ever so slightly. “The compound’s stability and long shelf life means that it is most commonly used as a bear tranquilizer.” Why that little… “Anyways, I’m giving you a clean bill of health. You are free to go at your pleasure, Kanna-chan.” She offered me a soft smile as she lowered the railings on the hospital bed. “And do wish your mother well for me.”

“It’d be my pleasure, Shuzenji-sensei,” I said, getting up from the bed and offering her a short bow. “Um, do you know if 1-A is still at the training grounds?”

“They should either be returning or already back,” she told me. “Now, go change out of your costume, and enjoy the rest of the way.”

“I will!” I said, leaving the infirmary.

I headed down one level to the locker rooms and went inside, going straight to my locker to open it up. I did notice that at least a couple of the other girls were there—I saw Tsuyu and Jirou, and was pretty sure it was only a 50/50 on whether I’d actually know if Tohru was there—but that was it.

“So what happened with the other matches?” I asked, opening up my locker.

“Well Todoroki beat Shouji,” Tohru said, confirming that yes, she was here, I just couldn’t see her. “And Uraraka actually won against Midoriya! She got him with what looked like the same flip Midoriya used against both Bakugou and Todoroki those times, and then she kinda left him floating in the middle of the room.”
“And what about Katsuki’s match?” I asked.

Tohru didn’t say anything. I turned to Jirou, who also didn’t say anything. Then I looked at Tsuyu, who just gave me a beatific smile… and said nothing.

“He’ll probably want to tell you himself, actually,” Momo said out of nowhere. I jumped clear out of my skin, because I don’t know where she was before this, but when she said that she was directly behind me. I spun, one hand over my heart in a vain attempt to slow it down from the sudden shock.

“Don’t do that!” I said. “Also, while I have you. Bear tranquilizers, Momo? Really? Really?”

She just shrugged.

“I thought it was funny at the time.”

Then she walked out, leaving me to stare at her back in somewhat dumbfounded amazement. Part of me wanted to be angry at this. Another part of me realized that this was probably my influence.

“Kero,” Tsuyu said, as if to confirm my thoughts.

Yup. I’m definitely a bad influence.

Chapter End Notes

Well, another chapter. Here's everybody's first hints at how people are going to be developing their skills and shaping up as heroes. Thanks go to @knolden for help with the Aoyama bit... and actually, giving Aoyama a level in badass was his idea wholesale, so a big thanks for that.

In other news: I have recently retrofitted a discord server for my use. If anybody would like to, they are welcome to join...

The Fluffy Bunnies Track Club.
https://discord.gg/3N3FACa

Thanks for reading folks, and see y'all next time!
Chapter Sixty-Four

“I was wondering why you looked like death warmed over,” Pony said over dinner, smirking as I picked at my plate. “I had to get it from Tsuyu and Momo, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I griped, grabbing a piece of broccoli with my chopsticks. “Look, it’s not that I care about losing. Does it suck to lose, especially one-on-one? Yes, but I’ll get over it. That’s not a big deal in the grand scheme of things. It’s more that Momo was acting…” I paused. “Well, more than a little off, I guess is the way I’d put it. It was clearly her, but at the same time it felt like she was trying really, really hard to be something she’s not.”

“Well, we still don’t know what her work experience was like,” Pony pointed out, leaning over the table and pointing her fork at me. Yes, I know; I was eating with chopsticks while she ate with a fork. I like using chopsticks. Pony prefers a fork. I just laugh because my utensils of choice are easier to keep clean. I feel I should also mention I was using a bowl while she had a plate, and that again, I found mine a bit easier to clean and dry off. But maybe that was just me. “For all we know,” Pony continued, snapping me out of my ruminations on tableware, “it was something as ridiculous as… well, ours. Just a bit less flashy.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I waffled. “Even so, it was just… well, it didn’t feel very Momo. If that makes any sense,” I added at the end, worried I’d sounded a bit like an idiot there.

“No, no, I get it,” Pony waved me off while speaking around her mouthful of chicken and broccoli. “You’re a busybody who doesn’t like when her friends get up to stuff that she doesn’t know about.”

“Wha—” I sputtered. “No I’m not!”

Pony put down her fork and looked at me. Just looked.

