Looking Glass

by twistedthicket1

Summary

Midoriya Izuku goes missing as a child. No villain is ever held accountable, no one ever brings his mother any answers. For ten years, the only people who remember the quiet, Quirkless boy are Inko and Bakugo Katsuki. They both feel his loss in different, inexplicable ways.

Eraserhead’s been on the hunt for an elusive villain only known by the press as ‘Ghost’. No fingerprints, blood, or evidence of any kind can ever be found at the scene of the crimes. All of the villain’s cases inevitably run cold.

Izuku wishes he’d been born Quirkless after all. Maybe then, he could've believed in heroes. Maybe then, he could've turned into someone good.
Hi there!

This is my first foray into the BNHA 'verse, and I'm real keen to write for it apparently! This story already has six, long-ish chapters in the works, and will be hopefully updating once a week every Monday or so.

I hope you enjoy it, it's an idea that's stuck with me for a long time, pretty much since I started this anime. If you want to keep up on updates, or follow me for more of my works, my tumblr is twistedthicket1.tumblr.com.

Without further ado, let's begin~
Out of all the villains that he’d had to face, Eraserhead was forced to admit that this one in particular was troubling. He thought this even as rain pissed down on him, soaking his clothes, his bandages, his dark hair until he looked like a bedraggled cat. He stood staring at the wreckage of a building, the smoke billowing into the sky and turning the air dark grey. In the distance, a siren wailed.

The problem with villains like this, he thought, was that there was no paper trail left behind. Whoever had planted a bomb in Endeavor’s main office had no physical Quirk. There were no marks from a Quirk-activated explosion, no ice or water marking the crime scene. There was no blood, no fingerprints, not even a message or particular reason or ransom why they had chosen this building. The only thing left behind was panic, as citizens filmed on their phones and stood huddled outside the wreckage, some crying as their loved ones were pulled out of the wreckage by the fire brigade. Endeavour himself was there, a dark figure that burned hotly in the rain like a flare gun, scowling and shouting and directing underlings. He always looked unhappy when he had to stand in the rain. Tonight he was especially miserable, from the looks of it. The thunderous expression on his features promised trouble, if there was only some kind of hint as to who was responsible.

Shouta had the uneasy feeling looking at the wreckage that the man’s anger would amount to very little, as it had with the two bombings that had happened two months before.

“It really is like they’re a ghost,” Hizashi spoke from beside Shouta, as conservatively quiet as he got. His hands were in his pockets, his normally pointy-haired up-do looking sad and deflated from the downpour. He chanced a glance at Shouta from behind his shades, his expression unusually grim. “The security cameras were disabled, no fingerprints or footprints left behind. No eye witnesses. Not even Nedzu has any idea of where to start, the only motive seems to be to create fear.” He shrugged “At this point, I’m thinking their Quirk is Invisibility.”

Ghost. Yeah, Shouta supposed it was kind of like that. He mulled the name over in his mind, head tilted in consideration.

He’d been working as a full time hero for nearly five years now, and it was the first time that he could admit to being unsettled. His fingers and eyes itched, one for action the other for rest. It felt like chasing this villain had burned most logic out of him, leaving him forced to relying on instinct instead. It told him that he didn’t think that the villain was invisible.

“The bombings are dangerous,” His gaze flicked to reporters, standing out in the rain and gravely delivering news in serious, real-time gravity. “Every time we don’t catch someone who sets fires, or creates fear… we lose public confidence in our capabilities.”

Hizashi cracked a small smile.

“So serious...” But he didn’t argue it further. Even he could feel the hostile glances directed their way, see the crowds in the distance being ushered back from the building for their own safety. The air felt claustrophobic and tense, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Shouta thought to himself that this villain knew exactly what they were doing, and even if it wasn’t
their end goal, the results were the same. It didn’t bode well. This crime… it was chaotic.

“Should All Might get involved?” Hizashi murmured, almost too softly to hear. His gaze was directed at the reporters standing a few feet away. Though his posture was relaxed, his smile was just a little too fixed. Shouta considered it quickly. As Eraserhead, he thought it was a good idea. As Shouta, something still felt off about the whole crime.

There was a puzzle piece missing, a niggling loose tooth that he felt somehow All Might just might crush.

“There’s something wrong with this.” He muttered out loud. Only Hizashi heard. Present Mic; to his credit, didn’t disagree.

-Ten Years Later-

It was no secret that Katsuki Bakugo was an angry person. Some of it was probably personality, some of it the nature of his Quirk. Being an explosion’s specialist tended to make someone a little hot-headed, especially when the power manifested at such a young age. He was proud, arrogant, and jagged in the kind of way that made his classmates reluctant to touch him lest they cut themselves on one of his sharp edges.

Eijiro Kirishima was by contrast, soft. Where Bakugo to many was the scalding part of fire, his classmate was warmth. His shark-smile was easy to come, his personality stubborn but undeniably kind. He was strong, but all of his classmates would willingly admit that he was also thoughtful. He was also, despite some of people’s beliefs, far more observant than given credit for. This came from his own childhood maybe, his aunt having suffered from sickness most of her life. She’d been a bitter, acerbic person, always looking for a fight. He’d been afraid of her when he was little, wary of her mouth and even more wary of her stubbornness. Getting her to enjoy anything had been the chore his mother had devoted herself to, something Kirishima hadn’t really understood until later in his aunt’s life. When the illness got worse, she got worse.

Somewhere along the way, Kirishima had realised that it was the illness that was bitter, and not the woman underneath. Somewhere around rounds of chemotherapy, hospital visits and crying sessions late at night when she thought he was sleeping, he’d seen that her anger was a shield.

It took all of five minutes being in Bakugo’s presence for Kirishima to realise in a quiet sort of way that Bakugo like her was sharp, to make up for something brittle beneath. It came out in the silences, when Bakugo was very tired or very unhappy. He’d stare into the distance, or stare into his hands as if searching for something other than anger. It appeared when Bakugo would look at him with a sort of confused resignation, clearly unsure as to why Kirishima stuck around when all he gave him was lip and abuse. It made Kirishima determined to be his friend, even if being his friend was sometimes (often) hard.
Kirishima was kind, kinder even when Bakugo snapped and snarled and bared his teeth. He was kind when his friend exploded (physically or metaphorically), and kind when Bakugo pushed to see just how far he could bend Kirishima before breaking him. Kirishima was tough in both his Quirk and his mind, and so could take more than his fair share of hits. If he couldn't, he wouldn't have lasted.

And when Mineta (because of course it was Mineta who couldn’t read a dangerous mood if his life literally depended on it) got frustrated with Bakugo’s bullying and finally snapped, Kirishima was there to hold Bakugo back from killing a fellow classmate (because let’s face it, that was decidedly unhero-like).

“Do you even have any friends?” The small boy had cried, uncharacteristically brave in the face of Bakugo’s anger. “Do you ever even think before you hit someone or before you blow up?! No wonder no one even likes you!” For Mineta to say that, given that he had earned the hatred of most of the girls in the class, was a bit harsh in Kirishima’s private opinion.

He had expected Bakugo to lash out, but he hadn’t expected the level of his reaction. The class that morning had been fairly chaotic, Aizawa-Sensei nowhere to be seen. Lida had tried to establish some order, but in truth it’d been a lost cause from the start. Now though, Bakugo launched himself from his chair, a wordless snarl on his lips. Kirishima hadn’t been expecting it, but it didn’t much matter. He had to stop Bakugo, because to not do so was to allow damage to school property. His Quirk came instinctively, hardening the side of his body facing Bakugo. It took most of the sting out of the explosion that landed on his side. The punch landed squarely, and Kirishima winced at what would likely be bruised and bleeding knuckles on Bakugo’s part.

“What the fuck do you know?!” Bakugo roared, ignoring any pain he felt in favour of yelling. The class fell silent, somehow sensing this was not the usual anger their classmate presented to the world. This was something sharper, unstable. Kirishima prayed that Mineta had a lick of sense in him, to read the mood at least now if he hadn’t before. “You’re a fucking perv! What do you know about friendship or any of that dumb shit!”

Mineta shrunk, his lips tightening into a thin white line. No one immediately stepped up to help him, but no one except Kirishima was siding with Bakugou either. Like scared sheep, most people’s eyes were wide as they saw the steam rising from Bakugo’s hands. There was danger in every line of his posture, a rattlesnake pushed too far. The silence that crackled was weighted.

It was Uraraka that was the first to break the silence, her quavering voice concerned.

“Kirishima, you’re bleeding.”

It was true, Kirishima realised. He could feel it in a vague sort of way, trickling at the thin skin of his temple. Hadn’t used his Quirk fast enough, he guessed. He offered her a toothy smile, shrugging it off.

“It’s nothing,” He replied easily “Probably just need a bandaid.” He couldn’t read Bakugo’s expression, but his shoulders tightened as he took in the small cut by Kirishima’s eye.

If he meant to say anything about it, he was cut short by the classroom door opening.
Aizawa-Sensei took in the class at a glance, everyone freezing with the new authority finally showing up. Kirishima winced, but to his surprise his teacher merely ordered the class to “Sit down.” They responded like lemmings, chairs scraping and sliding as everyone took their place. All except Bakugo, who was still trying to curb his breathing, his sweat turning into steam.

Kirishima expected (and worried) that Aizawa would snap, try to force Bakugo to sit. He honestly wasn’t sure what would happen if he did, who would come out of that confrontation the winner.

Instead, Aizawa checked the papers on his desk, reading something scribbled in his schedule.

“Bakugo,” He murmured. Bakugo didn’t acknowledge his teacher’s voice out loud, but his head did turn slightly. Aizawa took it as consideration. “You’re dismissed for the day. Go to your dorm. I can give you the notes later tonight.”

A quiet, disconcerted whisper broke out amongst the students. Mineta looked silently furious at the fact that Bakugo would get to miss class. Really, it was more of a slap on the wrist than a punishment. The muttering quieted down as Aizawa turned to the rest of the class, his glare sharp.

“To the rest of you, I feel we are far enough in the term that this shouldn’t bear repeating: I don’t tolerate in-class fighting outside of the training lessons. Antagonizing your classmates will lead in the future to consideration for expulsion. Am I clear?”

Wordlessly, the class nodded as one. There was no arguing with their teacher, not when he was in this sort of mood.

Bakugo gathered his books without a word. His fists trembled at his side as he made a hasty bow in Aizawa’s general direction. Kirishima watched him leave, wondering what about the date of April third could make Bakugo of all people look suddenly fragile.

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Inko Midoriya found the shriek of cicadas outside at once both comforting and sad. Their high, plaintive drone set many people’s teeth on edge, but to her they were the song of the inevitable. Every year, they marked the turn towards an anniversary that she couldn’t avoid. It was comforting, and devastating.

It didn’t hurt as much as it used to, but it still left an ache in her chest that was difficult to breathe around.

She treated it with the usual medicine for such a day, hot tea and the day off from work. Sleeping in wasn’t something that came naturally to her, but she tried. When she couldn’t lie in bed any longer, Inko got up, puttered about the kitchen, and convinced herself to eat a slice of toast. Despite the early hour, she briefly considered a glass of wine before discarding the decision with a shake of her head.

Instead she settled for cleaning a little, both putting off and anticipating at once the task before her.
Eventually, it couldn’t be ignored any longer. Inko drew a deep, considering breath, her hands fisted in her skirt.

Slowly, she made towards the upstairs, towards a room that for much of the year remained closed.

The air in her son’s bedroom was stale, though she tried when she could to open a window now and again. At one time the bed would have had sheets on it, but at some point during the years they’d been folded neatly at its end. The rest was relatively untouched, and Inko could almost believe standing at the doorway in the dark that Izuku would be coming home from school soon. The All Might posters that littered the walls seemed to be waiting for his return, the super hero’s broad grin a stark contrast to the sadness in Inko’s chest. She hovered, unwilling to step inside but needing to change the flowers on her son’s desk. It would do no good to leave the old, wilted ones today. Her teeth snagged on her lower lip, and she had to blink past the sudden hot rush of tears at the back of her eyelids.

She let herself think of it, just this once, alone where she could cry in peace. Today ten years ago, Izuku had never come home from the park.

Izuku would never come home to his posters, would never come home for dinner.

He’d never even have a chance to grow up, to live his dream of becoming a hero like his idol.

Izuku Midoriya had vanished ten years ago to this day, and Inko would never receive an explanation as to why.
The Boy Who Saw

Chapter Summary

In which Ghost is introduced, Shouto hates his dad, and All Might reflects on his need for a successor.

Chapter Notes

aaaaaand here we go~ first chapter! I hope y'all enjoy!

I'm making an effort to be regular about updates, and it's looking more and more like Mondays are a good time.

For those of you wanting to follow me/ wanna yell at me about my fics, my tumblr is twistedthicket1.

Without further ado, onto the show!

“Tell me again."

The voice came from the other side of the bar. To those who didn’t know it, it might have sounded bored or amused. To those that did, it was a rat crouched in your path.

The boy lifted his head slowly, green hair glowing luminescent in the overhead bar light. His gaze was flat, but his pupils flicked in rapid succession back and forth, reading a script that only he could see. His voice was equally devoid of life, his hands shoved into his pockets. Restless fingers spidered inside them.

“USJ has exactly twelve security cameras hidden in its training arena, five of which can be taken down through the same grid. The rest are split half and half, a safety precaution. Your most likely teacher will be Thirteen, given their age and range of experiences. Gender: unknown. Skill level: Moderate level Hero. Their body is void-like, approach with caution. Eraserhead has a ninety percent chance of being there, whilst All-Might has an eighty percent chance given the current known data. You know their skill levels and powers.” This last part was directed towards the dark part of the bar.

The voice hummed, and a man appeared from the shadows. His hair was white, greasy and hanging from his head in scraggly clumps. The tone of his ashen skin seemed greyer with the nasty grin on his face. Pleased, then. The green-haired boy breathed an inaudible sigh of relief. For now, he was
“Excellent, Ghost.” The man purred. His head was tilted in consideration as he looked the boy over appreciatively. “You really do make an incredible tool. I can’t be more grateful that I discovered you when I did. Should this heist go well, I think you deserve a reward.”

The boy didn’t respond to the praise, but the tension in his shoulders eased. Shigaraki was in a benevolent mood. That boded well for Izuku.

He blinked away the numbers in his mind, still counting out percentages and possibilities. There were still too many variables for his own comfort, but The Boss wanted to move ahead.

More Data.

He wanted more data on Eraserhead, especially. There was only so much that news headings and internet hypothesizing could give. The gnaw for information itched under his skin. Fine tremors wracked his body.

“I want Eraserhead for study.” He said, green eyes squinting out from under the mass of dark green hair. He looked perpetually sallow and tired, plaintive want clear on his face. Shigaraki laughed, the sound delighted as he came closer. The hand on his face obscured the look in his eyes, but Izuku knew it well enough. It was an expression of pride, pleasure that his Ghost jumped like a dog. Like his Quirk didn’t eat at him if he didn’t have all the numbers, all the data.

“To think, your pathetic mother and teachers thought you were Quirkless.” Shigaraki crooned. “The idea is laughable, when I see you like this. It’s a subtle gift, but so useful.”

Izuku didn’t respond. He had only vague memories of that time. Memories of a smile, or kind hands lifting him up in the air were useless with no face attached to them. The only name he remembered was a boy that had used to hurt him.

His Quirk wasn’t the kind that turned on or off, but one that ran under his skin, and being aware of it was like being aware of the need to breathe. It ate at him.

“Promise me that I get Eraserhead.” He demanded as much as he dared to. His tongue darted out to drag across his lower lip, and though his expression didn’t give much away, there was a feral hunger in his eyes. “Promise me.”

Shigaraki chuckled, one gloved hand coming to rest atop Izuku’s head. Fingers tightened in his hair, before the hand came to crack across the right side of Izuku’s face. It wasn’t a real slap, but it made a sound that ran in Izuku’s ears and made him taste blood from biting his tongue in surprise. He reeled, finding gloved fingers around his neck holding him in place. Shigaraki had gone from amused to displeased in an instant, and the threat was there as much as it was imprinted in the scars on Izuku’s arms, hands and throat. He froze, a hare caught between crosshairs.
“Do not forget your place.” Shigaraki hissed, his stance casual but his hand tightening on Izuku’s windpipe. Izuku didn’t dare to move, past experience had taught him that trying to avoid Shigaraki or fight back was as good as trying to fight a hurricane. He froze instead, pretending that he was made of stone even as he stilled his breathing, forced his Quirk down deep inside him until it was a whisper instead of a raging howl.

Izuku dropped his gaze, his hands moving from his pockets to hang limply at his sides.

“I’m sorry.” The blood behind his teeth slid down his throat. He swallowed against the hand around his neck.

Shigaraki’s fingers only tightened. Then, the hand slid away, and he stepped back. His expression was back to darkly amused, and Izuku had to acknowledge not for the first time that he had been toyed with like a cat toys with a mouse. He stared at his shoes, not daring to raise his head even as Shigaraki patted his arm.

“Good boy,” He murmured, turning to go. His parting words were given over his shoulder, a hand lifted in farewell. “You’ll get what you want, should this go well. But remember, the second you bite? I’ll do what I need to do without a second thought, and put you down.”

Izuku didn’t need his sentence spelled out for him. He kept his gaze trained to the floor, only lifting his head with the sound of the door closing. The shakes continued to run down his spine.

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There was a truth in society that no one spoke of, and yet inevitably came to light in the shadows. Some Quirks, just couldn’t be used for good.

No one liked to admit it, no one liked to think about it. Yet from Izuku’s experience, it was a harsh reality that slept just under the glamour and sheen of superheroes. It was a rot, a flipped coin to the shiny, clean media garbage that the news liked to feed its citizens. No one wanted a hero with Quirks like the League of Villain’s. No one could imagine any of their Quirks as hero worthy.

Shigaraki decayed things, Kurogiri was a void that could rip people to shreds, The Boss stole Quirks, eating away at the world and biding his time the way only an immortal could. Izuku, he had a Quirk that forced him to devour knowledge. It wasn’t a Quirk that on the surface seemed inherently evil, but it was. Izuku could see people, really see them.

As a child, it had come out with obsession. All-Might, Present Mic, Endeavour, these were all hero names he had known off by heart. He’d learned everything he could about them, from their blood type to abilities to their favourite places to go for morning coffee. Written off as a harmless pastime,
he could have filled entire journals with information about his favourite heroes, everything that made them cool. Yet that obsession, that hunger, began to reveal something to Izuku. He hadn’t recognised it for what it was at the time, but it came to him in dreams, a pre-Quirk moment that might have told him of his abilities to come.

He knew everything about most of his heroes.

And the more he knew, the more he knew how to beat them.

Present Mic was in love with Eraserhead. One early interview had made it obvious to Izuku, though he couldn’t say why. Yet he knew that weakness, even years before the hero had broken and come forward to ask the more elusive hero on a date. He’d known before Present Mic had known, all from one news special where Present Mic had talked about the man. Every lie, every inflection, the more Izuku noticed it the more his mind filled in the gaps. He started to write his analyses down, filling pages with careful, childlike print.