“Like, I was gonna say I was just kidding, but now you got all defensive, so I’m really curious,” she said, tone absolutely mischievous. “Kanna, are you a nosy busybody?”

“Do I look like my mother?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Yes,” Pony said. “Yes you do. There’s literally only four major differences appearance-wise between you and your mom, besides the glaringly obvious ones.” She raised her fingers, and started counting off. “Your skin tone’s a hair darker. Your eyes are amber, not brown. She’s older. She’s taller.”

“Why did you have to remind me about that last one?” I harrumphed. Yes, please, rub it in that even with a leg structure that probably added ten centimeters onto my height, my mother was still taller than I am. I mean, at least Pony and Tsuyu are shorter than I am. But I also haven’t grown more than two millimeters in the last year, and Pony’s grown a full centimeter and a half in the last month. She’s got a very real chance of passing me up in the coming year, and then I’m suddenly going to have to look up at her, just like I do almost everyone else.

“Anyway!” Pony tapped her fork onto the plate, making a somewhat annoying tink. “When are you gonna go talk to Momo?”

“Tomorrow before homeroom,” I said. “Assuming I can actually find her. I mean, even using
echolocation all I found was… *whoa.*

“Um, Kanna?”

Wow. How hadn’t I noticed this before? This was… wow.

“Earth to Kanna, are you still in there?… Houston, do we have a problem?”

“So you know that invisible girl in my class?” I asked. “Hagakure Tohru?”

“Aaaaand what does she have to do with talking to Momo?”

“She doesn’t,” I admitted. “But I realized—when I used ultrasound to find Momo during the bout, I overpowered it more than a little… and I think I know what Tohru looks like.”

Pony paused.

“You know what the invisible girl looks like,” she said, skeptical.

“I know what the invisible girl looks like,” I nodded, casting my mind back to that moment. “And let’s just say that if the boys knew what she looked like, they’d be cursing her Quirk to hell and back.”

“She looks that good, huh,” Pony half-asked, half-stated.

“No joke? The invisible girl is the prettiest in our year.”

“You’re not going to distract me from getting you to talk to Momo,” Pony pointed out.

“Hey, it was worth a shot,” I admitted. “Besides, that was a genuine revelation. Even if the timing was—”

“Convenient,” Pony finished for me. “It was convenient. Anywho!” She clapped her hands and leaned in towards me. “When are you gonna talk to Momo?”

“Uh, w-well…”

* * * * *

“Kanna-chan, could I have a moment?” Momo asked, intercepting Pony and me right as we walked through UA’s doors. I gave Pony a look, which she returned by way of a half-lidded stare.

“Well, that was easy?” I said, offering a half-hearted smile. Pony just rolled her eyes, nudged me towards Momo, and traipsed off towards her homeroom, leaving me alone with Momo. “So, what’s the matter?” I asked her, trying to keep my posture loose and open.

“I…” Momo faltered for a moment, one hand coming up to worry at a stray lock of hair as she grappled for the words. “Kanna-chan, please forgive me for my… uncharacteristic rudeness and recklessness yesterday. I have been trying to take the advice and teachings of my work placement mentor to heart, but I fear that in my enthusiasm, I have taken it a touch too far?” The last bit
sounded more like a question than a statement, but Momo’s facial expression spoke volumes. She was flitting between worry, earnest eagerness, shame, and hopefulness, waiting with bated breath on whatever response I would eventually muster.

“I, uh…” I paused, playing with the collar of my blazer with one hand. “I mean, everything worked out okay in the end, right? No harm, no foul, everything’s back to normal?”

“How can—no, I suppose a measure of understanding was to be expected.” Momo paused to collect herself, her posture loosening up as the tension bled out of her shoulders. “It would seem I’ve worried myself for nothing.”

“For now, at least,” I made sure to interject. “If you start acting like that again, then if I don’t let you know, somebody else will. Because the Yaoyorozu Momo I became friends with isn’t sitting on a throne looking down at her plebeian subjects with a superiority complex. And yes, it was that unnerving seeing you act like that,” I added before she could ask the question.

“And I see you’ve not lost your penchant for biting critique,” Momo replied, smile shifting into an easy grin.