Thirteen didn’t have a gender. That one became public knowledge a few years down the road, but something Izuku had known early on. He’d never referred to the hero as he or she as a child, only as they. It didn’t seem right, if Thirteen didn’t like those pronouns, then why use them? He’d only come across the word agender later in his life, but the concept had still rung true to Izuku’s perceptive senses.

Something was wrong with All Might. That one had frightened young Izuku, though he barely remembered it now. He’d noticed the way the hero had started to only save the day during certain set times, how he cut interviews short. To most it just seemed like the hero was busy, but something niggled in the back of Izuku’s mind, some sort of whisper of wrong.

He wrote all of these theories down and more, pages upon pages of cataloguing that made him seem shy, nerdy and withdrawn.

_The Man in The Black Hoodie would kill everyone if he didn’t come with him._

That analysis, had changed Izuku’s life. It had come to him playing in the park, chasing after Kacchan (And god, was that memory like a pipe dream to Izuku). The sun had stretched the shadows of the swings until they seemed like long fingers. Only children had been about, and soon even they would have to go home for dinner. Kacchan had pushed Izuku, originally meaning for it to be a joke but proving to be too rough. Izuku (Stupid Deku) had started to cry. It hurt, or at least he’d thought that’s what it meant to hurt back then. He supposed his current definition of hurt had changed a bit. He’d been inconsolable, and Kacchan in frustration had left him there by the swings, stomping off while muttering to his friends about getting his mom to give him the first aid kit at home.

Izuku could remember the way the sun felt on his back as he’d waited, his skinned knee bleeding slowly into the sand. His tears had dried after the initial shock, leaving him embarrassed and tired. He’d propped himself up against the metal leg of one swing set, staring moodily out at the road and passing cars and wishing Kacchan wasn’t so stupid and mean.
A shadow had passed over him, a figure blotting out the sun. He’d squinted up at the thin man standing in front of him, his smile chapped and cracked, the only thing Izuku could see from under his hood. The memory of his voice still sent the skin on the back of Izuku’s neck breaking out in hard goose eggs.

“You’re going to come with me boy, and you’ll do it quietly. Or I think your Quirk can tell you what will happen next.”

Izuku had seen a leaf blowing in the wind. The man snatched it out of the air, and before Izuku’s eyes it wilted, withered, and turned to dust.

Somewhere in the distance, he’d heard Kacchan’s voice, and wordlessly stood to follow the man before his friend rounded the corner to the park.

The memory burned him, and Izuku forced it from his mind. Don’t think about it, don’t remember.

There wasn’t any use in dwelling on the past. He’d never tried to escape, had never wanted to go back besides the odd fantasy here and there. There was no point. Here, there were people he had to protect, and protection from the blood on his hands. The shady, tucked away bar in the red light district of the city was more home to him than any warm memory could be.

One of the only things Izuku trusted in his life was his Quirk. It had proven itself time after time, never wrong.

So when it told him that escape would lead to not only his death, but the death of everyone he could remember loving, then he listened. Hope lied, numbers never did. Statistically, he never could have been a hero, and statistically, he most definitely wouldn’t be able to be one now. His hands were too stained for that, Shigaraki’s fingers too tightly twisted around his neck.

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“Again.”

Shouto kicked, striking the punching back with a satisfying thwack that rang up his ankle. If it’d been the first, or even tenth time he’d done it, he would’ve found it soothing. As it was, it was the thirtieth time, and Endeavour showed no signs of allowing him to stop. His father stood in the corner of the training room. He was frowning and lost in thought over something that had clearly very little to do with his son and yet still meant he was to suffer a hard training session. Shouto knew that look, it was the look his father wore when he was angry, and couldn’t take it out on the person responsible.

That usually meant Shouto was to bear the brunt of it. He grit his teeth, striking the punching bag again. Another satisfying thwack.

“Again.” Endeavour demanded, somewhat on autopilot. Shouto didn’t dare argue, not with that expression on his father’s face. He did however, indulge in a brief vision of striking the man himself instead of the punching bag.

THWACK.
In truth, he was glad his father was distracted. It allowed his own thoughts to wander. inevitably found himself thinking of the upcoming fieldtrip to USJ. It was meant to be a surprise as to what they’d encounter when there, but word got around. Chances were, they’d be doing field training, civilian rescues, the whole works. It was the sort of training someone like his father might refer to as ‘pandering’. Shouto personally, was more on the fence. His gut wanted to disagree with whatever his father thought on principle, but truthfully he wasn’t good at calming crowds down. He wasn’t personable enough for it.

He avoided the thought that came next to him, that he couldn’t even make any friends in his own class. Not that he’d really tried—he’d learned from a young age that having a father like Endeavour invited two kinds of people into his life: those that wanted to be friends with him for his family name, and those that’d ask too many questions about his father’s method of parenting. Either came to an unpleasant end.

The thought that he might be a little lonely didn’t occur to Shouto, because to be lonely, one had to regret that they were alone. Shouto couldn’t bring himself to feel this way, not really. Being alone meant that he was safe. It meant that Endeavour wasn’t around to harass him or that his siblings weren’t around to give him varying degrees of pity.

He didn’t mind being alone, but a part of him still minded that it was the only time he felt like he could be himself. The blank-faced child that interacted with his father wasn’t Shouto, not really. It was a canvas, a mask. Underneath, something in Shouto bubbled just under the frozen surface. It was boiling, coming to a head slowly over years. He kept trying to ice it over, but it was finding the cracks in his armour. It made him kick the punching bag harder than he meant to, bare his teeth when his expression was supposed to be blank. It made the idea of any sort of rescue work, where he didn’t have to fight? Laughable.

Shouto had the uncomfortable feeling that he was going to fail the upcoming field trip, and he didn’t know what that meant for him. He’d never failed anything, academically speaking. Endeavour hadn’t allowed it. What would his father do, should he come back with anything less than perfection? The thought made the burning under his skin shudder, equal parts fear and hate. Shouto didn’t let it show, hitting the punching bag so hard that his ankle bone rang again, this time offering the first small twinge of pain that would lead to a bruise.

He didn’t want to know what Endeavour might do, because Shouto wasn’t sure what he’d do in retaliation. That thought, so unherolike but real in his mind, lingered throughout the rest of his father’s distracted training. Something had to give, Shouto’s mask, or the fire underneath it.

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Action could not exist in a vacuum. This was a fact that Toshinori had learned around the time that
All for One nearly ripped his spine out from his toes and left him with half a stomach. Good could not exist without evil, and the greater the light the darker the shadows behind the scenes. In order to cripple the darkness, he also had to cripple his own abilities.

It didn’t mean he didn’t hate the fact that he couldn’t walk a flight of stairs in his normal form without tasting blood in the back of his throat.

In his youth, he’d been athletic. Even without having a Quirk, he’d never had to think twice about doing most things that the average man could do. It’d taken him nearly a year of adjustment to cope with the fact that he simply wasn’t the man, the hero, that he used to be. He liked to think that most of the time, he wasn’t too bitter about it. His only regret, was that he’d have to pass on the Symbol of Peace. That’s what he hoped to start today, if he could.

He’d seen the new recruits, the heroes-to-be that had made it through the strict testing that it took to make it into U.A. He had a few ideas of who he wanted to speak to, should training under Thirteen’s guidance go over well. Still, no one had exactly stood out to him, and that was a problem. Toshinori knew he had to pass on One for All, could feel that his time had come with each pained breath. Yet something nagged at the back of his mind, a tiny voice that insisted that this was not the way. A part of him however small, however selfish, wished he could see some of himself in the potential candidates before him. All of these students had bright futures ahead of them, and most if not all had noble hearts and good intentions. Yet he had yet to find one that seemed to have the drive wielding such a Quirk needed. It was a personality trait that was difficult to define, and even harder to explain to someone who had not wielded such power before.

He’d argued with Aizawa and Principal Nedzu over it, trying to justify his hesitation. Aizawa had felt that someone like Eijirou, or perhaps Ochako, would be a good fit. Nedzu had proposed Mirio or Katsuki (a suggestion that had made Aizawa turn pale and look vaguely ill). Toshinori had disagreed with all of their recommendations, all for different reasons. Too optimistic, too gentle. Too inflexible, and far, far too angry. Yet he still had to choose, and so had reluctantly agreed to make a decision after today.

“For the good of everyone.” Aizawa had tried to coax him. Toshinori didn’t have the heart to tell him that he sounded more like a man trying to bully a student into doing their homework, than a voice of reason.

He’d been pacing in circles ever since, anxiously checking the clock on the staff’s room wall. His tea had long since gone cold, tasting earthy and gross when he forgot and took a sip. Toshinori thought about calling Gran Torino twice, but thought against it every time. This was something he had to do alone, face on his own. He only prayed he’d make a good decision.
“Brother, is that you?”

Eri’s high, quiet voice drifted in the dark, echoing across the chamber like a startled rabbit running for cover. Izuku could just make out her outline in the shadow of her cell. His headache made him squint.

“It’s me.” He confirmed.

She seemed to exhale in relief, then stood. Carefully, she made her way into the light, her white-blond hair hiding her face until she was nearly pressed to the bars. It was automatic, the way Izuku stepped forward to take her outstretched hand in his own. Her fingers were cold, the dark circles under her eyes habitual. He offered her a smile, and she gave one, smaller and shy.

This was a habit; a secret he had fallen into as of late. Really, since Eri had come to be under Overhaul’s care. Izuku had tried to remain ignorant, but he’d known from the moment the child arrived that whatever Shigaraki wanted her for, it wasn’t good. He’d taken one look, and seen an uncomfortable amount of himself. It seemed wrong that a child should be here alone, in this cold and dripping place.

He’d die before he told anyone this, mind.

“Well, I’ve got something for you,” He said “But you need to eat it all before one of the others comes to see you.” He chanced a quick look around, and seeing no one, revealed his prize. The little girl’s eyes became round and huge, taking the huge chocolate chip cookie and quickly cramming about
half of it into her mouth. She chewed gleefully, uttering a small sound of delight as she gave Izuku a
look of utter devotion. Through a mouthful of cookie, she whispered.

“How?”

“Slipped out to a grocery store, saw it and thought of you. Are they good?” When she
enthusiastically nodded, he uttered a sigh of relief. Izuku didn’t really eat sweets, his training and
Shigaraki’s watching over him not leaving him much time to indulge. He had an idea of what little
kids liked though, from hazy memories of childhood. Sweets and toys, mostly, seemed to be
something that could never go wrong. Eri had a particular fondness for *Sailor Moon* comics and
chocolate chip cookies.

“I’m glad.” He patted her bandaged wrist, noting silently their newness. Izuku kept his face perfectly
blank, but he knew what it meant. He was gentle, when he let go of her hand. “Are you in too much
pain?” She shook her head, but Eri was sometimes good at hiding when she was hurting. Izuku
wished she didn’t, but couldn’t blame her. They had both been on the unpleasant end of Chisaki’s
curiosity for similar reasons. It was just Eri’s unlucky stars that her ability could be transferred onto
people, whereas Izuku’s was all in his own brain.

“I came to say goodbye for a bit.” Izuku admitted, though it pained him to do so. Eri always looked
depressed when he had to go away for a while, but she took it bravely enough. She never cried,
though now she stopped eating the cookie long enough to look contemplative. Her red eyes regarded
him seriously.

“He’s sending you to do Bad Things again, isn’t he?” She’d always been rather good at reading in
between the lines of his farewell’s. It made treating her like a child difficult sometimes. Izuku
winced, but he couldn’t deny it. Instead he shrugged, looking at the cell floor like the cracks in the
cement might give him answers. His skin was itching, but he could ignore it better down here, near
Eri, away from Shigaraki’s promise of *more*.

“It’ll just be for a day or so, if all goes well.” He never told her that the price for many of his missions
not going well was his death. He didn’t have to. A part of him suspected that she knew. She looked
at him sadly, fidgeting with a bandage on her wrist.

“Are you going to have to hurt people?” She asked, so soft that Izuku had to strain to listen. When he
understood, the fake smile on his face slipped away. He didn’t look up, feeling cowardly.

“I’ll bring you a new comic. One with Chibi Usa in it.” Was all he said.

He thought she might push further, and feared for the day that she did. He honestly had no idea what
he’d tell her, if he could get the words out of his mouth. You just didn’t tell a seven year-old that
their only friend was a murderer.

She didn’t seem happy with his answer, but she accepted it. Izuku was grateful. He left after
squeezing her hand one last time, promising again to bring a gift. It always felt wrong to leave the
girl in the darkness that the basement brought, but Izuku knew that of all the places in the Villain Alliance’s headquarters, Eri was safest there.

The itch, the craving was only acknowledged far away from her, alone in his room as he was putting on his costume. His Quirk reared its ugly head, hissing in his ear its craving. *Learn, collect, know.* Izuku shuddered, half in fear and half in anticipation. He stared at himself in the mirror, and let himself be the thing that he kept far, far away from the little girl he so wanted to protect. Staring back at him, was *Ghost.*

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Iida had never run this hard, this fast before. When he was younger, he truthfully never really understood how people got “out of breath”. His Quirk usually didn’t allow for it, his legs giving out before his lungs most of the time.

His heart was squeezing itself into knots in his chest, his lungs felt as if they were submerged in fire. Psychological, but no less painful. If this was what most of his classmates felt after running laps, he understood their hatred of it. It felt like his ribs were about to crack open. He was going so fast, that his eyes could barely track what was ahead of him. All because *villains* had done the impossible: Break into a UA approved training arena.

It still didn’t feel real. He was in a dream, running on autopilot. Someone would come wake him up, and telling him he was running for nothing. The sharp cry of his muscles was the only thing that kept him grounded. The idea that his friends had gone after the void-like villain to buy him *time*, kept him going.

*I can’t fail. I can’t fail or everyone will*-

Iida squeezed his eyes shut, wordlessly shaking his head side to side. He couldn’t think about that. He *wouldn’t.*

He nearly ran into the figure that stood in the middle of the road, a dark blur on the winding path back to school. At the last minute, he dug in his heels and came face to face with a villain barring his way. The boy was about his age, that was the first thing that threw Iida. Even though he wore a mask, Iida could see the gangly length of his limbs. He was shorter than Iida, probably not much taller than Ochako. The staff in his hands further dwarfed him.

His brother had told him stories now and again of children, teenagers who had strayed from the hero’s path, but he’d never seen one before. They weren’t cases given to heroes in training, they were dangerous, often unstable. A child that could murder was a nightmare of legal red tape and charged politics. Looking at the boy before him, Iida realised why. It was like looking at *himself,* if
he was chronically malnourished and a little sickly. The chrome mask the boy wore couldn’t hide the sallow tone of his skin, or the dark circles under his eyes that could be seen in the mask’s holes. His gaze was flat grey, or maybe green, and it flicked restlessly, agitated. There was a fine tremor running through his entire body, like he’d gone on a rollercoaster before ending up here and his legs were still shaky.

The rest of his costume was rather plain, a dark hoodie with the sleeves pulled up to the elbow, a spray-painted Kabuki mask on the front. He wore a pair of jeans that seemed ripped from old age instead of fashion, and a utility belt kept them on his hips. The only two pops of colour were the boy’s shoes, and his hair. Wild, curly green strands fell around his face in a disorganized halo, seeming to fly in every direction. His shoes were strangely well-cared for, bright red and clean despite his overall bedraggled appearance.

The boy’s arms were bare but battered, littered with nasty scars that made Iida want to stare. Fingerless gloves revealed fingernails bitten to the quick, curled around the staff’s grip. The villain spoke, and his voice was flat and uninterested under the mask.

“You escaped. Interesting, I only counted that probability at fifty percent.”

Iida swallowed. His voice didn’t tremble when he spoke, though there was a feeling around the villain that felt dangerous.

“I’m afraid I can’t fail in my mission.”

The boy’s gaze flicked over Iida’s glasses, his face, and something in the expression shifted. It was a flicker of interest.

“You’re the Iida’s youngest son. The spitting image of Ingenium.”

The mention of his older brother made Iida twitch. How-?

“I know every hero registered in the city’s database. There was a slow day and I got bored. Also, I’ve read your file.”

The answer came unprompted, but the statement was unsettling. There were over four hundred heroes registered in the city’s index, and his files were protected under the school. An information Quirk? Or perhaps an eidetic memory.

Iida carefully braced himself to run, eyeing the path beyond the boy. He couldn’t let this villain stop him. If he really did have an Information Quirk, then more than ever he needed to get the teachers. There was no telling what the Villains had brought with them to prepare for this set up.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you,” The boy said softly. He spun the staff, the pointed end now directed in Iida’s direction. A dull hum seemed to emanate from it. “I’m having a bad day, and it’s going to get worse if I have to kill you.”

Iida was already moving, making a wide run in a burst of speed that he hoped would be enough.
The villain’s weapon was moved from his belt with lightning-quick speed. It unfolded into a long staff, the villain swinging it as if he knew from the start where Iida’s body would be. He couldn’t see it, shouldn’t have been able to, but with unerring aim the staff was rammed against Iida’s left leg. It found its home in one of his engines, digging in deep. Then, a searing hot pain jolted up Iida’s leg, hip, climbing up his spine and shoulder. A shout left his lips, his body crumpling and jerking as his muscles quivered and trembled. *Electrified*, his dazed brain couldn’t help but make the connection even as he hit the ground hard. He struggled not to vomit, spasms wracking through him and blood in his mouth- he’d bit into his tongue.

The boy sighed, clearly let down by his effort.

“Your movements are so obvious; a child could guess where you’d go. Honestly, what are those teachers teaching you at UA?”

Iida couldn’t speak. He was still trying to force his jaw open, the muscles uncooperative. He screamed through clenched teeth as the villain removed the staff from his engine, twirling it and holding it up so that he could see from where he was lying.

“Rubber handle, conductive length. Basically, a taser on steroids. You lead with your right foot every time, and your eyes told me where you were going. Your left leg’s vulnerable.”

Iida had to get up, had to move. Gaspind, he tried weakly to do so again. Again, his muscles ignored him in favour of shaking like jelly. The villain tutted, almost chidingly. “It’s no use trying to get up, and if you do I really will have to kill you. You’re better staying here. Our aim isn’t you students, anyway.”

“W-who-” But the boy hardly needed prompting. It was as if he was so unused to talking to another person, that once the floodgates were open he couldn’t stop. His voice had taken on a muttering tone, as if he were used to talking to himself.

“My boss is after All Might, but we made a critical error there. I’m sure he’s going to be mad with me over that one. But personally, I think Eraserhead is far more interesting, don’t you think? He’s not registered in any hero index; his civilian status is hard to track down… He’s a mystery, and it’s so rare I find a mystery in this day and age of computers…” Iida couldn’t see the villain’s mouth under his mask, but from his tone he suspected he was *grinning*. He tested his engines as subtly as he could, feeling a choking start-stop in response. No luck yet. The realisation that everyone’s safety might depend on getting this villain to *monologue*, was an irony that didn’t escape him.

“You’re going to fail,” He said, in part because he was hoping desperately that it was true. “Already Eraserhead’s after your boss… and All Might’s on his way… do you really think you can beat him?”

“Oh. I suppose it’s not common knowledge,” The boy blinked, looking down at Iida with apprehension. “All Might has a weakness. Also, knowing Shigaraki, your teacher is nearly dead by now,” Iida’s chest went cold. “Though, I did ask him to keep Eraserhead alive for my sake at least. Hopefully he listens.” Iida knew the villain was grinning now, the hunger in his eyes burning brightly. “I can’t take him apart if he’s dead.”
With a dull roar, Iida's leg engines came back to life. He moved with a strangled snarl, a high kick aiming directly for the villain’s head. He saw a flicker of surprise twitch on the villain’s face, but the boy was still moving. His staff came up, electricity off, moving just in time to push away against Iida’s leg so that the villain could tuck and roll to safety. The staff dragged on the pavement, shrieking. Iida landed on his feet, his stance shaky but standing. His breath came in hard pants through his nose. Somewhere along the way, his glasses had cracked.

The boy had also landed on his feet, the staff clutched in his hands. He was looking at Iida appraisingly, a hint of amusement playing on his features. There was a scratch on his cheek from where Iida’s shoe had managed to nick him.

“Clever,” He said gleefully, rising to his feet. “You distracted me. Clever, clever, clever.”

Iida didn’t smile. His jaw was grimly set.

“You won’t take Aizawa-Sensei, and you won’t kill All-Might. If you want to, you’ll have to kill me.”

“A pity.” The boy actually looked regretful, his head tilted to the side. “You’re so young, and have so much potential. All of your family does, though. Are you really going to use such big words? You’re still a kid.” A look of perplexion crossed the boy’s face. “Why don’t you run away? No one’s watching, and I think we both know that I’m going to win if we fight. I’ve killed before, and you haven’t.”

“You’re also a kid.” Iida replied. “You must have someone important you’re fighting for?” The smile on the boy’s face seemed to shrink, something dead encroaching into his expression. His hand twirled, the staff crackling with blue electricity once more, live and dangerous.

“Not clever enough; it seems, to keep your mouth shut.” He intoned softly. The amusement was gone, and Iida knew with a sinking heart that his stalling limit had been reached. His thoughts went to his brother, to his mom and dad. *Forgive me, Tensei.* He thought. *It seems like I might not become a hero like you, after all.*

He braced himself as the boy charged, his engines guttering to life. Iida prepared to throw everything he had into them, hoping to just be fast enough, just *good* enough, to run to UA. The stuttering of the tank in his legs didn’t give him much hope. Something was broken.

He moved, and the boy leapt, and Iida didn’t know who was going to land their hit.

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“*Have No Fear, Because I Am Here.*”

*Izuku was a child, trapped in a nightmare. There was so much blood on his hands that it had stained his fingernails. He kept trying to wash it in the small, dirty sink in his cell. He kept finding more. His*
sobs sounded funny, strange in his ears. The dark echoed his voice back to him, higher and distant.

I Am Here.

He’d tried to be brave, tried to be strong like All Might.

Somebody would notice he was missing, someone would come and save him.

That was the mantra that kept running in the back of his mind, playing like a broken record. It kept him quiet through Shigaraki’s yelling, despite how the villain kept hurting him when he didn’t do what he wanted. It hurt so bad, though, and Izuku was starting to feel shaky with hunger and hopelessness. He wasn’t sure, but he thought it’d been a week since he’d been here.

It felt longer, somehow.

Against his hope, something bitter and scared was beginning to break free.

Why was no one coming? Did no one care? He wanted his mom. He wanted his dad even, and the man had moved out of his and his mother’s life when he’d been only a baby. He’d been having dreams where All Might found him, scooped him into his arms and carried Izuku away from this place. He kept waking up alone.

I Am Here.

“No one’s coming for you.” Shigaraki had told him during their last interrogation session. He’d grown frustrated when Izuku refused to tell him about the man in the video footage: A grainy image of Endeavour and one of his sons walking to a grocery store. The boy’s mind had whispered to him information, though he’d clenched his jaw tight to keep it spilling it.

He’s a bad dad. He hits his son. His son keeps flinching when his dad lifts his arm too quickly. He’s badbadbad-

“He wants to go home.” Izuku ended up saying, though it came out as more of a sob. Shigaraki didn’t hesitate- a gloved hand flying up to strike Izuku across the cheek. The little boy had rocked and sobbed harder, his jaw stinging.

The memory of that pain made Izuku sniff, sinking into a crouch in his cell. He could feel that his face was swollen, like Kacchan’s fists when he got too angry and hit a table or a wall. The taste of blood in his mouth made him cry harder.

I Am Here.
But All Might wasn’t, not really. He was alone.

He was always alone.
The ringing in Izuku’s head was like a gong. It radiated with pain up along his jaw, to his forehead, across one ear. He felt like he’d been hit by a semi, and that was saying something considering his pain tolerance.

Opening his eyes was hard, it felt like trying to slide open a rusted window. A moan left his lips.

He was lying down, that much he could figure out. Judging from the fact that he still couldn’t hear due to the throbbing in his skull, he could only assume he’d been hit. Whatever had managed it, packed a punch. Stifling another groan, he tested to see if he could move his arms and legs. Only when they twitched could the tight knot in his spine loosen in relief. No broken bones.

Izuku managed to turn his head, blinking blearily at the figure that was now standing between him and Ingenium’s little brother. The sun was blotted out by the shadow of the man, and Izuku had to squint to see past the glare. His ribs throbbed as his heart sank, recognising the imposing shadow. A sound left him, a laugh of incredulity. It came out as a wheeze, hysterical and shaking.

So many miscalculations today.

So this was how he was going to die. Fucking. Excellent. If there was any way he expected to go, it’d just make sense it’d be taken out by the Symbol of Peace, Mr.-Tightpants- America Himself. He’d lifted his head, but now he let it drop to the pavement in defeat.
All Might was standing in front of him, his hands on his hips and that trademark smile on his face. The shadow of his eyes left a dark slate, his blue irises glowing with the power of his Quirk.

Though this was the first time Izuku had seen it in person, the hero looked larger than life itself. There was something a little kitschy about him, almost forced. The American memorabilia, tanned skin, and muscles upon muscles were comic book in every way. It was utterly imposing.

Izuku groaned, knowing the answer his Quirk gave him even before he gave All Might a long, measured look.

No weaknesses, save for his time limit.

The most frustrating heroes were the borderline invincible ones. He settled for managing to spit up a little bit of blood at the hero’s feet.

“You’re here.” That was Iida, clearly relieved, surprised, and more than a little awed at being in All Might’s presence. Not planned then, that much was a relief. Izuku was beginning to believe that he had lost his touch, to mess up this badly. Despite his best attempts, there was no way to account for spontaneity.

“I was going to go with your class in the morning, but an… inescapable errand had to be run before I could do so.”

Ah. So that was it.

Izuku’s Quirk mentally calculated the approximate time, and the length that All Might had been MIA. Three hours, just about. Not that he could do much about this information now. He couldn’t even sit up, the nausea from being knocked on his ass was so strong. He managed a mumbled curse.

“It’s to my benefit.” Tenya managed, obviously relieved. The boy adjusted his cracked glasses, looking at his teacher earnestly. “There’s been an attack. Aizawa-sensei... I think he’s in trouble. We need the teachers to come.”

All Might took in this information. The broad shelf of his shoulders tightened, his hands curling into fists at his side.

“You run to the school.” All Might said after a moment of consideration. “I’ll deal with this villain... and come to Aizawa’s aid.”

That was bad.

Shigaraki would kill him for sure, if that happened. A moment of dull panic settled into Izuku’s bones. Like a rabbit cornered, it was beginning to dawn on him that there was no way out of this. Somehow, he’d managed to fail badly enough that this was going to hit the fan hard. Even if he managed to escape, and it was a strong if at this point, he’d still have to face his boss. He wasn’t sure
he’d make it out of that alive, the numbers weren’t good.

Iida was looking at him. In his expression was something uncertain.

“Deal with him, Sensei?” His voice didn’t waver, but his hesitation was clear.

By contrast, Izuku wasn’t too worried. He knew All Might’s track record, and it contained less maiming and killings compared to Shigaraki.

*Here*, he was relatively safe. Caught, yes. Likely to face the idea of jail time, yes. That was something he knew would have come either way, death or capture. It was just another cage, and this one had the decency not to kick him while he was down.

Still, a quiet voice in the back of Izuku’s head screamed that exceptions could be made.

All Might’s expression seemed grim, despite the smile on his face. The oppressive air of his presence made it hard to breathe, like a physical weight. Izuku had little doubt that one hit from the man’s pinky, would be enough to kill him. He braced himself for an attack as All Might stepped forward, his heart hammering in his chest.

He found himself hoisted into the air. An undignified squawk left his lips, followed by pain as bright as a fire shooting up his side. His damn ribs. The nausea came quickly after, forcing Izuku to press his face against the crook of the hero’s shoulder. *Dammit.*

All Might held him like a sack of potatoes, not gentle exactly but without much effort. He turned to Iida, energy crackling along his body blue-white.

“I’ll take him so that he can be held accountable to the authorities. Go, Iida! Quickly!” His tone could have moved armies. *This,* was the voice of the man that had made Izuku want to be him as a child. A bitter, nameless emotion lodged itself in Izuku’s throat.

Iida didn’t argue, snapping a quick salute before tearing off. He was quickly a blue-white dot in the distance. Only when Iida was gone, did All Might bother to speak to him directly.

“You’ve picked a bad day to attack UA.”

Izuku’s nausea was getting worse, he honestly thought to himself that he must be concussed. Blackness was encroaching on his vision.

“Mmrgh.” He managed, because it felt like he had to put up at least a token objection to being manhandled like this. He hadn’t been carried like this before. He’d been tossed around when unconscious, thrown back into his cell, but not held securely like he was some cat with a bad temper. He scowled. “Would’ve been a perfect day, if you had just shown up when you were s’posed to.”

All Might said something, but the ringing in Izuku’s ears was only getting louder. That was fine, he didn’t *want* All Might’s explanation. He wanted nothing from this man, who now came to him ten
years too late. There was nothing, no hero’s monologue or meaningless platitude that could make the hate in Izuku’s chest loosen. This rescuing, no matter how unintentional on All Might’s part, would only crumble away.

His vision swam, and the ground beneath him seemed further and further away. Breathing was a chore.

Izuku blacked out before he had to attempt anything else. He let it happen, his eyes sliding shut without a fuss. His Quirk registered before he was gone the red smudge by All Might’s mouth, dripping down his chin.

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He wasn’t sure how long he was out for, but it felt like a while. Izuku wasn’t usually one for sleeping, not in long stretches at least. He’d lived for the past five years or so under the same roof as Toga, who drank blood as part of her Quirk. He’d brushed shoulders with monsters like Dabi, or Overhaul. Sleep didn’t come easily, not when every time you closed your eyes you risked having a piece of yourself dissected or eaten or stolen from you.

He took cat-naps. Sometimes they were enough, most times they weren’t. If he was really exhausted, Izuku would set traps. Nothing that would kill someone and piss off Shigaraki, but traps that could leave a nasty sting. Overhaul had been the victim of a few of the uglier ones, up to and including having a wasp’s nest catapulted directly at his face.

This meant that Izuku woke up scrambled and sluggish. He blinked, white light making his eyes hurt as he struggled to see past the glare. There was a clinical smell. The confusion kicked into a low-grade panic when he found that he couldn’t move his arms or legs. Looking at his wrists, he found himself handcuffed to what he now recognised as a hospital bed.

*Not Good.* A stab of panic hit him squarely in the chest, making his breathing turn sharp and shallow. It swallowed Izuku, threatening to drown him entirely. *Shigaraki’s going to kill me.*

He was in a hospital, which meant he had been caught.

He’d been stupid enough to allow himself to be caught.

Then, the anger came. It was short and fire-bright, rising in the back of his throat and making Izuku have to grit his teeth to hold back a scream.

*Damn it. Damn it!* They’d been so close, *so close* to having everything work out smoothly-

And then All Might came late, and ruined everything.

He jerked in his restraints, a growl coming from deep inside of him. It made his chest hurt.
A voice spoke from somewhere to his left, probably meaning to be soothing.

“Take it easy now, you sustained a pretty bad head injury and some bruised ribs.” Well, that would explain why Izuku felt as if he’d been trying to wrestle a brick wall with his face. He turned, seeing an elderly woman standing to the side.

She was tiny, hunched and wrinkled, and though her lab coat seemed to swallow her there was steel in her eyes as she looked at him with her hands in her pockets. Izuku knew her, though only through photos of when she had been younger, the face of the first generation of heroes. His Quirk filled in the details as his eyes swept over her, taking in a geriatric hip, poor eyesight and arthritic knees and storing it away for later.

“Recovery Girl.” His voice rasped, and it was then he realized how thirsty he was. Izuku could drink an entire lake, and still some part of him believed he might still need more. Recovery Girl hummed, turning towards the sink at the corner of the room. She filled a glass of water methodically, holding it to his lips.

“You know your heroes, lad.” She was kind, or as kind as a hero could be to a villain. Izuku took greedy mouthfuls of water, feeling relief sink into his bones. He drained the cup, then sat back and blinked blearily at the ceiling.

“Have to.” He muttered, feeling charitable now that his mouth was no longer a desert.

Recovery Girl didn’t ask more, but she took a seat in the hard plastic chair by his bedside. Her grey gaze peered at him from the deep-set lines of her face. His eyes narrowed as he gestured with his restrained hands at the room around him.

“Why am I here?”

“You’re young, for a villain,” She ignored the question in favour of her chiding observation. “I must say that when All Might brought you to me, I was preparing for a man.” If Izuku had more pride, he might have been stung. As it was, he looked at her blandly as she adjusted her glasses. “I didn’t expect a child.”

“I’m gifted for my age.” He said cheekily, and was surprised when the old woman actually laughed. Her face soon sobered though, her hands folding over her cane. There was a tired look in her eyes. Izuku didn’t often feel like a child, not really at least. Yet somehow under this woman’s stare, he was an infant. He wasn’t entirely sure how it made him feel.

“You’ve gotten yourself into a real fix, lad. Ordinarily, you’d have been taken to the police. Your age gave argument to bringing you to the school so that the authorities could question you while I could tend to your injuries.” She looked at him searchingly, as if trying to peel back the layers of Izuku himself.

“A word of advice: If you’re being threatened… forced to do the things that happened at Thirteen’s arena… I’d like to think at least that you didn’t do this by choice. I have no wish to see a child go to
jail, not when you look so much like our students.”

There was a tight knot in Izuku’s throat. He found he couldn’t quite meet her gaze, instead directing his attention to the top of her right ear.

She had no idea what she was asking of him. He knew that, logically. It didn’t stop the muted defeat trickling into his thoughts, or the chill from settling in his bones.

The thought of betraying Shigaraki sent cold terror through his veins. Eri’s face swam in his mind. Had he been distant enough? Good enough at hiding his protectiveness of her? Already she was at risk, Shigaraki’s anger was unpredictable. How long had he been here? What would Shigaraki deem to be an “acceptable” punishment for this kind of failure? The questions in his head were sharks, and his Quirk could only feed so many of them without the man actually being there.

Izuku had borne the brunt of enough to know how much it hurt, and without his physical presence there was no one else to take it. If he gave any information away, turned traitor? The thought of Eri enduring anything like he had made his stomach twist itself into knots, nausea climbing high in his throat.

“I wasn’t threatened.” Izuku said flatly, which was technically true enough.

Recovery Girl looked sad, but resigned. Her cane tapped the floor in thought, a sigh heaving her shoulders as she rose to her feet. She was still only a little taller than the bed itself.

“if that’s how you want it.” She murmured. Izuku watched as she brushed off her lab coat, turning to take her leave. Why did he feel as if he had missed some chance? This old woman owed him nothing, and he didn’t owe her. There was no reason to feel like he was no better than the dirt under her shoe.

He heard rather than saw Recovery Girl pause in the doorway, offering him a parting shot after some consideration. “It was nice meeting you, lad. I do hope that you find your way somehow, in all this mess.”

The sound of the door sliding shut left Izuku alone with his thoughts, and alone with the panic that was slowly, surely, dragging him into a pit.

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“Tell me.”

Shigaraki ordered, deadly quiet. Izuku was eleven, all fight beaten and broken out of him. His head hung low as his gaze flicked around the empty room, overturned tables and chairs and blood splatter just details to a bigger picture. His fingers itched at his sides.
“Three men, two killed on the scene. Breaking in and armed assault.” His head tilted to the side, noting the lack of corpses. “The third man’s Quirk dealt with the bodies somehow.”

Shigaraki hummed, a pleased sound. The puzzle pieces slotted into place, and Izuku blinked in confusion.

“You... you set this up, somehow. Why? A test?”

“To see if your skills were as valuable as me and Sensei had hoped.” The villain confirmed. His gloved hand came to rest on Izuku’s shoulder, and the boy suppressed a shudder at the contact. Open revulsion of any kind earned pain. Izuku resisted the urge to fidget as Shigaraki’s hand came to comb through his hair, petting him as if he were a dog that had shown promise in tracking a scent.

“I don’t understand.” He confessed. Why was his Quirk being tested? Shigaraki knew what he could do- wasn’t that why he’d been taken from his home in the first place?

Shigaraki only grinned, the expression stretching his thin face into something dark and unpleasant.

“You will.” He murmured, and his long fingers continued to pet Izuku’s hair even as he lead him away from the room.

It was only after he was alone in his cell that Izuku realised that he’d lost his fear of blood, somewhere along the line. Curled into the corner of his cell, he guessed it was at some point between Chisaki’s experiments on him, and Shigaraki’s training. He wondered if that made him bad, like one of the villains his mom used to fret about in front of the television when she’d thought he’d gone to bed.

But his mom wasn’t here, and he didn’t have anyone to ask. If he was being honest, Izuku thought he might be too afraid to do so, even if the option was given to him. He tucked his face against his arms, wishing he could cry. His eyes were bone-dry. Somewhere along the line, he’d forgotten how to do that, too. It made Izuku think of Kacchan, though he hadn’t thought of the boy in years.

Wouldn’t he be proud of him, if he could see?

Izuku bit into his nailbed, and pulled the skin apart.
Katsuki

Chapter Summary

In which Bakugou reflects on how much it sucks that he has to feel things like a normal human being.

Chapter Notes

Hey y'all~

So just a touch on the tags above specifically the mention that in this fic Bakugou is a trans dude and also the mentionings of self harm. Nothing really graphic or worrisome, more as establishing a bit of his character at this point in the story.

Also! if you want a look into his and kirishima's relationship/ musical inspiration while reading listen to "The Last of The Real Ones" by FOB. For Bakugou himself, I listen to "Young and a Menace" also by FOB. for whatever reason, both of these songs really jive well with my take on Katsuki's character for this story.