“Well—”

“Oi, hurry the fuck up you two!” Momo and I both jumped when Katsuki yelled at us from down the hall. “We got that joint shit to go to, so quit talking and get your asses over here!”

Momo’s face went blank at his cursing.

“I don’t know what it is you see in him,” she admitted to me in a quiet voice.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “He’s a bit like a barnacle: drifts along, gets attached, then grows on you, and good luck getting it off.”

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“Welcome to our second joint 1-A/1-B seminar!”

We were in the same room as the last of these: a lecture hall-style room with stadium seating, small little computerized tablets integrated into the usual overly-tiny table that can rotate up from the armrest of every seat. Once again, I needed to finagle a way to get comfortable with the darn thing, because they were not made with southpaws in mind, though I also owed another thank-you to Pony for saving me a seat with a lefty desk. Katsuki tried to save a seat next to him for me, but he hadn’t realized that I couldn’t use the desks the way he did. I mean, okay. Technically I could. It would just be horrendously uncomfortable and leave me with a stiff shoulder and a crick in my spine from sitting funny the whole time. Principal Nedzu began his introduction before we’d finished getting settled, even before the clock had struck eight in the morning. For someone as highly placed as he was in a Japanese hierarchical system to not be starting exactly on time meant that this was a matter of some importance.

“I apologize for the early commencement,” Nedzu continued, “but we have a lot to get through, including a special additional something that was not originally on the agenda but that I am all too proud to include!”
Oh, there we go. That actually explains a lot: it wasn’t an early start for the sake of haste, but because he had to fit something else in. Which only had me wondering what that something else was.

“Kan-sensei, Aizawa-sensei, if you two would like to join me onstage?” Nedzu beckoned to our homeroom teachers, and they stood up to join him next to the podium. “If you remember, your homeroom teachers had all of you fill out forms to let us know about your work placement experiences. What they did not tell you is that not all of those sheets were identical.”

Murmurs broke out amongst us. I myself couldn’t help but frown in confusion, because this had implications. Ones that I didn’t like.

“We’d heard from some of our students,” Aizawa-sensei took over, “in the middle of their work placements. The things they shared with us were… well, if I felt like being diplomatic, I would say ‘problematic’ and leave it for you to decide.” Aizawa-sensei scowled. “I’m not going to coddle you. We heard about abuses of the work placement program, and violations of its tenets so egregious that certain Pro Heroes are going to have hefty limitations on what conditions they may recruit a student under, and at least one Pro Hero is being removed from the program for an indefinite amount of time.”

Sekijirou Kan stood forward next, arms crossed over his chest.

“Listen to me carefully. Japanese society has long had issues with juniors, interns, and new employees struggling under the yoke of an abusive or uncaring senior, and expected those new employees to keep quiet and just go with the flow. Part of being a Pro Hero has to include understanding what parts of your own society are actively hurting it, so that you can work to effect positive change. This means that you actually need to speak up, even when people would rather you not. Even if it feels uncomfortable, even if it feels ‘wrong’. Hopefully these examples will help you.”

“That’s not to say all the feedback we received was negative!” Nedzu took a chance to interject before the murmuring in the lecture hall could reach a fever pitch, and before the negativity boiled over. “More than a few students had immensely positive experiences, the likes of which we would love for future work placement coordinators to emulate. There are also some students whose placements, I will admit, verged into the negative, but this was for reasons beyond the control of anybody involved. Take this as another lesson, that sometimes positives and negatives can be found in the same bit of information, with a trick of perspective being the only difference between the two.”

“With that,” Kan continued, “we will begin with, unfortunately, the lowest of the low.” He reached behind him, and a moment later, a remote was in his hand, and… wait. Wait wait wait wait wait. I call bullshit.

“Does that costume have a utility belt with rear-facing pockets?” I asked Pony in a whisper.

“It does,” she confirmed, “but none big enough for, well, that.”

It was a support item shared between all of UA’s faculty. It had to be. Some kind of… hammerspace generator, maybe? A transponder that could link dimensional pockets, or something else that was letting all these teachers and heroes pull something out of nowhere? Because come on, this was getting ridiculous. All Might, Aizawa-sensei, Midnight, Nedzu, Present Mic, and now Vlad King had all pulled off variations of the same trick.