As for why class 1-A isn't in dorms yet, well according to the manga, they only established the dorms after the students kept getting attacked by villains, so.

As always, thank you so much for the kind comments and kudos! Please let me know what you think~

Contrary to popular belief, Bakugou had some idea that his behaviour was not exactly hero-worthy most days. It was an awareness that came in the silence that followed when he was too loud, too aggressive, too willing to resort to violence as a first resort to get his way. He wore his emotions on his sleeve, if he was angry he was furious, if he was happy it was like trying to contain a supernova for all the good it did him when he tried to hide it.

When he was sad? When he was frightened? Well, he wasn’t very good at hiding that either. He was in every word, explosive.

At a very young age, his mom had realised that her child was sad. It had made telling her easier, if only because hiding it wasn’t an option. Katsuki never could hide, making transitioning to his true self (and god, he hates that shitty, tropey term for all of this) relatively simple. He’d been brought into the world an unhappy little girl, but by four was an angrier but happier little boy to all of his classmates and neighbours. It had been so easy in some ways, that Katsuki privately felt that what
happened to Deku was the universe’s way of punishing him.

*Your pride, the weapon you use to hurt other people... it’s going to take that person you hurt away, and you’re going to live with the regret of what you did to him for the rest of your miserable, selfish life.*

Izuku Midoriya disappeared when Katsuki was only six years old. One day, he and the other children were playing out on some swings. They’d left Izuku behind (he’d been crying *again*), and when they’d come back, he was gone. If Katsuki strained, he could remember the way finding that empty sandbox had felt. First disbelief, then anger, then confusion. Where had the little twerp *gone?* He’d thought Deku had gone to hide, maybe gone to tell his mom what had happened. Katsuki hadn’t once thought that his friend/sometimes bullying victim had been *taken.* Not in their sleepy suburb. That sort of thing only happened on the news, so his own mom could fret over him and tell him to *never* go with a stranger.

He’d gone to tell his mom, who’d later gone to tell Inko Midoriya. A halfhearted search began that soon morphed into a manhunt as the day crawled on and no sign of Izuku turned up. It was as if he had vanished into thin air, snatched by some sort of monster from a fairy-tale. As the days turned into weeks, Katsuki’s anger at the boy burned to white-hot fury, to confusion, to finally fear and sadness.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. He’d never *wanted* Izuku to disappear, not for *real.* He’d tried to negotiate it in his head, justify it. He’d only wanted Izuku to toughen up a little, act *cool.* How was he supposed to be like his hero All Might if he cried at scraped knees and boo-boos? He hadn’t wanted- He *didn’t.*

*It doesn’t matter what you wanted.*

A small, insidious voice whispered in the back of his mind.

*This is because of you. He’s gone, and his last memory of you is that you hated him, wanted him gone.*

The weeks turned into months, and Katsuki was left adrift with only his sadness, and no one to blame but himself.

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“Are those marks from your Quirk?”

Kirishima was the first with the bravery to ask, maybe because he was the first to see. Katsuki could get away most of the time in his own home being binderless and sleeveless. He’d gotten comfy in Kirishima’s company, perhaps a bit too comfortable really. Carelessness had left him inviting Kirishima over to his house, being in a t-shirt and sweatpants, doing homework with him on his bedroom floor.
The question had sent a lick of fear through Katsuki’s spine, but it was an old response from a time when he had something to hide. He resisted the urge to turn his wrists to the floor, hiding the scarring that made shiny patchworks of his arms to the crease of his elbows. His voice was cutting, but that much would have been true regardless of the question.

“What kinda fucking question is that?”

Kirishima’s face turned the same shade as his hair, realising the invasiveness of his question. He held up his hands in apology.

“Sorry bro, filter got away from me.”

There was the opportunity to drop it there, but Katsuki could still see the curiosity in his friend’s eyes. He tried to push down an irritated sigh, and only partially succeeded. God fucking dammit, Katsuki knew he wouldn’t leave it alone.

“Yes.” He said, because in a way they were. It was his Quirk that made the marks, in a roundabout sort of way.

Kirishima seemed to sense that there was more to the story though, his brows knitted in confusion. Katsuki refused to meet his gaze head-on, some strange combination of embarrassed and irritated at once.

“Isn’t a person’s body meant to be immune to their Quirk, though?” Kirishima wondered aloud, his fingers coming to rub at his chin as he thought about it. Katsuki tried not to feel like he was being interrogated. He reminded himself that Kirishima was his friend, tried to use some of the shitty breathing exercises he’d been taught in therapy.

“Yes.” He answered again, through gritted teeth. Shitty-Hair wasn’t this stupid, surely?

Slowly, Kirishima seemed to reach the right conclusion. His expression morphed from confusion, to horror, to sadness. Katsuki braced himself for something disgusting like pity. There was an uncomfortable, silent stretch. He wondered if it was possible to die from embarrassment and shame.

Then, Kirishima said something unexpected, and surprisingly observant given his track record all things considered.

“I’m glad you seem like you’re doing better.”

“What?” his panic fizzled out into shock. He stared at Kirishima like he had grown two heads.

“They’re old, right?” Kirishima gestured to the scars, a nervous toothy smile etched on his face like he hoped it’d put his friend at ease. “I’m saying that, all things considered, I’m like, really glad that you’re doing better than you were when those happened.” He chanced a slightly worried look at Katsuki then, seeming to reconsider his words. “Um. Unless you’re not? In which case I care about you and think we should like, talk-”

“I am.” Katsuki blurted, because watching Kirishima try and shove his other foot in his mouth was awkward for both of them. He’d rather beat himself unconscious against a brick wall frankly then
discuss his childhood like they were participating in a feelings circle. It’d been hard enough to get the words out right with a medical professional, let alone a friend. He wasn’t programmed to just talk like it was nothing.

Kirishima looked equally relieved. He ran a hand through his messy red hair, grinning widely up at Katsuki from the floor.

“Good! That’s good.” He fiddled with his pen. If Katsuki had been looking at him instead of his bedroom wall, he might have seen the slight flush that crawled up Kirishima’s neck as he added. “I’d hate to see the bravest dude I know hurting like that.”

Katsuki found himself focused on the fact that Kirishima hadn’t hesitated to call him dude, his binder long since put away for the night. He tried to hide the pleased flush that crept up his own face, and failed. He pressed his face against his bed covers.

“What’re you even going on about?” He growled. He could feel Kirishima’s eyes on him, could hear the amusement in his voice.

“Dude, are you blushing?"

“Shut the fuck up or your head will end up buried in your ass.” Katsuki snapped. His friend laughed, and the sound did funny things to his heart, making it feel like it was going through a taffy puller.

Thankfully, Kirishima was too nice (or maybe too afraid of Katsuki’s short fuse) to say anything else.

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So, Katsuki let Kirishima get closer. There were times he wasn’t sure he wouldn’t end up regretting it. He tried not to think about it, because if he did he started to get agitated. Kirishima took to following him a bit like an overly excited puppy, and Bakugou had to admit that he liked the attention.

Whether or not he liked how Kirishima seemed determined to know everything about him, was a bit of a different story.

He was used to being treated as someone to avoid or fear, and the experience of having someone actually come looking for him was flattering and irritating in equal parts. Katsuki thrived on attention as much as it made him competitive, and Kirishima was more than happy to indulge in a good training match or seven. Their friendship was probably to an outside viewer a little problematic, given their tendency to beat the shit out of each other for fun.

Katsuki had never had a friend better suited for him before in his life.

Then The Anniversary rolled around, and Katsuki felt like no matter where he was looking,
something reminded him of the whole terrible day. He’d come to mentally date Deku’s disappearance in his head as The Anniversary thanks to the news headlines that used to commemorate the boy’s disappearance. It made his skin itch, if he remembered the news broadcasters solemnly staring into the camera, as if they really cared that Deku was gone. It made him angry and oddly fragile, to the point where even the fucking teacher noticed his quiet falling apart.

He’d been embarrassed, and in turn even angrier with himself.

Then he’d made a fool of himself in front of the entire class, over something the fucking Grape said. Really, he liked to think he had a bit more pride than that.

Mortified with himself, Katsuki had escaped to his house. His one saving grace was that no one stopped him on his way, so no one had seen how dangerously close he’d been to doing something awful like cry or blow up. His room felt too small, but it was a good buffer for his anger. His Quirk unthinkingly torched a few notebooks that he flung from his backpack, sending his sparse notes from class briefly ablaze before sputtering sullenly on the floor. He had the good sense to make sure it wouldn’t light anything else ablaze, then lay face-down on his bed.

Given the time to calm down, Katsuki could admit to himself that he probably should have just skipped class. He knew well enough by now to know that today wasn’t a day where he or anyone who had been a part of that day was functional. His mom still took Inko out for brunch every year today, because doing so meant that Deku’s mom wasn’t alone and was eating and getting out. Mitsuki still called Katsuki everyday today, making sure in a roundabout way that he was alright. No one talked exactly about why his mom went to such lengths, but everyone appreciated it in their own ways. Katsuki didn’t tell her off for calling him, and Inko didn’t ignore the doorbell when she rang. Both of them pretended like it helped.

The thought that he should maybe check on Deku’s mom himself now and again niggled in his mind, but he always quashed the idea firmly. It wouldn’t be taken kindly, given that Katsuki was, well, Katsuki.

The knock on the front door of his house was nearly expected, a few hours later. He knew without getting up that it was Kirishima. He didn’t answer, not even when his friend hesitantly called his name. Katsuki wasn’t fit to be around anyone right now. A few moments stretched in silence, then he heard the retreating sound of Kirishima’s footsteps from the front step. Katsuki relaxed only after he couldn’t hear them anymore. He ignored the small, stupid part of himself that wished his friend had persisted, hands clenching under his pillow. He wouldn’t have the words to explain anyway, even if he really wanted to.

****

USJ had been attacked, and there were villains filling the training ground. Katsuki felt only anticipation, a grin stretching across his face as he fought for his and his classmate’s lives. This was easier, the simple struggle for survival that he’d become so good at. No one bested him in a fight, not in his element. He thrived with his palms coated in sweat, ash in the back of his throat and nothing
expected of him except to deal with the next target.

He blasted through the first few villains like they were tissue paper, a laugh half caught in his throat as he ran through the training grounds, looking for new targets. Here in the ruins training ground, Kirishima beside him, Bakugou felt like there wasn’t anything he couldn’t do.

“These shitty villains are weak as hell!” He commented, and was pleased when Kirishima laughed and agreed. His friend’s Quirk turned him to sharp points, more so than usual. It made his smile shark-like and wide.

“We should go help the others.”

A part of Katsuki agreed, but his mind turned to the bastard that had thrown them into the ruins zone in the first place. His hands restlessly clenched and unclenched at his sides, adrenaline making his blood sing.

“We need to get that void bastard. He’s the fucking gate for the villains.” He might have said more, but a movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. His palms snapped backwards, his Quirk activating without thought. The villain was sent flying, Kirishima’s expression melting from surprise to fear to being impressed. Katsuki could feel heat crawling up the back of his neck as his friend pumped his fists in awe.

“Yeah, okay! Let’s go get him!”

Katsuki didn’t need any more of a nudge. He blasted himself forward, his heart thundering in his throat. He told himself it was the action, the excitement, and tried not to look at Kirishima’s smile too directly.

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All Might proved to be the turning point, of course. That’s what was to be expected from the number one hero, after all. Katsuki wasn’t impressed very often, but the man’s atmosphere still rocked him. It was an aura, a sort of chill that one got under their spine when All Might was around. Katsuki felt safe with All Might, but his base instincts still trembled under the weight of the man’s stare. It was the presence of someone who was so powerful, that very few could stand by his side.

It made the limp body he was carrying unimportant, barely considered even as the hero placed the unconscious villain carefully onto the ground to fight the Noumu.

Katsuki had to hold back a wince as he saw Aizawa. Some of his excitement over the battle faded as he took in his teacher’s injuries, took in the monster All Might was facing down. It didn’t even look human, and Katsuki had seen quite a few Quirks that changed one’s physical appearance. This… this was something mindless, something created only to destroy. Its dead gaze unsettled him, even as he tried not to let it show on his face.
Too soon he was moving, the shadow-villain further away. There wasn’t time to stop and watch the show between All Might and the monster, that wasn’t his mission. He pushed the fight from his mind, dragging Kirishima with him even as his palms sparked. His wrists were getting hot, the kind of strain that would soon come with injury. It was good, he thought, that things were wrapping up.

He leapt over the limp villain that All Might had put on the ground, giving it the barest of glances. It was a kid not much different from himself, at a glance. His face was hidden by a ragged mop of greasy, dark green hair. He was breathing. Katsuki’s mouth was making a shape as he moved, not quite a grimace but less of a grin.

It seemed even All Might felt sick about the idea of murdering children.

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All too soon the battle was over, Iida managing to get the rest of the heroes to come. Katsuki and most of the other students managed to get away with only minor scrapes, dirty but otherwise unharmed. The villains that weren’t arrested escaped, including the void bastard, which made him seethe.

“Sometimes shit happens, man.” Kirishima said philosophically, apparently less bothered. Typical for him, he just seemed happy that everyone was alive and relatively unhurt.

Their teacher, was a different story. Aizawa was taken away on a stretcher, Present Mic fussing over his prone form but trying to put on a brave face. None of the students were allowed to see their sensei, his condition too fragile. He was taken straight to the school, Recovery Girl given a call ahead of time to prep a bed for him.

Even more concerning, is that no one was allowed to see All Might. The pro hero had defeated Noumu, but Cementoss was keeping anyone from knowing the extent of the man’s injuries. Something about that sat oddly with Katsuki, although he wasn’t sure why. He wasn’t given much time to think on it, soon ushered towards one of the pro heroes to have a look at the state of his wrists and hands.

It was determined pretty quickly that he didn’t need much more medical attention beyond a few bandages and some burn cream, and finally Katsuki was granted permission to leave the training arena and head back to school with the rest of the class. The exhaustion began to hit all of them, Katsuki’s head ringing, the overuse of his Quirk making his wrists stinging and sore.

Kirishima looked not much better, his grin present but flagging as the class collectively made their way back to their homes, their parents called and waiting for them.

One by one, the class broke apart to go to their respective homes, saying their goodbye’s and see you in the morning’s. Some chose to room at each other’s houses for the night, unwilling to admit it but in need of company.
Katsuki and Kirishima’s homes were in the same direction, both of them having called their parents to tell them they were fine and could make it back together. Soon they were left, walking side by side down the quiet and empty streets. They stood at the crossroads, Katsuki’s bare toes digging into his shoes. He’d forgotten a change of socks. With the excitement of the day finally leaving his body, he was left feeling hollowed out and a little dazed. There was a small part of his brain replaying the entire event over and over again, lingering on Aizawa’s wounded body, on All Might’s strange disappearance. That part of him, the part that wasn’t entirely emotionally illiterate, recognised the feeling as fear.

He saw the same feeling on Kirishima’s face, hidden under a carefully cheerful smile. His hands hadn’t stopped fidgeting since they’d stood together in the dark, his red eyes flicking around the shadows when he thought Katsuki wouldn’t notice. Neither of them could bring themselves to walk away.

“Hey-” Kirishima tried to break the silence, unable to stand it any longer. Katsuki interrupted him, knowing that if he let his friend talk that he’d never get out the words that needed to be said. He could feel his ears burning as he stared down at his feet, his words blunt and clipped.

“Grab pyjamas and come over.” And then, because he was second guessing himself apparently in all sorts of ways over this shit, he added “Unless you don’t want to. Or your parents want you home. I don’t know. Do whatever the fuck you want.”

He pretended not to notice the way Kirishima’s shoulders slumped in visible relief, the tightness in the edge of his smile loosening.

“O-okay.” He said. Katsuki turned towards his street, unsure of what was broadcasting on his face. He heard his friend go, feeling some of the tightness in his chest ease.

Katsuki stared down at the bandages wrapped around his singed hands, and for once in his life tried not to overthink it. For one night, he didn’t let Deku’s memory haunt him, and instead let Kirishima’s excited rambling lull him into security as he rejoined him and they walked home.

They spent the night playing videogames, Katsuki’s mom hovering but trying not to make it obvious. Katsuki appreciated it, though he still cursed and bickered with her at the table.

Exhaustion overtook him at around the point that he and Kirishima retreated to his room, when his friend started talking about his middle school years. Katsuki’s dreams were filled with ghost-like faces speaking to him. He couldn’t hear what they were saying, and didn’t know if it was Deku or someone else. It left him in a crowd of his classmates, doubled over on top of each other like a reflective funhouse mirror.

It wasn’t a nightmare, but when Katsuki woke up at six in the morning, he couldn’t pretend it was entirely a dream. He looked over, seeing Kirishima passed out and snoring loudly on the floor, not a care in the world. Katsuki snorted to himself, staring up at his bedroom ceiling.

“Idiot.” He said softly, but it fell flat in his mouth.
Deku

Chapter Summary

A favour is asked of Ochako. Izuku's doing his best.

Chapter Notes

Howdy~ Ochako and Izuku get to interact in this chapter :) and we get some of Tsukauchi too!

As always, thank you for the kind comments and kudos, and let me know what you think!

Naomasa Tsukauchi had known Toshinori a long, long time. Long enough, that he could remember a time when the name All Might had been just a hopeful daydream, instead of an international symbol. Though years had given them widely different career paths and social circles, a part of Naomasa still felt excitement for his friend when he achieved something, and felt ill whenever he learned that Toshi had gotten himself hurt again.

He thought sometimes that he could almost sense the latter it before it happened, their childhood friendship creating a brotherly sixth sense in him that seemed to always know when Toshi had managed to get himself injured. Maybe his Quirk wasn’t a lie detector, but a precog.

This time around, the unease was a full on stomach ache. He hid it well enough, but seeing Toshi bandaged up like a mummy brought back memories for Naomasa. He hadn’t seen his friend this injured since his fight with All For One, and it was something he’d truthfully hoped he’d never have to see again.

“You look like you’ve seen better days, old friend.” He’d greeted, seating himself in the plastic office chair by Toshi’s bedside. His friend had smiled at him, waving away his concern with his usual good cheer. It was Toshi’s go-to, his modus operandi a wide smile that got wider each time someone asked him if anything was wrong. As a result, Naomasa very quickly saw through it. “Out with it.” He demanded, making Toshi sigh and look down at his wrapped hands.

“One of the villains we caught was a child, Naomasa. I- we, as a council, have reason to believe he wasn’t a part of this operation by choice.”

“Child trafficking?” Toshi hummed in confirmation, his expression grave. He had dealt with these
cases before, though rarely. They unfortunately didn’t always have a happy end.

“We’ve yet to get a name from the boy, but it’s clear that his Quirk is very powerful. It’s some kind of analysis ability, a bit like Nightwing. However, he won’t consent to DNA testing, and is extremely distrustful of authority figures. He has no papers, nothing to give us even a name.”

It wasn’t difficult to see what was eating at Toshi. Naomasa knew that face well enough to guess.

“You’re worried that the authorities will take his silence for guilt.”

“He can’t be more than fifteen years old!” Toshi burst out, frustration clear. He looked up at Naomasa earnestly. “How can we, as pro heroes, condemn a child when it’s not even clear that he hasn’t been groomed all his life to be some sort of… of weapon!”

Naomasa hummed a little, neither agreeing or disagreeing. He’d worked with law enforcement for a long time, and at the age the villain was at, it was a case by case basis more often than not as to whether or not they were charged. It was strange, how the legal system could get itself worked into knots when it came to children. Some children, Naomasa knew unfortunately, were a danger to society if released with a slap on the wrist. Others, he knew were victims of circumstance.

It was a delicate balance, and one he quite frankly preferred not to deal in. His legal cases often were adults, because he felt he could put them on trial fairly without the fear that they’d been put on such a path with no opportunity to leave.

“Do you think that your colleagues would be unfair towards a child?” He asked instead, not unkindly. Toshi made a noise of denial about the idea, but his hands still clenched the bed covers restlessly.

“It is about the nature of his Quirk, my friend.” He said “Whether he was forced or not, it is clear that the boy was used to plan this crime and possibly a number of others. In a court of law, I worry that the jury will not be able to look past the potential danger of his Quirk.” He made a sound of disgust, then. “Worse, the boy won’t even try to see reason about his situation! He remains convinced that Shigaraki will find him and kill him should he give any sort of information away.”

“Long-term abuse and grooming can do that to a child,” Naomasa answered gently. He’d seen it often enough to know the kind of cruelty people were capable of. “It’s possible he truly believes that Shigaraki will still be able to get to him, even in one of the most protected facilities in the world. What’s more, if his Quirk is as you say, he’s probably afraid it will be abused again.”

Tsukauchi ran a hand through his close-cropped hair then, shooting his friend a pointed look.

“Realistically, there’s not much you can do about this except advocate for leniency. You bullied Tamakawa into giving this information to you in the first place, didn’t you?”

Toshi groaned in frustration, throwing his hands up in the air. It was clear that the entire problem was
torturing him inside. Naomasa offered him a pat on his hand, considering the situation critically. What would he, if he was a child that had an amazing Quirk but had been abused terribly, want? What could they exchange, to give the child a sense of control over the situation? A budding idea began to grow in the back of his mind.

“Do you know if he has any family?”

At Toshi’s miserable denial, Naomasa pressed on “A student then, perhaps? Someone his age, fairly non-threatening, that could introduce him to the idea of a friendly face?”

Toshinori considered the notion, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

“One of Aizawa’s students, maybe?” His blue eyes narrowed, and his fist connected with his hand. “I do think I know of a student that’s good at making others feel safe, actually!” Toshi beamed up at Naomasa, some of the weight taken from his shoulders.

“Tsukauchi, you are a genius.”

“Can I get that in writing?” Naomasa grinned, laughing when Toshinori swatted him.

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“Ochako Uraraka, my name is Naomasa Tsukauchi. May I have a word with you?”

The man at the classroom door had been a stranger, dressed in a trench coat and hat. Ochako had at a glance, thought he’d looked more like the stereotype of a detective than a real one. She’d turned to Present Mic, who was substituting for Aizawa given his injuries. Only when she’d gotten the go-ahead had she rose to her feet, following him curiously outside.

Ochako realised how tall the man was, alone together in the hall. She had to crane her neck upwards to look him in the eye. She felt a little bit intimidated. Naomasa seemed to sense this and smiled, softening his expression. It was enough to make Ochako relax, sure that she wasn’t in trouble for something.

“I’m with law enforcement,” He took off his hat, introducing himself with a handshake. Ochako took it, recalling him now.

“You were there when Aizawa-Sensei was being taken to the ambulance.” He nodded, and she asked him urgently. “Is he ok? We aren’t allowed to see him yet, and me and Tsuyu and the rest of the class are worried-”

“Aizawa will make a gradual, full recovery,” Naomasa assured, not unkindly. She sighed in open relief, a smile breaking out on her face that felt like it’d been missing for days.

“Thank goodness.”

“You care a lot.” The man observed. His tone wasn’t judgemental, to Ochako’s surprise. Instead he seemed pleased, his smile turning an otherwise bland face friendly. He gestured for her to follow him as he turned to walk down the hall, and Ochako followed out of as much curiosity as a sense of duty.
“You’re aware I suppose, that during the fight at USJ All Might captured a villain that may be key to our understanding the nature of the attack?” Ochako nodded. Naomasa was leading her towards the nurses’ office, she realised as a distant side note. He paused at a room in particular, seeming to deliberate as his hand hovered by the door as to how much he should reveal. “What hasn’t been made public is the villain is in fact a child, about your age.” Ochako’s eyes widened a little, but she didn’t get to comment before Naomasa drove on. “We believe that he’s been abused badly, and coerced into working for Shigaraki Tomura.” She had to resist the urge to shiver. Ochako was still occasionally having nightmares about the scary villain that had nearly killed Tsuyu and hurt Aizawa. “He’s extremely wary and distrusting of authority figures, and seems afraid that Shigaraki will hurt him if he gives information away. His Quirk seems to make it very easy for him to read ulterior motives.”

The detective looked at her earnestly then, his expression grave. “I need you to talk to him, try to get him to open up or relate. I don’t mean to put pressure on you, but the boy’s already at risk of being charged as an adult for his crimes. If we can’t prove his life was being threatened, he might take the fall for the incident. All Might himself recommended you highly for the job.”

Ochako looked up at the man, stunned into silence. If someone had told her in any other situation that *All Might* thought highly enough of her to recommend her for anything, she would’ve been over the moon. Straight up, her Quirk would have activated, and she’d be floating high up into the stratosphere. She gaped like a fish for a few good seconds before gathering herself together enough to reply.

“U-um. Not that I’m not flattered but… why me?” She was just a poor girl from the country, not a psychologist or someone well-versed in trauma. She didn’t exactly shine in class, when put against students like Bakugou or Todoroki. Naomasa smiled.

“I was told that in the entrance exams, you sacrificed your score to protect Iida Tenya. All Might’s apparently noted your continued compassion for your classmates and your loyalty to your friends.” She’d nearly forgotten about the entry test. Back then, it’d been instinct when she’d seen Iida had gotten his ankle caught in debris. She’d acted without much thought, her feet telling her what to do even if her mind was a blank canvas of white noise. Ochako had gotten quite the lecture from Recovery Girl for that stunt- she’d nearly gotten herself killed.

A flush of pride rose on her cheeks, and she felt her determination bloom. Ochako looked up at Mr. Naomasa, her dark eyes focused and steady. Her hands balled into fists at her sides.

“I’ll do my best.”

Naomasa lead the way.

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Cops were really, really stupid sometimes. It never failed to astonish Izuku. All it had taken was a little distraction, and the paper clip that had been holding together his file on the counter by his
bedside had been tucked carefully into his palm. The frustrated police officer had asked him for a fifth time if he knew any information on Shigaraki Tomura or had any background information on himself he’d like to share. The man was cat-like due to his Quirk, and Izuku had watched in satisfaction when his ears began to press against his skull in irritation with his lack of answers.

Izuku had let him rattle off questions, nodding his head along agreeably. When the cop had finally paused for breath, he given him a placid, terrible smile. He had the same response he had given the Human lie Detector Cop.

“Get. Fucked.”

It’d been going like this for the better part of three days. Izuku kept his mind occupied when he wasn’t being interrogated, with the idea of escape. So far, he’d found nothing in his immediate vicinity that could pick the handcuffs latching him to the bed, but the paperclip changed things. All he needed was a little time alone, and he could be out the window and on his way. He’d been gone long enough, Eri would be missing him. Shigaraki’s patience would be already frayed.

His chance seemed to have come, the police had gone on a ‘break’ that had in reality become an hour-long stretch of silence in which Izuku held his breath and waited for someone else to come harass him. When no one came, he began slowly reinforcing the paperclip, layering it overtop itself so that it wouldn’t break in the lock. Then, he got to work.

Picking a lock wasn’t like what you saw in movies, it took time and quiet, and even a simple pair of handcuffs could prove to be difficult if you were trying to pick them at a bad angle. Izuku’s wrist was already throbbing after fifteen minutes, and the first edges of frustration were beginning to creep in on him. His tongue darted out of his mouth as he tried to get a feel for the lock’s shape, struggling to find the space to slot the paperclip into the right spot.

*Just a little more…*

He really didn’t want to have to break his thumbs to get out of these cuffs.

He thought he’d almost gotten it when the door began to jiggle in its frame, alerting him to company. Izuku had just enough time to stash the paperclip under his hip, morphing his expression into something bland and innocent as the visitors entered his room.

He already knew one of them, the detective that had first tried to question him- Tsukauchi. Izuku glared at the man on principle, his opinion on being hounded for information already having been made clear.

He didn’t recognise the girl that trailed behind the detective. She came into the room hesitantly, as if she felt rude about intruding despite Izuku’s obvious lack of high ground to stand on.

His Quirk took her in at a glance, absorbing information at lightning speed even as he plastered a lazy, uncaring smile on his face and gave a little wave with his fingers.
“Come back with reinforcements?”

*Not a torture-type Quirk.* His power helpfully supplied from the gentle way the girl was looking at him and her nervous posture. *She’d have more steel in her, if she was accustomed to violence.*

“This is Ochako Uraraka.” Tsukauchi ignored his mocking, introducing the girl. “I was thinking that you might feel more comfortable, talking to someone closer to your age.”

Uraraka stepped obligingly forward, offering him a small wave. She was indeed about Izuku’s age, with a bob haircut that made her already soft face softer. If Izuku hadn’t grown up being wary of any kind face, he’d have thought of her as pretty, if a little too perky. She offered his handcuffed hand one of her own in a rare lack of fear, revealing small pink pads on her fingertips.

*Something to do with her Quirk is touch-activated.* He didn’t take the hand, glaring at it suspiciously. She retracted it a moment later, her smile a little more forced.

“It’s nice to meet you! I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name…?”

Izuku gave her the name he’d given all the detectives, a title more than anything else.

“Ghost.”

“Ghost.” She repeated, rolling the name around in her mouth, trying it out. She sat herself down in the plastic chair by his bedside, too close for Izuku’s comfort. He didn’t like unknowns within striking distance. He resisted the urge to lean as far away as he could, shooting the detective a reproachful look. Tsukauchi looked unrepentant.

“I’m going to go get some coffee and leave you two to chat for a bit.” He said, smiling in face of Izuku’s annoyance. “Do either of you want anything?”

“I’d take being released.” Izuku said dryly. Uraraka shook her head, stifling a small smile at his joke. Okay, she had a sense of humour then. That was marginally better than some of the detectives he’d had to see.

Tsukauchi took his leave, the door sliding quietly closed behind him.

Izuku was left side-eyeing the girl in silence, the paperclip jabbing into his side uncomfortably. She sat in turn with her hands in her lap, fidgeting and clearly unsure of how she wanted to start. Her gaze kept glancing at the scars along his arms and darting away, clearly curious but too polite to ask. He swallowed a small sigh. His hands were itching, his thoughts restless.

Izuku’s Quirk hadn’t had any kind of new material to work with, and in truth it was beginning to wear on him. He was tired of being looked at like he was under some sort of microscope, and tired of his own brain essentially hitting itself against a brick wall because it couldn’t find new stimulus.

“You’re in the hero division.” Uraraka jumped a little at the sound of his voice, snapped out of whatever thoughts were making her face so serious. She flushed a little, two high points of colour on her cheeks that seemed to come easily.
“Y-Yes.” She admitted, hands folding and unfolding in her lap “I was there at the USJ incident.”

“Your Quirk is activated through touch, right?” He asked. Her mouth opened as if to ask, and Izuku impatiently explained. “The pads of your fingers are slightly different than the rest of your hands. Your job is to make me feel comfortable, right? What’s your Quirk do?”

“Oh!” Uraraka smiled at his observation, something that didn’t happen often in his experience. It threw him a little. “My Quirk is Zero Gravity. I can touch things and change their gravitational pull. Oh, but if I use it too long, I get really nauseous.”

“Is it dependent on weight? Or surface area of the item? Can you make things heavier, or just lighter? What are the parameters?”

Uraraka blinked, stuttering out a hum that seemed a little confused. She scratched the back of her head, letting her hand as if she could halt his interrogating physically.

“Um. No offence, but why are you asking all of this? It’s making me feel like you’re trying to find out how to take me out in a fight.” She laughed, a little nervously. When Izuku didn’t laugh back, she looked at him a little more seriously. Her hands stilled. “Look, I don’t really know you, or how you got mixed up with this League of Villains.” Her dark eyes found his face, a spark of steel behind them “But my teacher was seriously hurt because of this fight. My friends almost died. I was brought here to talk with you, if you’d like. And to me that doesn’t just mean asking you about your motives. Detective Tsukuiuchi seems to think you can be reasoned with, and aren’t just a terrible person.”

Izuku snorted flatly. If he could, he would have crossed his arms over his chest. As it was, he rattled the handcuffs on his wrists.

“No offence, but it’s hard to have a friendly chat like this.”

Uraraka bit her lip, but the determined glint in her eye didn’t waver.

“I’ll ask if you can have the cuffs off, at least when we’re talking. Would that earn some trust from you?”

Izuku blinked. He stared at her as if she were crazy.

“You’d be willing to talk to a villain one on one… with no way of stopping an attack?”

“Would you attack me?” Uraraka replied, to which Izuku’s mouth snapped shut and he looked vaguely cowed. He looked her in the eye, but his hands restlessly smoothed over the sheets at his side, giving him away.

“Why shouldn’t I? You’re the enemy.”

Uraraka looked as though she was fighting back a smile. Izuku resisted the urge to snarl. She was better at reading body language than he’d hoped.

She reached into the tattered school bag she’d brought with her, revealing a brown paper bag lunch from which she took out a Thermos and cup. Izuku inhaled as she unscrewed the lid, miso soup
making his mouth water. He was suddenly, desperately hungry for something other than hospital food, his Quirk forgotten. He tried not to show it, and thought he probably failed miserably.

“I’ll make you a deal,” Uraraka said, pouring some of the hot soup into the cup. “You give me a name so that I can call you something other than ‘Ghost,’ and I’ll give you something about myself.” She gestured to her lunch. “Either way, I’ll share some soup.”

“You’re bribing me.” Izuku half complained, secretly a little thrilled at finding a hero so willing to bargain. His Quirk reared its head again, wanting to know more about someone who’d so willingly barter with a villain. Uraraka smiled. The expression was far more angelic than the glint in her eyes.

“You get nothing for nothing, right? I get it, you feel like you’re losing if you don’t get something back.”

It slid into place for Izuku, then.

“You grew up poor.”

Uraraka made a ‘tsk’ sound.

“Not fair. You have to give me a name now for learning that with your Quirk.”

Izuku considered. A name? He wasn’t so stupid as to give his real name away, but he reluctantly could admit he did want to play. A smile touched his face, the first real one since he’d been captured. It felt rare on his face, a little wrong but not entirely bad, either.

“Deku.” He said, letting the old nickname wash memories over him for a moment. His eyes closed, remembering the children he used to be so afraid of. When he opened them again, he felt a nostalgia he hadn’t let himself feel for years. He held out the cuffed hand, letting Uraraka lean forward to take it and shake it daintily. “People… used to call me Deku.”
At a glance Deku was a pale, skinny teenager that was probably around fifteen years old. Ochako’s first impression of him was that he was very observant, that his Quirk helped with this, and that he was perpetually anxious. In a way, his unassuming presence was soothing. She was a little relieved that he wasn’t what she had imagined him to be, at least not when alone and talking with her. She’d worried about what talking to a villain would be like- the ones she had met hadn’t been pleasant people. Yet Deku was polite, if a bit quiet, with a sense of humour that cropped up in unexpected stretches. He laughed at jokes that would make most therapists likely look at him with concern. To an untrained eye, he might have passed for a civilian, possibly a young, tired undergrad.

It was a very, very good persona, she had to admit. If she weren’t talking to him one on one, she wouldn’t have noticed the little cracks in the friendly conversation. Deku’s eyes never stopped moving, shifting from her face, to the room, to the window at his bedside and away again. Likewise, his fingers were equally restless. Freed from his handcuffs (as per Ochako’s request), he gestured as he spoke, as if trying to make his words a picture that could be seen. It was a never-ending stream of words, too. All in all, he was a restless, jittery person that underneath the hard edge hid something soft and vulnerable.

He tensed when she moved too quickly, relaxed when she sat down again, and always had her at least in his peripheral vision. It was clear from the start that he didn’t trust her, and that this was a normality that he was well used to. Days passed and this never changed. Ochako was a little saddened, but not surprised. To Deku, she was an outsider, a listening ear but still a stranger.
She had the feeling his manners were real enough, as was the information he gave her, but everything else was as if he were operating a very convincing mask. He gave no specifics of where he’d grown up, who he was or where he’d come from. If pushed for information, he knew what buttons to push in return to get her to drop the topic. All he would admit to was that he was taken in by Shigaraki at a very young age.

“I’ve been with the League of Villains since I was about four or five.” He admitted in exchange for learning about her reasons for becoming a hero. “If I’m being honest, I forgot for a long time anything even existed outside of Shigaraki’s influence. It’s like… a bubble. Wake up, do what I’m told, go to bed.”

“What was your job?” She asked, but his eyes shuttered in the way they did when she’d probed too much. Deku looked away, the tangled mess of green curls hiding whatever expression crossed his face. When he looked back, she felt he’d gotten distant again. There was an icy layer that separated him from her.

“Your teacher’s Eraserhead, right?” He asked neutrally. The change of topic made Ochako’s nod a little hesitant. Deku hummed, blinking eyes that were a little too wide up at the hospital lights above them.

“That’s what Shigaraki promised me, y’know. If I got the job at USJ perfect.” Her confusion must have shown, because he elaborated. There was a distant cast to his eyes, looking at something she couldn’t see.

“He promised me Eraserhead, if my layout for the attack on USJ went well. If we had succeeded, your teacher would have been taken.”

Ochako felt a chill run down her spine at the flat, deadened tone of the boy’s voice. She’d never heard that tone come from Deku before. For the first time, she felt a shadow in the room.

“Wh-why would you want Aizawa-sensei for?”

“Data.” Deku blinked slowly, finally meeting her stare. His gaze was unflinching as he took in her horrified expression, cold as stone.

“My Quirk feeds on data. It craves it, and Eraserhead is one of the few pro heroes I have very little information on. Given the chance, I would’ve had him taken, and pulled the information out of him one way or the other.” He said it so matter-of-factly, as if discussing the weather or a newspaper article. The confidence in which he said it made no doubt in Ochako’s mind that Deku meant it, that he had done it before. She was reminded abruptly that this wasn’t a classmate she was talking to.

Her heart was squeezing itself a little in her chest. She was the first to drop the staring match, her eyes returning to her lap. She’d brought a bento box that she’d been hoping to share today, but she was suddenly not hungry. It sat under her hands, a plastic peace offering that now seemed too ‘slice of life’ for this kind of conversation. How could he just say something like that? Deku didn’t even know what Aizawa-Sensei was like. The idea of taking someone apart with one’s Quirk sent a vicious curl of nausea up the back of her throat.