It was some piece of tech. It had to be.
“—of our own local heroes.” I caught the tail end of what Kan-sensei had said before he clicked on
the remote, somehow managing to miss the entire substance of what he’d said. On the screen behind
him, Mineta’s ID card picture popped up on one side, and an image of Mt. Lady on the other side.
“Do you remember that criticism of our society I mentioned a moment ago, about how people are
often too reticent to come forward? Thankfully, Mineta-kun is not one of those people, and it is in
fact his choice to do so that prompted this inquiry in the first place.” He was about to turn to face the
screen before seeming to remember something important, and faced us once more. “Ah. I should
probably mention that Mineta-kun agreed to share this with us of his own accord.”

Kan-sensei clicked on the remote again, and we were treated to a somewhat shaky video, whose
perspective came from a rather low height.

“But how is this supposed to teach me about being a pro hero!?” Mineta’s voice rang out from
somewhere behind and above the camera’s perspective, which we could only tell because of the
lecture hall’s surround sound system. The fact that the lecture hall even had surround sound was
surprising in and of itself, for a moment… until I remembered two things. One, Present Mic. Two, a
bunch of bored Support Course students definitely needed something to keep them busy and more or
less out of the way, and what better than upgrading electronics?

“Well, when you’re a pro, you get busy,” another voice said. “And at the end of the day you’re tired,
and then you come home, but it’s a mess, and you don’t have the energy to fix it.” The camera
panned, and we saw Mt. Lady laying on her stomach on a couch, one arm propping her up and
turning pages in a magazine, the other popping potato chips into her mouth one at a time. “Say, is the
laundry done yet?”

There was a cut in the footage, and a moment later we saw Mineta looking into a mirror. The tiny
pin, or broach, or cape hook, or something or other on the front of his costume was dead-center with
the camera footage, and—ohoho. I see how he got this.

Minoru Mineta’s costume has a built-in bodycam. That’s clever.

His fingers came, and a quick twist and flick pulled the small bodycam off of his costume, which
Mineta turned around to face himself.

“A call came in for some kind of disturbance down the way,” he said, voice low. “She hopped out
the window and grew big, and hey, it’s the first villain thing in two days, so maybe I would actually
get some experience here instead of just watching this lazy b****,” all of us blinked as the footage of
Mineta’s mouth blurred, and the audio track got bleeped out. “But no, what does she do? Tells me to
do her f****** dishes! This isn’t what I signed up for! What the heck!?”

The footage paused there, and the lot of us turned towards Mineta, who’d purposefully sat himself in
the front and was standing up on his seat to actually be visible. He was still furious, if the tension in
his jaw and shoulders was any indication.

“Unlike her fellow Pro Hero and Musutafu peer Kamui Woods,” Kan-sensei continued, “Mt. Lady
deigned to use UA’s work placement program to hire a free manservant. As a result, she has been
removed from UA’s work placement and internship programs for the next five years, at which point
we will conduct a review to determine if her ban stands.”

“Bakugou, not a word.” Aizawa-sensei stepped forward, taking center stage from Kan-sensei, who
stepped back to give Aizawa the spotlight. “You can harangue your cousin in private. Not in front of
the class.” There was some good-natured chuckling, and a muffled curse from Katsuki before Aizawa-sensei held a hand up to quiet everyone. “Next up is one of mine. After we received this information from Mineta, we began to discreetly check in on all of our students’ work placements. There were five of my students I was worried about, and two more of Kan’s came to mind. Five of them for the same reason. The eight students whose situations came to our attention were as follows: Bakugou. Iida. Kendo. Midoriya. Todoroki. Tsunotori. Yaoyorozu. Yaseiki.”

“We can remove five of those from the list because they were all involved in the Noumu attack and Stain’s capture in Hosu,” Nedzu added. “Incidentally, if the five of you—you know who you are—would remain behind briefly at the end, before we transition to the next phase of our morning?”

I didn’t like the sound of that, but the five of us who’d been at Hosu all murmured our assent.

“We can also remove Bakugou from this list; he was wounded in an unexpected engagement with a villain and has fully recovered. However, the other two were outliers of note. Yaoyorozu and Kendo.” Aizawa-sensei clicked on… wait, did he take the remote from Kan-sensei, or did he have his own version of it? “Kendo we could account for, and I’ll just say this now: Uwabami is still allowed to take interns, but she must register a program plan with UA, and her status is probational. The problem for us was Yaoyorozu.” Aizawa-sensei turned towards her and gave a look that I couldn’t quite read. “We couldn’t find her.”