Silence hung heavy between the two of them, a lead brick killing the camaraderie.
When Deku spoke, his voice was almost gentle.

“Are you angry at me for being honest?” He sounded genuinely curious. His hands had stilled completely, waiting for her answer. Ochako grit her teeth, tamping down the part of you that very suddenly wanted to turn, leave and not come back.

He’s trying to bait you.

“Aizawa-sensei nearly died protecting us.” She said, jaw clenched. He directed a flat, unimpressed look at her. Deku’s looked confused and entertained at once.

“Of course he nearly died, he tried to take on a Noumu. His actions were rash and emotionally-driven. Stupid, really.”

“He didn’t want to see his students murdered in front of him, of course he was emotional!” She snapped. Ochako glared at him fiercely, fury burning in her eyes. Because no one talked badly of her friends or her teachers like that. “He went into the fight knowing he might die, because he was the only one of us who stood a chance. How can you say his actions were stupid?”

Deku merely looked at her in confusion, as if she’d started suddenly speaking Hindi or French.

“Because they were stupid. He should have easily seen that the Noumu couldn’t be beaten, and instead put his energy into escape. Why risk your life for someone, especially when they’re too weak to support you?”

“Because that’s what a hero does!” Deku snorted, confusion morphing into derision. He turned his gaze back towards the ceiling. Ochako wasn’t having it. “What? Do you not think Heroes risk their lives everyday protecting people?”

“Yeah, but not because they care.” Deku seemed surprised with himself, the bitterness in his tone a break from his usually mild responses. When had he gotten invested int his conversation? His mouth kept moving, apparently uncaring of this question. “Heroes do it because it’s their job. But why risk your life for a bunch of students when the best option would have been to evade as much as you could until help arrived?”

“Haven’t you ever wanted to protect someone?” Ochako asked, looking at Deku in disbelief. “Haven’t you ever wanted to stop someone from taking something important to you away, someone?”

Something crossed his expression, a small flicker of understanding. He seemed agitated by the understanding. “Aizawa-Sensei was scared. He didn’t want any of us to get hurt under his care, so he took a risk. That doesn’t mean he was stupid.”

And just because you can think your way out of a situation that’s already happened, doesn’t mean you’re better than someone who had to face that situation directly. She thought, but kept to herself. Ochako was angry, but not that angry.

Some of the distance in Deku’s expression had thawed, and he looked a little cowed. His restless hand movements had started up again, his fingers folding and unfolding in his lap. The edge of his
nailbed was starting to fray, and he focused on that now. A thoughtfulness had entered his face as he considered her words. His voice when he spoke had a little more emotion bleeding through.

“The best thing I can do for the people I want to protect is to pretend I’m not with them.” He said quietly. Ochako felt the anger in her chest fade. Deku suddenly looked about a thousand years older, the dark circles under his eyes purple bruises in the light of the afternoon sun streaming through the window. “The people I care about are. Better off if I’m far away. I’m sorry for saying what I did.”

He said it was such acceptance, that a horrible thought came to Ochako.

He’s protecting someone too.

“That’s not true!” Deku didn’t look at her, but she knew she’d heard him. His hands had stopped their restless picking.

Ochako continued, lowering to a soothing tone, as if she were coaxing a skittish animal. “That’s not true, Deku. Protecting people… it doesn’t mean distancing yourself from them.”

“It does when you’re part of the League of Villains.” He said. It was the closest he’d ever admitted to her about what his life had been like under Shigaraki. It made Ochako’s throat tighten in sympathy and sadness. Never before in her life had she wanted to just hug someone so badly. Only the image of Deku reacting to such affection like a dead trout caught in a net stopped her.

“It doesn’t have to be like that. You can ask for help.”

“Why would you help me?” Deku asked dully. There was a crooked, bitter smile on his face. “I admitted that I wanted to torture your teacher. I’d have killed your friends during the USJ fight, and nearly did kill one of them. One of my teammates almost murdered Thirteen, because I told him to beforehand. I’d still hurt Eraserhead, if it meant knowing about him.” He said the last part like pulling a thorn from his side, spitting and angry. “You care about them. So why would you help me?”

“Because your eyes look like they’re begging for help.” She said, quietly. Deku stilled, his breathing stopping as he looked at her head on for the first time. His eyes were too bright, and his breathing too quick. Ochako didn’t flinch as she repeated herself. “It’s what heroes do, Deku. At least, it’s what I want to do, as a hero.” Her fingers reached, refusing to think too much of it before her nerves got the better of her. Her hand found Deku’s, her palms feeling the jagged lines of scar tissue as they rested on top of his palm. Deku didn’t move, merely looked at the hand in quiet bewilderment. She wasn’t a therapist, didn’t know much about psychology at all really. She barely knew if she could help at all but something inside of her was demanding she try. “Promise me at least, that you’ll think about it?”

Deku didn’t reply. Really, he looked like he didn’t know how. Ochako stood after a moment more, smoothing the pleats of her skirt. She left the bento at his bedside table without a word, a small smile on her face despite the somewhat gazelle-like looks he kept giving her.
“I’ll see you tomorrow, ok?” She added as an afterthought. “Do you like books? I could stop somewhere and get you something to read.”

She didn’t really expect him to reply, and was surprised when a moment later he spoke. Deku’s voice was nearly inaudible, and Ochako had to ask him again.

“S-sailor moon. I… like Sailor Moon.”

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Ochako went home, and Izuku was left with his thoughts. The silence left him feeling restless. He was handcuffed to the bed again, staring up at the ceiling in frustration.

He’d thought he’d gotten over the guilt that his Quirk used to manifest in him. Feeling bad for a fundamental aspect of his nature only made his job under Shigaraki harder, left him feeling useless. Yet it had reared its head when Ochako had been upset, leaving him feeling strange and cowardly. God, one conversation with an actual girl and he was completely useless.

He groaned, striking his head against his pillow. His eyes slipped closed as the anger drained from him, leaving behind just the guilt. Damn it. Why was he doing this?

It wasn’t even that Ochako was a girl, though the part of Izuku that was still a teenager silently thrilled at just having a conversation with someone his age. It was how ridiculously nice she was, to a complete and total stranger to boot. Making her angry at him like he had just done made Izuku want to sink into his hospital bed, through the floor. It was shame, a feeling he hadn’t had much use for since well, since he’d still been with his mom. Those memories hurt, though, so he ignored them.

The paperclip was still tucked safely amongst his sheets, where his hands could reach it if he needed it. He still hadn’t tried to pick the lock since the first time, and he’d been here for almost a week.

By now, Shigaraki was likely past furious. Chances were, Deku was better off running away from both heroes and villains, laying low until he could gather enough support from his own contacts to try and bargain for Eri. His fingers didn’t move towards the paperclip. A frustrated snarl threatened to appear on Izuku’s lips.

What was wrong with him? He could admit to himself that playing at normal for a while had been nice. Pretending to be a good person around Ochako, learning about her and befriending her, it was like something out of a fairy tale for Izuku. Like a good dream he’d found himself clinging to it, reluctantly anticipating her visits and half bracing for the day she didn’t come. It never happened, and with each passing day Izuku felt a little more pathetic about how he’d come to enjoy her company. He didn’t want to wake up, because waking up meant dealing with the fact that all of this was just UA’s attempt to get information from him. It was a thorn that twisted inside of his chest, stabbing him every time he was left alone.
She wasn’t his friend, even if he desperately wanted her to be. Ochako was a student training to become a hero, the likes of which would one day put people like him in jail. He’d managed to escape one cage, and thrown himself straight into another. Izuku could have kicked himself for his own stupidity.

This had gone on for too long, and he was painfully aware of it. He’d proven it today, really. He wasn’t good, and Ochako was. All of her friends were citizens, classmates, people who hadn’t hurt others. They were people who could exist with their Quirks and not have them threaten to swallow their reasoning whole. They were people who looked at villains with fear, disgust, at absolute best pity. He could try all he wanted, but the truth was etched into his skin.

He didn’t belong here, and he never could. The dream had been poisoned for him a long time ago.

He kept his eyes closed as the sound of footsteps approached one of the orderlies due to check on his bandages. Izuku didn’t much feel like talking to anyone, not with his mood like it was. If he played dead, maybe he’d actually slip into a coma, and he wouldn’t have to deal with his own anxiety trying to logic him into staying.

He listened as the door slid open, quiet footsteps entering his room. He didn’t recognize the voice that tutted quietly, but a chill went down his spine nonetheless. It was some instinct that wrenched his eyes open, a cold sweat that broke out along his back. He stared at a stranger with a familiar smile. What little hope Izuku had plummeted into his gut like a stone.

“Aw, did wittle Izuku get hurt in the Big Bad fight against All Might?” She was leaning against the desk by his bedside, fanged grin stretched wide.

“Toga,” Izuku’s hands gripped the sheets, trying to keep his voice as neutral as possible. Internally his brain was going faster than lightspeed. This was bad. This was so, so very much bad.

His eyes swept over her disguise, taking in the uniform and tied back hair and feeling his mouth go dry. “Tell me you weren’t stupid and killed an orderly to sneak in here.”

Her tongue darted out between unnaturally sharp teeth. Toga giggled, throwing back her head as if he’d told a good joke. Two high points of colour bloomed on her cheeks.

“Oh sweetie, I just took a little. She’s unconscious in a supply closet, won’t wake up with much more than a headache.” She nodded to the door, where another shadow stood on watch. “Besides, I brought backup. Just in case, y’know?”

To an outsider, Toga looked like a regular UA nurse. She wore a white lab coat, business clothes, and a name plate claiming her name was Anko Kurosawa. The woman she’d taken blood from had been African-Japanese apparently, her dark braids trailing down to her waist. The lines at the corners of her eyes made her seem older than the childish mannerisms she preferred.

Toga held a clipboard that had been sitting by the door, apparently with Izuku’s file since coming to UA. This she flipped through delicately, humming delightedly as she read through it aloud. It was
more to mock him, than for any kind of benefit.

“Villain: GHOST. Age: unknown, guessed to be around fifteen years old. Admitted with a concussion as well as a few other mild contusions. Broken ribs. Further Information: None.” She looked up, Chesire grin making Izuku swallow past a tight lump in his throat. “You’ve been keeping secrets- Good Boy.” She tossed the file beside her, golden eyes narrowed.

The shadow at the door spoke, stepping inside so that the glare of the sun retreated behind him, and Izuku could see who it was. It didn’t make him feel better, knowing the silhouette by memory.

“All right, that’s enough. Stop teasing him, Toga.” Dabi’s voice was quiet, but his presence held a weight to it that made the temperature in the room drop a few degrees. Izuku could feel a fine tremor starting up in his hands. Despite knowing Dabi for most of his life, he still never failed to instil terror. It was the raw kind of fear that came with memories of Izuku watching the man standing at the edge of a building, gasoline stinging his throat and the flames behind him reflected in cold, dead eyes. He blinked, and the memory snuffed out.

Toga hopped away from the counter, stalking casually forward. Izuku breathed carefully through his nose. One, two, three. He needed to keep calm. It’d be at least fifteen minutes before someone discovered the unconscious nurse, in all likelihood. All he had in easy reach was the paperclip. Current Plan: Keep her talking. Hope to god she’s not still hungry. It was a pitiful plan, and Izuku was ridiculously aware of how loud his heartbeat was in his ears. He dived for the worst-case scenario.

“Come to kill me then?”

“Kill you?” Toga pressed a hand to her chest, mock-horrified. “Is that really what you think our friendship amounts to?” Lower lip jutting out in a pout, she let it linger before splitting back into her usual grin. “No, Shigaraki thinks that’d be too easy an out. Or at least, his Sensei does.” Sensei. The word was black tar, dripping in a quiet place in the back of Izuku’s mind. Don’t think about that.

“Why’re you here, then?” He licked his lips nervously, gaze darting beyond Toga towards the front door. In the time someone would hear him screaming, she’d already kill him. The window? Only if he could get the handcuffs off. As discreetly as he could, his hand dug for the paperclip under his side.

“Why, Izuku, to help of course.” A cold sweat broke out over Izuku’s arms as she reached into the lab coat pocket, a switchblade gripped in her hands. She tilted the blade considerably. “We miss you back at the hideout. Or at least, I do.” Toga cast a sly glance towards him from beneath her lashes. “I know Eri does too. Poor thing won’t stop crying.”

Izuku’s hands stilled.

His lungs had turned to ice in his chest. For a moment all he could see was Eri’s bandaged arms, the bruise-like shadows under her eyes.
“What has he done to her?” Was that his voice? It didn’t sound like him. It sounded… flat. Colder than it should have.

Toga was tapping the knife’s point against her lips. She looked up at the ceiling as she hummed.

“Mm. Y’know, I don’t really remember? You’ll just have to come back and see for yourself, won’t you?”

“If he’s hurt her. If you’ve hurt her—”

The knife came quickly, too quickly for Izuku to dodge. He flinched, only realising after the deed was done its aim. It’d struck the chain on the cuffs, severing it cleanly in two. Unnaturally sharp. Toga leaned back, hands on her hips in satisfaction.

“I wouldn’t finish that threat, dear. You’ve got until tonight to make it back to headquarters, or Shigaraki told me he’d think of a new and creative way to skin you himself.”

“Toha.” Dabi snapped, this time a little force inflected in his tone. Until now he’d seemed bored, but there was a restless energy that hummed under his skin. He moved impatiently, gesturing with a scarred hand. “We don’t have all day. You’re not killing him, and you know it. Both of you come the fuck on.”

As if to highlight his point, Toga’s disguise began to melt away, shrinking in height and paling until her true form stood before him. She looked at her bare body in distaste, no embarrassment about being naked.

“Too little. That’s what I get for being nice. Oh well. Guess you’re right, Dabi.” She smiled at him. “Though don’t think I don’t know you’re just being grumpy cause someone didn’t get to finish his TV show.”

Dabi grunted. “Brats, both of you.” But there wasn’t much heat to it. His cool gaze flicked to Izuku. “What’s your answer, brat number two? You on board or do I have to make you?”

Izuku sat up, panic clawing tightly in his throat. No, no he could walk just fine. He knew what Dabi meant when he said make. Shigaraki had given him a second chance, but it wasn’t much of one. He knew that leniency wouldn’t be a factor, not if Sensei himself had pulled this order. The sun was already beginning to set in the sky, painting the sky shades of red and orange.

“How’re we getting out of here?” He asked. Toga’s golden eyes flicked to him irritably, already reaching into a bag that she’d brought along and revealing a spare change of clothes. She changed into them as she spoke, casual oversized sweater popped over her head.

“Isn’t that your Quirk, Wonder Boy?” She smiled a fanged smile, shooing him with one hand. “Unless you’re willing to let me bite you, because that’s all I’ve got.” An involuntary shudder ripped through Izuku.

Let me see your hand?

He forced the memories down, gritting his teeth. He couldn’t afford to space out, not now. “Get to it, because by my estimations, we’ve got five minutes before that nurse is found.” Toga sighed.
An ear-splitting alarm suddenly shrieked, its wail high and plaintive as it filled the school grounds. The lights flickered, turning red as backup power took over. Dabi looked up at the ceiling in absent interest.

Izuku cursed, throwing the sheets off of himself and getting to his feet. His decision had already been made for him.

Toga clapped, heady excitement written all over her face. Her hands came up to her chin.

“Make that no minutes.”

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Izuku reflected on the fact that he was lucky: Recovery Girl had left his clothes (sans weapons) in a closet in his bedroom. His costume would be too garish to wear for long without being spotted in public, but it was better than his hospital gown. He changed quickly, trying not to trip on his jeans as he forced each leg through them. Toga didn’t have the decency to turn around, but she did laugh at him for bothering to ask.

Hoodie and pants on, Izuku muttered out loud as they took to the halls. So far, there was no one else around, everyone focused on evacuating.

“This window’s to the south of the building, the front gate’s at the north. Security’s been alerted, so it’ll be closed off. There’s one other gate to the east for cars. It leads to a side road. The pros will be waiting for us. Who’s waiting for our signal?”

“Kurogiri, of course. He can ‘void’ us out if we get close enough to him. I love a good fight.” Toga tilted her head in consideration. “Who do you think will be after us?”

“Eraserhead and All Might are too injured. It’ll be Present Mic leading, possibly the Principal if they feel like they need him. His Quirk’s weird and finicky. I’m hoping he’s caught up with other things. It’ll be the student heroes, probably, that’ll make the bulk.”

Izuku pulled on his gloves, flexing his fingers in them for a moment in relief. It was good to be in his clothes again. He pulled up the hood of his sweater, hiding his face as much as possible. The mask was a finishing touch that let him frown freely in thought. “It’s going to be tight. If one of us gets caught…”

“You know I’d leave you too, sweetie. Don’t even worry about it.” Toga cracked her knuckles, hands reaching behind her to tie the smiling half-mask she wore over her mouth. The grinning skull motif couldn’t hide her real excitement if it tried.
Izuku took a deep, considering breath. With it, he packed his feelings, his hopes, his longings into a box deep in the corner of his mind. To do this, he needed to forget the events of the last few days. He needed to be stronger, meaner than people like Ochako allowed.

When he moved, he moved not as Izuku, but as *Ghost*.

“What we need to go through the school, to get to the gate. Follow me, and I’ll tell you the plan along the way.” He gestured down the hall, and didn’t look to see if Toga or Dabi followed.

Left forgotten, Ochako’s bento box sat behind on the counter.
“He seems really conflicted, I think I believe Mr Tsukauchi when he says that he doesn’t think Deku is a villain by choice.”

Ochako knew in theory, she wasn’t supposed to talk to her classmates about her newest friend. If Aizawa-Sensei wasn’t injured and caught her doing so, there’d be consequences.

She also knew that Tsukauchi had never forbidden her sharing in words. She also knew, bless his heart, that Present Mic-Sensei just wasn’t very good at recognising when his students were keeping secrets. She’d been filling in her friends all day, starting with Mr. Tsukauchi’s request for help and leading into meeting and getting to know the villain that’d nearly planned a perfect invasion of U.A. She was huddled with her friends at the cafeteria in the pretence of eating a late lunch. If her guilty conscience nudged her, she convinced herself that it was just Iida, Tsuyu and Yaoyozoru that she was telling.

“He seemed villainous enough when fighting me, but I will give you that he gave me many chances to run away.” Iida spoke to her left. He had to sit at the end of the bench, the leg that’d been shocked wrapped in a cast. His crutches rested on the side of the table, within easy reach. Recovery Girl had healed the organic parts of Iida’s body, but the engines proved to give her some trouble. Despite the injury, he’d been in relatively good health, getting to class with only a little help carrying his books. Iida took academics very seriously, and no broken limb would stop him from learning all he could.

He now seemed to be considering Ochako’s words, mulling them over between bites of rice. “He also didn’t seem to really want to fight me, like he was just stalling for time.”
Ochako nodded enthusiastically.

“I think he’s protecting something, or maybe someone. He keeps hedging, like he’s afraid of getting in trouble if he talks too much about himself.” She frowned, a little sad. “I think he’s also afraid I’ll use anything he gives away against him.”

“Still,” Yaoyozoru cautioned “You shouldn’t forget that he is a villain, Ururaka. He might have reasons, but there’s still the fact that he’s involved with a fight that nearly killed Aizawa-sensei and All Might.”

Jirou scoffed, twirling her chopsticks to get noodles into her mouth.

“Like anyone is gonna kill All Might. He’s All Might!” She said, but it came out as a garbled mess through her Udon.

Ochako was reminded of her conversation with Deku earlier that day.

“But if he is protecting someone, then he may not have had a choice but to help, ribbit.” Tsuyu croaked, her hand to her cheek in thought. Ochako sighed, seeing the circular nature of the argument.

“I wish I could just prove to him that we’d protect him, if he’d just talk.” She knew it was wistful thinking, but it didn’t stop her from voicing it aloud. Ochako’s hands balled into fists on the table, her voice turning a little shaky. “He gets distant when I try to talk to him about the other villains, and he won’t talk about them. Every time I try to, he steers the conversation somewhere else.”

Tsuyu’s hand found hers, the slender lines of her fingers warm and comforting. Ochako smiled at the gesture, but it felt a little flat.

“Ribbit. Part of being a hero is recognising that if someone doesn’t want to be saved, you can’t help them. Ribbit.”

Yaoyozuru nodded, although she looked as troubled as Ochako felt.

“If he really wants to be treated like a villain, people will treat him as such no matter what you do.”

The truth of the statement sat heavily with Ochako. She wanted to scream in frustration. This was the part she hated about being a hero- the feeling of helplessness that so often accompanied it. Any action at all had to be better than just sitting in place, doing nothing.

Tsuyu continued to stroke her hand, her expression pensive.

“I think all you can do is try to show him that there are good people here. Show him that there’s someone listening to him. Ribbit.”

“You’re right.” Ochako forced a smile on her face, banishing her fears with a derisive head shake. Lingering on her own limits wasn’t going to help Deku. “I promised him comics, Sailor Moon specifically. Can you guys think of anything else he might like? What do teenage boys like to read?” At Jirou’s snickering, she scowled. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it!”
Iida was suggesting puzzle books when the lights flickered, the cafeteria washed with red. A siren cut through the air, making the hair on the back of Ochako’s neck stand on end. A robotic voice cut over the crowds of students, their heads snapping up to the ceiling as if they could look the disembodied voice in the eye.

“Attention. We are undergoing a level 3 emergency. All students in the Hero-Academics course to the front gate. This is not a drill. Civilians- report to your nearest classroom for lockdown.”

“Oh no.” Ochako muttered, a sinking feeling entering her stomach. She had the suspicion she knew what this was about. Momo cast a look at her, Tsuyu wolfing down the rest of her food. Jirou pushed what was left of hers away, good humour gone.

Iida’s face was grim as he shot a glance at her, one eyebrow arched.

“IT seems that your friend has attracted company.”

Yaoyozuru was already on her feet. From her body, she began to form a megaphone. It crystalized in her hand.

“Let’s just hope this visit wasn’t part of a bigger plan, unlike last time.” She clicked on the megaphone, jumping atop the table as stunned students looked began to move in a panic. Standing on the table, she was the image of orderly conduct.

“All general academic students to the east exit! I repeat: All general academic students to the east exit!” She looked down at her friends, setting the megaphone to a clip on her hip and cracking her knuckles. “This is going to be worse. This time, both sides were expecting this.”

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Toshi was startled by the alarm, waking from a light doze in his hospital bed. For a moment, the red lights and wailing siren disoriented him, reminded him of a different place and time. The fear was old, gripping his throat, but it had no claws to sink into his skin.

He blinked it away with some effort, sitting up and shrugging it away.

What was going on?

Distantly, he could hear the collective rumble of chairs being scraped back across linoleum, feet hastily shuffling. When done at once, it could be felt through the school like a collective breath. When the alarm’s automated voice system informed him of the situation, his hands gripped the edges of the blanket.

The part of Toshi that had been scolded by Recovery Girl one too many times knew he probably
shouldn’t be on his feet, let alone acting. The rest of him was already casting off the covers. He headed to the closet, rifling through the clothes Hizashi had brought him during his last visit. He settled on an oversized red sweater over his hospital gown, as well as a pair of jeans.

He couldn’t activate One for All yet, if the pain in his side was any indication. Toshi grimaced to himself. There was a time when he’d have been able to use his Quirk for days at a time without his body giving him shit for it.

He felt, well, old. Lots of heroes mourned no longer being in their twenties, but Toshi mourned no longer being able to eat full meals most days. He thought to himself that if he one day got back to being able to eat an entire Big Mac from McDonalds, then he’d be a happy man.

Not for the first time, his conscience sounded suspiciously like Aizawa.

“You need to find a successor, before your Quirk kills you.”

The man was sounding more and more like Gran Torino, and it wasn’t a good thing in Toshi’s opinion. No amount of dodging, bright smiles or shrugging away the problem convinced his partners any more. Increasingly, Present Mic looked at him as if he were made of spun glass. Aizawa grumbled, and fussed in ways that wouldn’t be considered fussing if it were by any other normal human being.

It was a sliver under Toshi’s skin, not hurtting but sitting uncomfortably with him in the long stretches of silence at his or Aizawa’s apartment. The weight of being a burden had never been something he could shoulder. It pricked him when he couldn’t transform, stuck in a body that was thin and broken and so often falling apart on him. Each time he couldn’t just protect people like he used to, running headlong into any fight without thinking, it hurt. His own self-doubt screamed at him how useless he was when he saw Aizawa, bleeding and unconscious at the USJ fight, trying to buy him time because he couldn’t protect him.

Some Symbol of Peace he was.

Footsteps sounded down the hall, the shrieking of the alarm continuing. His thin fingers rested on the door handle, a heavy feeling lodged in his chest. It seized, tightened into a cough that brought up blood. He looked at the reddish stain it made in his palm.

“You shouldn’t push yourself so hard.” Hizashi had told him, or muttered at him after the USJ incident. He’d said it when he thought Toshi had been asleep, legs folded to fit crossed in the hard plastic hospital chair beside him. Hizashi’s restless hands hadn’t stopped stroking Toshi’s arm as he’d spoken.

“You and Aizawa both... At this rate I’m going to be a bachelor at thirty-four and it’ll be both of your faults.” He’d said it lightly, but his expression had been uncharacteristically numb. “I can’t do that, y’know? I think... I think when you’re better, I’m going to have to ask you to take a break. I can’t. We, can’t keep doing this. Neither of you are invincible, and you both need to know that I can’t lose either of you.”
Toshi had felt his hands shaking a little and continued his charade, unwilling to open his eyes and see what Hizashi’s face might have looked like. He could guess well enough.

What was he supposed to do, though? Stop fighting? \textit{Stop} being \textit{All Might}? How could he just sit back and allow villains to hurt people, when he could help? There wasn’t anyone else that could be what he was, not until he found a suitable successor. He wiped the red on his hands on his jeans, feeling useless and disgusted in himself at once. He was standing, wasn’t he? He had two hands and two feet, even in this form? Wasn’t UA’s motto \textit{Plus Ultra}? How could he say those words to his students, say them to the world and not act on them? How could he call himself a hero, if he didn’t put his life on the line when others needed him?

One more time.

One more time, he’d fight.

Toshi opened his hospital door. His smile was more of a grimace, bracing himself for whatever he’d find.

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It was bad luck for the kid that Toga managed to corner around a bend as the students began to evacuate in a panic. Izuku tried not to maintain eye contact with the victim as she sank her teeth into the crevice between neck and shoulder, drinking deeply. Though she was small, Toga was strong and vicious. One hand held the boy in place, the other was clamped firmly over his mouth. He hadn’t even had time to fully activate his quirk, electricity crackling along his fingertips then fading as weakness took over. Eventually, the fight left him in jerky bursts. Only when his eyes slipped shut, did Toga release her bite. She dropped him on the floor as if he were a sack of potatoes.

“Mm, strong Quirks always give the best blood.” Her voice deepened as she shifted, blonde hair falling down into her face as she took the form of the boy lying unconscious between them. She flexed her new hands experimentally.

She grinned, fanged smile sending a shiver down Izuku’s spine. “It’s a shame I can’t use their Quirks when I’m like this- he has a good electricity power.”

\textit{Are you really Izuku? How do you know?}

The voice, a memory, made Izuku jerk. The voice had come from the back of his mind, an echo of words once said to him. Toga saw the flinch, smile turning into a playful pout.

“Aw, still put off from what happened between us? Don’t be like that, sweetie.”
I only want to help.

Izuku grimaced. He didn’t want to think about this right now. His heart was already rabbity in his chest.

“There’s an exit out by the cafeteria, in all likelihood. A lot of traffic goes through there at one time, it’s a fire hazard. We’ll go out through there- people will have evacuated by now.” He distracted himself from the voice, eyes darting about as he took in the layout of the hall they were tucked into. Out of the three of them, Dabi had the most experience playing defence and offense at the same time. “Dabi, can you make sure no one is following us if Toga and I keep ahead?”

“I can if you two stop fighting and work together.” The jab was delivered with little heat, but Dabi’s blue eyes gave away the lingering irritation. He had patience with Toga, with children in general. That didn’t mean it was bottomless.

Izuku didn’t want to know what would happen if that patience was pushed to breaking point.

It didn’t help that working with Toga was like trying to control a tornado, though.

Echoing his feelings Toga frowned, but shut her mouth.

“You’ll need to create a diversion if we run into someone. How well can you pretend to be a hostage?” Izuku asked her. She considered the thought, golden eyes narrowing.

“Clever, clever. I like it.” She rose to her feet, cracking her neck from side to side. “And if the heroes don’t fall for it? What’ll we do then, Izuku dear?”

He was already at that point, his Quirk moving at a mile a minute.

“We kill as many as we can.” Because if they didn’t escape, then he’d rather die trying. Whatever Shigaraki had planned should he fail would be worse. Dabi didn’t speak, but blue-black flames began to lick up his palms, his jaw setting.

Toga giggled, twirling her knife nimbly in one hand.

“Glad to see both of us know the better option.”

****

“N-no.”

He hadn’t meant to say it out loud. He’d remember that much, later on. It’d slipped out between his lips, his tongue pressed against the swelling on the inside of his cheek. Izuku hadn’t seen his reflection in a while, but he was pretty sure the left side of his face was purple. His eyes were glued to the profile presented to him, two words leaving a terrible chill running through his blood.
Shigaraki sighed, sounding like a put-upon parent. He thrust the envelope towards him impatiently.

“Our source risked their life and put a lot of effort into gathering this information, Izuku. It would be rude not to read it, just because you’re still attached to All Might’s act.”

Tears burned in the back of Izuku’s throat. Shigaraki had kept him in his cell all this time, without anyone to talk to. His Quirk had run around in his head, taking in the lines of the brick, his injuries, the texture of the cell bars. He’d been counting the number of springs in the threadbare mattress for the seventieth time when someone had finally come for him. Izuku felt jittery, wrong in a way that he couldn’t describe. It was like his Quirk was eating him, in that dark cell.

He knew that he’d be hurt if he refused again, but All Might was important! He was a real hero, a Symbol of Peace. He saved the day with a smile! (and maybe, just a little, Izuku still believed that he’d come for him).

“No.” He said again, his heart shuddering in his chest. Tears were already beginning to pool in his eyes. Izuku braced himself, expecting the blow that Shigaraki usually gave him in return for refusing. It didn’t come.

Instead, Shigaraki seemed to see his resolve. His red eyes narrowed as he seemed to think. When the villain spoke, it was to the entrance of the room.

“Toga, come here.”

A pause, and then a little girl that Izuku had never seen before stepped into the room. Her blonde hair was short, clipped close to her chin in a soft bob that tilted with her curious expression. Her slit, gold eyes seemed to squint against the light of the room, or maybe they just squinted in general. It reminded Izuku of a lazy cat, and despite his worry he felt some of his fear melt just a bit. This was the first kid he’d seen since he’d been taken here.

She was his age, barely more than eight. Her sweater had a soft teddy bear on its front. Her blonde hair was tied into two pigtails, her elastics sparkly and pink.

“Izuku, this is Himiko Toga. I’m going to leave you two to get acquainted. Play nicely, okay?” Shigaraki’s tone was sugar-sweet, and Izuku felt a small curl of dread. He’d usually wasn’t nice, tolerable maybe. But not nice.

Shigaraki patted the little girl’s head once, before taking his leave. The turn of the lock was a loud, final note. Left alone with the girl, Izuku eyed her warily.

“H-hello.”
“Hi!” The girl smiled, and Izuku saw that her teeth were pointed like a cat’s. She held out a hand, and a keychain in her pocket jangled with the movement. “You’re Izuku, right? It’s nice to meet you!”

Shyly, he met her outstretched hand with his own. Her grip was strong, stronger than it should have been. Her smile only got wider. “You’re cute! Mr. Shigaraki didn’t tell me you were cute!”

A blush was beginning to work its way on Izuku’s face. He didn’t feel cute right now given his jaw, but he liked the attention just a little. Girls, well, people really, didn’t often talk to him. A thought occurred to him then, and he looked at her in a panic.

“D-did Shigaraki make you come here, too?” Was he not the only one? The idea that there might be all sorts of children trapped here; hidden away and hurt, made Izuku want to cry.

Toga giggled a little, her hand brought to her mouth.

“No, I came here on my own. I like it here.”

Liked it here? Izuku looked at her in confusion. Toga giggled, apparently unbothered by his stare.

“What’s your Quirk?” She asked, her head tilting in curiosity. Izuku’s gaze slid to the floor. Hungry for stimulation, his Quirk had already been reading the girl in front of him. He knew it was rude, but he couldn’t help it, the numbers came to him like flashings on a TV screen:

About fifty-two pounds. Key chain is a keepsake. Reminds her of family? Data inconclusive. Quirk gives her sharpened teeth—possibly some sort of defensive or hardening ability? Or is it offensive, like a predator’s teeth and claws?

“I-It doesn’t have a name.” He said quietly. Izuku had never bothered to name his power, too busy trying to keep it from constantly overwhelming him. “I can see… information.”

“Information? Like you can see the future?” Izuku shook his head, a frown crossing his face. He struggled to explain it out loud.

“No, it’s more like… Shigaraki calls me ‘observant’?” He tried the unfamiliar word on his tongue, rolling it around. “I look at people or places, and what I see tells me a story about them. Where they’ve been, what they’ve done… what they can do, sometimes.”

Toga hummed, openly impressed.

“That’s a real nice Quirk, Midoriya. Rare, too! My papa told me once that Quirks like yours only come once in a hundred years!”

Izuku was a little startled. Toga thought his Quirk was nice? No one had ever had anything positive to say about it. Shigaraki thought it was useful, sure, but only because he did bad things with it. The
other villains found it invasive, sometimes obnoxious.

Toga leaned forward a little, as if confiding in a secret.

“Can I show you my Quirk?”

He hesitated, curious despite himself.

“What’s it called?” He asked. Her gold eyes glowed as she replied.

“It’s called Transform. Here, lemme see your arm.”

She held out an expectant hand, waiting patiently for him to offer it up. Her smile was very large now, slit eyes focused like a cat chasing a laser point pen. Izuku took it for friendliness. She must have been lonely too, after all.

Trustingly, Izuku gave over his wrist.

With inhuman strength, Toga wrenched his wrist to her mouth, and bit down.

****

They crept along the hallway as a trio, Izuku’s ears straining for any telltale noise or movement that might mean a person up ahead. They kept having to pause, aware of the time ticking as students shuffled back and forth, trying to find the nearest exit to evacuate the school. The process was grating, but necessary. Still, all of Izuku’s nerve-endings were on edge. When the last of the students finally filed out, the silence was an open relief that made his breathing easier.

That relief hower, didn’t last long. He’d guessed the direction of the cafeteria, following the smell of food as much as what he knew about common school layouts. Realistically given the number of doors it likely had, it should have been one of the first places to have been cleared of people. Yet the closer they got, the better Izuku’s ears picked up on a heated conversation. They were forced to pause at a split in the hall, one branch likely looping back around, the other headed to their destination. The talking had only gotten louder.

“Wait” He whispered at the edge of a branching hallway, straining to hear. Obediently, Toga and Dabi paused. Izuku closed his eyes, concentrating. It was loud enough to be a group, which sat with him wrong. Too many, why were they still here?

“Why are there so many?” He echoed to himself, listening in. They sounded like they were arguing, though he was too far away to pick up about what. He had a sinking feeling growing in the pit of his stomach the more he listened. Something about one of those voices sounded… familiar.

“We’re waiting, chief.” Toga’s voice was closer than Izuku would have liked. He could feel her breath on the back of his neck, and it was making a shudder run down his spine. He didn’t like not having her in his peripheral vision. Izuku waved her off, chancing a quick look around the corner. His heart plummeted down to his toes as his worst fears were confirmed. He did know that voice.
The problem with heroes was that by nature, their greatest strength was their weakness. The call to action when everyone else ran was deeply ingrained from a young age. It didn’t mean Izuku didn’t want to swear extensively, explosively at the sight of Ochako and people who were clearly her classmates clearly not evacuating the premises. A cold sweat broke out on his arms as he realised they weren’t even paying attention, too absorbed in their arguing to realise the danger they were in.

“We can’t go this way.” Izuku knew it was already a lost cause, but he had to try. Toga latched on to the note of desperation in his voice immediately.

“What’s wrong, Izuku dear?”

“It’s a dead end.” He tried, but Toga was already peering over his shoulder. She caught sight of the students. Her fanged smile stretched across her face, impish and glad.

“Aw, did you make friends while you were away? Cute. Too bad they’re blocking our exit.”

Izuku turned to Dabi, his teeth gritted and his eyes pleading. He wouldn’t want to fight them, surely. It’d take too much time, be too much effort. Any excuse he’d buy would do for Izuku. This couldn’t happen.

This couldn’t happen.

“Listen to me. There’s no point in fighting them. It’ll take time we don’t have and get the pros on our backs more than they already are. I can think around this; I just need a minute-”

“Didn’t you say we’re running out of time?” Toga tapped her wrist, mimicking a clock. “Tick-tock Izuku, unless you want to hear my idea.”

He exhaled a long, shaky breath. Izuku could feel the pressure at the base of his skull, pounding even as he snuck another glance and read what he could of the students. Yet even as he tried, his eyes kept landing on Ochako, like a magnet drawn to force.

“Brat,” It was just a word, but Dabi’s voice had taken on a certain tone that Izuku knew well. It was the tone that didn’t take arguments, stated certainties. The sick feeling in Izuku’s stomach got worse. He was acutely aware of his own breathing, sharp and fast in his ears. Panic attack. “You need to figure out something or things are going to get messy.”

No! No stop! Please stop! I’m Izuku! I’m Izuku!