“This is something we would rather not have revealed,” Nedzu took over again, but there are trackers in your costume cases, and in all of your costumes. I won’t explain the tech, but suffice to say that it is foolproof; only UA can track you, and nobody else. Believe me, we’ve tried to crack our own trackers. There is still a one billion yen bounty available to whoever successfully cracks our tracking system, can replicate it on-demand, and is not Quirk-dependent.”

“Which is why we were concerned when, upon arriving at what we believed to be Yaoyorozu’s location, we found an empty campsite.” Aizawa-sensei clicked the remote, and pulled up a picture. “We tried to track her phone, but its location was being spoofed. We tried to call her, but even when we forced the call to connect, all it gave us was an audio track on repeat.

“Edge Shot is known for his secrecy,” Aizawa-sensei continued, revealing the name of Yaoyorozu’s work placement hero. “I trained alongside him briefly. I know him better than anyone else on staff. I hadn’t expected this measure of impropriety from him.” He clicked the remote again, and the screen went blank. “Needless to say, we will be having words when next I manage to track him down. He’s been… avoiding me.”

And wasn’t that an amusing mental image. The faux-ninja was trying to live up to his image… by avoiding a schoolteacher. Yes, a superpowered schoolteacher whose specialty was bringing everyone else down to his baseline and beating the living daylights out of them… but still. A schoolteacher.

… oh who am I kidding, if Aizawa-sensei wanted words with me, I’d be terrified too. And if you disagree, then I hereby declare that you are a lying liar who lies!

“We had originally planned to go into further depth on this matter,” Nedzu said, taking the limelight for himself again. “However, a new opportunity has decided to present itself. Now!” He clapped his paws… hands… whatever, making a muffled whuffing noise. “Who here had to design their costume around their Quirk? And by that, I mean you had to make design compromises to facilitate the use of your Quirk, or to prevent your Quirk from negatively impacting the design.”
My hand went up in a heartbeat. If I could have something more covering and protective on my upper half, I would… but if I did, it would just get shredded any time I went for a morph that was larger than a human. And because I said “protective”, that basically removes spandex, latex, rubber, or any other stretchy material from the equation, because then I’m losing out on the protection aspect of it. I looked around me, and saw more than a few other hands raised. Just from the ones I could see at a glance, you had Mina, Tohru, Momo, Todoroki (though his was tentative, and only half-raised), Shishida, and Mineta. I’m pretty sure there were a few others who had their hands up, but I couldn’t see them from this angle.

“Well, before the footage cut out, who was watching Best Jeanist’s event from last Saturday evening?”

“I was there,” Katsuki groused, prompting more than a few nervous chuckles. “Get on with it!”

“If you insist!” Nedzu reached into his pocket and pulled out… perfectly uncreased papers. Okay, this was getting ridiculous. That has to be a hammerspace pocket generator or something. “For a few reasons I’m not at liberty to divulge, UA’s students will be the first to have access to the wonderful material young Mr. Schutz developed, and can begin redesigning their costumes posthaste!”

Dead silence.

“If you want to begin redesigning your costume, come on down!~”

I was out of my seat in a heartbeat. Mineta beat me to it, as did Tohru, but I think I was the third to get my grubby little hands on the forms I needed to finally get a costume that doesn’t have a glorified halter-top. Oh, the possibilities… I was going to be spending many, many hours slaving over these little sheets of paper. This was going to be absolutely perfect.

“And that’s all for now!” Nedzu exclaimed. “Iida-kun, Midoriya-kun, Todoroki-kun, Tsunotori-chan, Yaseiki-chan. If you five could stay behind briefly?”

My heart sank. Oh, right. That.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and turned to see Katsuki giving me an expression of slight worry. I put my hand over his and gave a slight shake of my head before pointing him over towards the door.

“I’ll see you back in the classroom,” I said. He huffed and bumped me with his side, but he did leave the lecture hall. I went back to my previous spot next to Pony. Once the rest of the class had left, Nedzu began to talk again.

“Sunday afternoon, at four oh three pm, the villain known as Stain escaped custody.”

… what?

“There aren’t many details currently available,” Nedzu continued, “but this is what we know: at four oh three pm on Sunday, Stain managed to escape from police custody. This is despite being held with restraints meant for somebody many times stronger than he is, which has… disturbing implications. However, the police did not detect the whiskey-scent associated with the League of Villains’ teleporter, so we can safely assume that they are not involved.”

“Incidentally,” Aizawa-sensei took over, “we are currently operating under the assumption that the Noumu attack in Hosu was a deliberate attempt to either co-opt Stain’s popularity or upstage him
entirely. For the moment, assume that Stain and the League are in opposition.”

“Sensei!” Tenya stood, back ramrod-straight, his countenance pale. “What about Stain’s previous living targets!?”

“He had every opportunity, once he’d broken free from his restraints in the hospital, to assault your brother,” Nedzu pointed out. “For reasons unknown, he did not.”

“Children, welcome to the worst part of being a hero: raw uncertainty.” Kan-sensei spoke with a somber tone, and I somehow felt the frustration bleeding off of his frame. “Sometimes, you just do not know, and have no means of acquiring that information. You take what little fragments of knowledge you do have, piece it together into a framework that makes some sense, and then you do two things. One, you act on the assumptions you’ve made. Two, you plan for your every assumption to be completely wrong, and get your contingency set up.”

“We are currently operating under the assumption that something has changed with Stain,” Nedzu added, “based purely on the fact that he had at least one, possibly up to four targets available within a small radius, and deliberately chose not to assault any of them. Several months ago, I consulted with the Hero Public Safety Commission to build a profile in an attempt to help predict where Stain would strike next. We identified him as an opportunistic ambusher; given his location and the profile, he should have struck. That he did not means our old model no longer works.”

“Until we know more, police presence has been increased in the neighborhoods you and your families live in, and Pro Hero patrols are being adjusted to cross through those areas more often.” Aizawa-sensei gave what I think was supposed to be a reassuring look at an increasingly-anxious Midoriya. “The high traffic, combined with Stain’s distinctive appearance, should help keep your families safe.”

“If any of you see anything out of the ordinary, let us know immediately,” Kan-sensei implored.

“Anywho, I believe that should about cover everything!” Nedzu clapped his paws and hopped down from atop the podium. “If you would excuse me, I have an important meeting in Tokyo soon.” Nedzu made his way out of the back of the room, his slow-building cackle remaining audible even as he walked further and further away.

“All of you, go take a minute to call your families if you wish,” Aizawa-sensei said, turning to leave himself. “Be back at your classrooms in twenty minutes.” With that, both he and Kan-sensei exited through a side door, different than the one Nedzu had taken, which didn’t allow sound through. This made it pretty darn clear that Nedzu wanted us to hear his maniacal, evil-genius laugh.

Sometimes that mouse-bear-dog-thing scares me. Wait, no, scratch that. He always scares me.

Pony and I took our cue and got up from our seats, heading towards the back. As we moved to exit the room, though, Todoroki blocked the rest of us at the door.

“U-um, was something the matter, Todoroki-kun?” Midoriya asked, still looking a little pale from the revelations.

“I’m not sure,” he said with candor. Then he turned his odd-eyed gaze at me, and I started in surprise. “Yaseiki. Your father was involved in the Stain incident, and is mainly active in the Hosu
“Yeah?...” I hesitated a bit, wondering what he was getting at.

“Do you think he might know more than what our sources have been told?” Todoroki asked.

And gods help me, but he had a really good point.

“Alright, uh… one sec.” I pulled out my phone and sat back down at one of the desks in the auditorium, called my dad, and set it to speakerphone.

“He should pick up,” I murmured. “He got hurt, so he won’t be on active duty for a little—”

“Kanna-chan?” I heard Dad’s voice come over the phone. “Is everything okay? You don’t normally call during school hours,” he said, worry in his tone.

“Principal Nedzu just told us about Stain,” I said, trying to keep my voice level. “Are all of you okay in Hosu? Does anybody even know how he did it? And did he hurt anybody on his way out?”

“The Commission’s still looking into how he got broken out,” Dad said. Behind me, both Todoroki and Pony had to stifle their gasps. “I can’t share anything more, it’s still an active investigation, but we do know he finally left Tokyo proper heading southwards before surveillance completely lost his trail. We’re trying to get a tracker in, but given most of them are still trying to find where the Wendigo arrived from and then disappeared to on Saturday?”

“Not likely to hear anything,” I bit out, shuddering a bit at the reminder of our family’s perennial killer stalker. “Promise you’ll let me know if you hear anything else?”

“I promise I’ll let you know what I’m allowed to,” Dad said. “And don’t think I didn’t notice your friends in the background there. Tenya-kun still sounds like a respirator. Also, thank you for keeping Kanna-chan from burning your apartment down, Pony-chan.”

“I don’t breathe like—”

“I was not—”

“You’re welcome, Uncle K!” Pony said, cutting us both off.

“Anyway, the Hero Commission wants this paperwork in triplicate, and I’m barely a third of the way through the pile. The hoops you go through to get paid… I’ll talk to you later, Kanna-chan. Be good.”

The phone line went dead. The five of us turned to look at each other.

“Ignoring your father’s need to embarrass you,” Todoroki began, at which I flushed slightly, “I can’t be the only one who caught what he said.”

“He’ll let us know what he’s allowed to,” Pony said, “meaning he knows a lot more than he’s saying, but is being told to keep things quiet.”

“I-it’s more than that!” Midoriya interjected. “You heard how he phrased it! Stain got broken out, which means a third party did it. And it’s not the police or the local heroes investigating, it’s the
The way he phrased that twigged at something in my memory. It was a little while back, but it was so oddly specific... was it?...

"Um," I ventured hesitantly. "I think I remembered something."


"You remember about a year and a half ago, when my dad went full idiot?" I asked. I’d wanted to say ‘did his best Endeavor impression’, but that would’ve been a little too on-the-nose with Todoroki in front of me. "Well if you check the footage, there was a bit where All Might was talking to him really quietly. And, well…” I demonstrated briefly, shifting my ears from human to animal and back again, shuddering at the temporary deafness that the transformation imposed.

"You heard everything," Todoroki said. "I gather this reminds you of what you heard?"

"After my dad crippled the Wendigo, however temporarily that ended up being," I continued, "he sort of vanished. We had a severed limb that could’ve been used by about... how many Quirks?" I asked Midoriya.

"Five currently active Pro Heroes have a Quirk that would let them use a blood sample to track somebody," he answered, "and another seven more that recently retired. Some are more accurate, down to the square mile, while others can only get the relative area, or need some other form of material aid to let their Quirk pinpoint the—"

"Midoriya, we get it!" Pony interrupted before the muttering could really build up.

"Kanna-chan. Are you saying that you heard All Might explaining that they were deliberately not tracking the Wendigo?" Tenya asked.

"That’s exactly it," I said. "Or more specifically, they had him tracked, but were waiting for him to lead them to whoever he was getting help from."

"And if this is similar…” Todoroki trailed off. He frowned, and looked all of us in the eye. "We cannot speak of this, you realize?"

"You think the Hero Public Safety Commission just, just... let Stain go?" Midoriya exclaimed.

"I may hate my old man," Todoroki explained, "but he had a good point that I agree with: only trust the Hero Commission as far as you can throw them. They have different priorities, and have occasionally used... unsavory methods."

"We’re probably safe from Stain then," Pony said. "But what would they even try to use him for? And how?"

"I would rather not think of it," Tenya said brusquely, pushing past Todoroki to get to the door. "Now, let’s get to class! We would not want to be late!"

With Tenya in the lead, we finally left the auditorium, heading back to our classrooms. I didn’t think I’d be able to concentrate on today’s lessons very well, though.
There was one additional bit of information Dad had snuck into his phone call that I don’t think the others picked up on, and it was more a particular quirk of his: whenever the Hero Commission made him do something he didn’t like, or enacted a new regulation he disagreed with, he’d refer to it as doing paperwork in triplicate, because that’s what it felt like to him: forced busywork, waste, nuisance, and annoyance.

He’d specifically referred to doing paperwork in triplicate, and that he wasn’t done yet. What else did Dad know about how Stain escaped?

And how was he involved?

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