He couldn’t speak, his throat felt like it was clogged with knives, his Quirk white static in his brain.
He felt Toga grab him, quicker than Dabi could stop her. Her voice was dismissive and cruel.

“We’re wasting time.”

He felt her teeth sink into the crook of his shoulder, his body jerked hard. What came out of his mouth was a whimper of fear, choked and cut off.

She drank until he was shaking, lost in memories that reared their ugly head from deep, deep inside of him. He hardly heard her tell Dabi to stay on guard and wait for her signal. She shoved him, and Izuku’s feet worked on autopilot even as his brain went offline.

Run.

****

“Ow! That hurt!”

The sting from the bite on his wrist sang up his arm. Izuku wrenched his hand away from the girl’s grip, cradling it against his chest. Why did she do that? He’d only been trying to be nice!

He glared at her, only for the glare to slip away as he watched Toga’s Quirk begin work.

Before astonished eyes, blonde hair began to darken, shorten, curling up and out like wild tufts of grass. Her colourful clothes dulled, matching the dark blue jeans and yellow hoodie he was wearing. Freckles broke out along her chin, cheeks and nose. In the span of a breath Izuku was looking at his own reflection smiling back at him.

“Cool, huh?” It wasn’t Toga’s voice, but the infectious giggle that followed made Izuku recognise her. His shock began to fade, replaced with awe and fascination.

“Woah, that’s amazing!” Izuku meant it. He’d never seen such a cool power before used by someone his age. Already, his own Quirk was clamoring to read her, try and figure out how the power worked.

Except something strange happened. The longer he looked, the more he tried to collect information. His Quirk felt blurred, overlapped and fuzzy in a way that made Izuku wince and grip his head in pain.

“W-what?”

Toga cocked his head to the side, something glittering in her now-green eyes.

“What’s wrong, Izuku?”

“My… my Quirk…” It was burning? Why? He kept trying to blink past the blurring, to see Toga under her transformation. Yet the visuals kept getting confused, overlapping with information about
himself. His own age, height, weight, it was all spit back at him in a jumbled, disorganized mess. Like a glitch, the numbers kept shuddering in front of him, but they felt flimsy and intangible as air. Izuku clutched his head, a dull throb jarring up his temples.

“Is your Quirk broken?” The question, asked in childlike frankness, made a part of Izuku panic. It’d taken so long for his powers to manifest; his mom had nearly given up hope. Another thought came, even worse. His Quirk was the only reason he was useful, in this place. If he didn’t have his Quirk, then Shigaraki would be really mad. Plus, being Quirkless reminded him too much of Kacchan’s insults for him. Those days, hazy memories were something he missed and hated himself for missing at once.

Toga pouted a little, seeming put out by his pain. If Izuku weren’t feeling so terrible, he might have been a little upset at how quickly she became annoyed by him. As it was, he could barely look at her without waves of radiating agony hitting him.

“It’s like watching a microphone looping in feedback, isn’t it?” She said, seeming to be speaking to herself. “Mr. shigaraki really was right, y’know. He said you wouldn’t like it.”

Toga’s grin spread then, and Izuku flinched as a hand identical to his own shoved him. He stumbled, falling backwards. He curled in on himself instinctively, trying to curb the nausea still working its way up his throat.

“Hey Izuku, how can a tool that breaks so easily be useful to anyone?” The smile was gone now, his mirror image looming above him with a bored expression. “Really, I make a better version of you, and like this I’m basically Quirkless.”

Izuku could only whimper, in too much pain to reply.

The sound of the door opening momentarily brought his hopes up, thinking this creative new punishment was over. Shigaraki stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame like the sight entertained him. There was a nasty smile on his face.

“Looks like you two are getting along well.” He said, a note in voice that made Izuku’s short-lived hope shrivel. The villain shot a glance at Toga, the words that came out of his mouth making Izuku tremble in panic.

“Come on then Izuku, play time is over for now.”

“Coming, Mr Shigaraki!” Toga said cheerfully, before Izuku could reply. The boy let out a strangled noise, struggling to get to his feet. No, this was wrong! She wasn’t… he was…!

“She’s not… I’m Izuku!” He cried, suddenly realizing that the room Shigaraki had put them in was cramped and small. It was a perfect cage, short of his actual cell. The lock on the door made the hair stand up on the back of his arms.
The other him shot him an annoyed look.

“Puh-lease. You’re just a broken tool, right? I’m a better Izuku, one that listens to Mr Shigaraki. One that **works.**”

Izuku watched as his other self skipped towards Shigaraki, feeling cold and confused and hurt. Shigaraki **had** to know it was Toga, it only made sense, yet he stroked the top of her head with four fingers and levelled Izuku with a look of disappointment.

“Izuku’s right, you know. It’s a shame, but a broken tool is better kept in a shed than used.”

“No.” the boy whispered, unable to shout because his heart was in his mouth. Shigaraki and Toga were already turning away, and he couldn’t get to his feet quickly enough. His head was swimming. Izuku scrambled through his dizziness, wobbling to his feet on knees that felt like Jell-O. “No, please!” The door was shut, and he was left helplessly jiggling a locked doorknob, his other hand scratching fingernail marks into the wood.

Shigaraki’s voice sounded on the other side, darkly amused.

“Perhaps this tool could learn a lesson, prove his use after some alone time? What do you think, Izuku?”

The other him giggled from the other side of the door. Izuku slammed his hands against the wall, his breath coming in heaves. The room was small, smaller than his cell. When he got older, he’d realise that it was where the bar used to store crates of beer before it’d been taken over by villains. The walls seemed pressed in around him.

“Please, I’m sorry! I’m s-sorry I’ll be better! Please, I’m Izuku!”

A cold, callous laugh rang through the door. It faded with retreating footsteps.

Izuku was left alone, his head throbbing and his sobs loud in the silence.

It would be a week of this, of the other him showing up, biting him, telling him what he was and what he wasn’t, before Izuku began to doubt even himself.

If his Quirk couldn’t prove something, then how did he know it was real?

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He did the only thing he could do when he was terrified, the only thing he’d ever known. Izuku ran like a startled colt, tearing down the corridor blindly.

His mirror image gave chase.
For the second time in under a month, class 1-A found themselves under a villain attack. It was beginning to feel a little old hat, something that they could all agree probably shouldn’t be the case. There was a certain order amongst the chaos of the other students that were evacuating, a hardness that had developed between all of them after watching their teacher nearly get killed.

It made them calm, even in the face of panic.

It also made them question the procedure that led to panic in the first place, unfortunately.

“I’ll stay inside the school, and make sure people get outside safely.” Iida looked a little bitter at the task that was automatically assigned to him, but couldn’t complain. He leaned on his crutches on one side, feeling awkward and stiff if he couldn’t use his usual gestures. “People still know me as the ‘Emergency Exit’ man, so they should follow.”

“What’s the target like?” Jirou usually had a somewhat lazy expression on her face, but her posture now was straight and tense. Iida remembered that she’d been one of the students to fight the general villains, ones that they’d known little about and as a result been caught by surprise.

He thought about his fight with Deku, his speed and the way he seemed to almost know how Iida would act before he himself did. He fidgeted with his glasses, contemplating.

“He’s Quirk makes him difficult to surprise. If he’s going along with this, a direct and fast attack before he has time to analyse is more likely to catch him off guard.”

“Strike hard, and strike randomly. Ribbit.” Tsuyu hummed. She cast a glance at Ochako, who was
frowning into her lap. “We should also consider that he might not be part of this break in at all, but got caught up in it anyhow.”

“We shouldn’t be considering anything, since we’re supposed to be evacuating with the rest of the school.” Momo interjected, her voice hard. Since announcing evacuation protocol, she’d sat back down and begun gathering her bag calmly together. She quirked an eyebrow at the group. “Or have you all just forgotten?”

“We can’t just do nothing!” Ochako squeaked, a panicked look on her face. Deku’s resigned expression kept swimming to mind. “What if the teachers hurt him and he’s not part of the plan? Or what if they don’t find the villains in time?”

“The heroes are pros. We’re students.” Momo’s hands crossed over her chest, some of the severity in her expression softening at Ochako’s clear desperation. “We need to get out of here so the heroes can do their job safely, and serve as backup at the front gate. That’s our job, as heroes.” The immovable determination on Momo’s face was clear: she wasn’t budging.

This may have been the end of it, if it had just been Ochako’s group in the cafeteria. Yet even as Tsuyu, Ochako, Iida, Momo and Jirou got themselves together, a familiar yelling voice caught their attention. Heads snapped up, and they caught sight of Bakugou and Kirishima arguing at the front entrance. There were few who would fight with Bakugou and got away with it, and it was clear that Kirishima was pulling out all the stops. His head was bent towards Bakugou, an endearing smile on his face as he trussed up his hair and jerked his thumb towards the exit—convincing him to evacuate. The blonde said something, all snarling words and derisiveness.

“Yo, Kirishima!” Jirou, cupping her hands around her mouth, waved the two over. Kirishima turned at the sound of his name, toothy smile widening even as Bakugou’s sour mood turned thunderous behind him. Together they wandered over.

“Dude, does anyone know what’s going on? I missed out on curry for this.” Kirishima looked genuinely mournful for a second, Lunch Rush’s curry a known favourite.

“Villain evacuation, shit’s fucked.” Jirou arched a brow, looking at Bakugou. He wore an antsy expression, shifting from foot to foot. His eyes kept flicking towards the other exit, leading out into the hallway. “You want to go fight them too, huh?”

It was probably the least surprising fact to anyone that Kirishima had been trying to convince Bakugou for the past five minutes that evacuating was the smarter decision. It was more surprising that Bakugou had been reluctantly listening. That was, he’d been listening up until Jirou admitted to secretly wanting the same thing.

“I’m saying we could take ‘em. If that Void Bastard’s with ‘em, then I won’t lose round two.” Bakugou brought his hands together, one fist against open palm. His expression was murderous. “Destroy their exit once and for all, instead of fucking hiding like cowards!”

“We, are students, not teachers!” Momo cried, exasperated at the reluctant expressions on her classmates faces. “We need to set an example for others. As Class 1-A, we reflect UA. Do you really
want to tell Sensei that we decided to fight instead of follow the logical evacuation procedures?” The reminder that Aizawa-Sensei would have all their heads caused most heads to duck down.

Even Bakugou, though not one to back down from a fight, made a sound of resigned disgust. His arms crossed over his chest, a mulish appearing set to his jaw.

“I still think we could take ‘em.” He muttered spitefully. Kirishima swiped his arm over Bakugou’s shoulders, shaking him a little. He looked sympathetic.

Momo led the rest of the class outside, taking the hallways not filled with students panicking over yet again having their school life disrupted. All in all, those from 1-A that had been in the cafeteria were herself, Ochako, Tsuyu, Iida, Bakugou, Kirishima, and Jirou. The hall was silent in the wake of the evacuation, and they slowly amalgamated in the empty space left behind the other students. Somewhere in the distance, rumbling sounds of fighting echoed. It was the reverb of Quirks striking Quirks, and it made the hair stand up on the back of Momo’s arms.

She’d been trapped at USJ, fighting for her life with Jirou and Kaminari. The memories kept rising to the surface, oil in water. Except last time there hadn’t been any guarantee that help was coming. The fear was still there, like a tight ball in her chest for her and her classmates’ lives. Yet it wasn’t as loud. She hoped that was a good thing.

“We should go after them. They’re still in the school.” Bakugou broke her out of her thoughts, apparently not done with the argument as she’d hoped. His palms were sparking on and off, his gaze directed out the window. “It’s coming from outside, that means that people are already covering the gates. We’re more useful here.”

It didn’t surprise Momo really when she thought about it, that Bakugou was willing to ignore protocol. What did surprise and frustrate her was that Kirishima was wearing the expression he took on when he was leaning towards Bakugou’s corner in an argument.

“We’re not discussing this. This isn’t a discussion.” How did people lead like this? How was she supposed to lead when people like Bakugou were in her class? Being class rep was as good as being a pebble on the side of the road for all it leant her authority.

Kirishima seemed to be considering something, his usual smile gone.

“They might hurt someone if we just leave, and we don’t know the villain’s Quirk so there’s no guarantee that the pros will be able to stop them, right?”

“We’ve been given orders to evacuate.” Iida interjected, looking troubled. Oddly enough, his gaze was directed towards Ochako. She was studiously silent, her lower lip snagged between her teeth.

Bakugou let out a wordless noise of frustration at Momo. He threw his hands up in the air, sparks flickering between his fingers.

“The rules are stupid!”
Ochako took that as her cue to break up the fight. Moving bodily between him and Momo, she glowered at them both.

“I’m going after him. I think I’m the only one with a chance of talking him out of getting away, if he’s being coerced. I want to give him that chance.” Even as she said the words, she hardly believed they were coming out of her mouth. Momo was giving her a helpless, betrayed look. She didn’t expect to have to argue this with her. Normally, Ochako would feel bad. As it was, she planted herself firmly with her hands on her hips.

Behind her Bakugou let out a huff. He looked unexpectedly pleased with her, some of his usual ire replaced with grudging admiration. Ochako again asked herself mentally what in the hell she was doing, if she could win that sort of expression from her class’ well-known garbage fire.

“That means you need backup, round-face.” Bakugou said. She didn’t argue it, how could she? Kirishima nodded, shark-like grin already splitting his face.

“Yeah! We’ll give them a fight for the ages, and protect the school from the inside!”

Momo pressed a hand to her forehead, frustration clear. Iida didn’t look entirely impressed either.

“You won’t be able to stop them, Momo.” Jirou spoke up, a resigned expression on her face.

“Ribbit. Might as well join them, keep us all safe.” Tsuyu added, and though her amphibian face could sometimes be hard to read, Momo swore there was a sparkle of mischief in her eyes. Did all of her classmates have a death wish? She didn’t get to find out.

Any kind of protest died as a cry rang down the hall. Necks snapped towards the sound of the voice, and Ochako’s breath stopped in her chest at what she saw.

Two Dekus were running, one clearly chasing the other. The one chasing turned his head, panting through his teeth. He held up a hand, and waved.

“Yo, you guys are heroes, right? *Stop her,* she’s not me!”

A shadow in a black hoodie tore down the corridor, narrowly twisting just in time to avoid colliding with the adjacent wall- the other Deku. This one managed to turn on a dime just at the right moment to stay upright, hands scrabbling against the floor for a moment before he was back on his feet. He didn’t turn to look like the other had; tearing blindly down the hall.

The first Deku groaned, the sound echoing down the hallway as he gave chase.

“Fucker’s *fast,* if she gets away I’m *toast.*”

“He’s… on our side?” Tsu croaked, echoing the confusion on her classmate’s faces. Kirishima shrugged, making an ‘*I Dunno*’ noise at the back of his throat. Momo looked up at the ceiling, as if she could find the answers to why the universe tested her this way up there.

Ochako felt hope bloom impossibly in her chest. Deku wasn’t trying to escape at all!
“Bakugou, Kirishima!” Her tone made both of her classmates straighten, losing their confused expressions in the face of orders. Ochako delivered, feeling determination weigh in her words.

“Support me. I need to get close enough to help him take the… other him down.”

“U-Uraraka-” Kirishima looked like he wanted to protest, but there was no arguing with Ochako when she was like this. The whole class knew it, had known it from the first day when she’d gone tearing after Iida to save his life in the competition. He sighed through his teeth.

Bakugou only grunted, maybe too eager to fight or recognizing the look on her face. He cracked his neck, the sound loud and terrible and utterly appropriate, somehow.

“Sounds good to me, I’ve been wanting to hit something from the start.”

Ochako breathed in deeply, activating her Quirk on her clothes with quick precision.

“We need to move quick.” She said, but might as well not have spoken. Given the go-ahead, Bakugou was already moving. His Quirk made him fast, and Kirishima had to book it to keep up. Ochako brought up the rear.

Momo watched them go, the only thought on her mind that they were all, absolutely, incredibly, dead when Aizawa-Sensei would find out about this. Then she pushed that despair down, and did what she had to do.

She began to materialise a bow staff, and the others gave chase.

The chase was a bit bottlenecked, the hallway narrow and there being too many of them to all run as fast as they’d like. In that sense, the Not-Deku had the advantage. Yet to Uraraka’s surprise, he didn’t seem to be doing much with it. The course that he set on was winding and confusing, as if he were picking halls blindly. Like a pin ball launched from its coil, the group found themselves darting this way and that just trying to keep up.

Deku caught, well, Deku before they could make it to the next hallway, tackling him to the ground in a move that was brutal and dirty. Ochako winced at the sound of someone’s jaw clacking against the linoleum. Driving his knee into the villain’s back, Deku head turned, and Ochako got the impression that behind the placid expression of his kabuki mask, he was smiling.

“Caught him!” He panted between greedy mouthfuls of air.

Kirishima crowed, pumping his hands towards the sky as the group of students slowed down to meet Deku.
“Nice job there, man! For a villain, you’ve got good reflexes!” Ochako was inclined to agree. She hadn’t realised how fast Deku was when he was in action, but she understood now how Iida had been hurt. As it was, her friend only just made it to the end of the hall, his crutches clacking against the floor.

Deku seemed pleased at the praise, fidgeting under the group’s stare. He shrugged.

“Well, the bastard bit me to activate her transformation Quirk.” Deku’s expression wrinkled in distaste, and he gestured down at the prone body beneath him. “This is Toga. She was sent to pick me up and had um, opinions when I told her I didn’t want to go.”

Inwardly, Ochako felt a wave of relief. Then Deku hadn’t wanted to escape, but been forced. A smile spread across her face, the quiet fears banished.

“Thank goodness, I wanted to believe this wasn’t something you planned.” She looked at the transformation villain curiously. “She really does look like you…” It was true. The sweating, trembling villain beneath Deku looked identical to him in every way, from the height to the clothes to the green eyes staring wildly out from behind the kabuki mask.

The transformed villain twisted and writhed in Deku’s grip like a snake, their eyes hateful and narrowed. Their breathing was hard, but they’d been running hard too. They were also surrounded by heroes, which couldn’t be the most relaxing experience.

The transformed villain’s gaze met Ochako’s, something wild in them that she couldn’t parse before Deku got a firmer grip and forced the villain’s head back down towards the ground. He grunted from the effort.

“Anyone have anything I can use to tie him up? He’s uh, stronger than he looks.”

“Here.” Momo’s Quirk activated, her school uniform open to reveal the sports bra she’d taken to wearing for such incidences underneath. A pair of handcuffs materialized from her stomach, which she handed to Kaminari. The transformed villain grunted, struggling to lift his head under the boy’s grip. Deku didn’t seem particularly phased.

“We heard there were two of them. Where’s the other bastard that helped you break out?” Bakugou asked, his arms crossed over his chest. He seemed disappointed at how quickly the fight had ended. Ochako watched as Deku shrugged, standing up now that their opponent was detained. The kabuki mask he wore hid his expression, but she thought he seemed almost flippant towards Kacchan’s grouchy attitude.

“Beats me. All I’ve ever known about the other guy is that he’s real scarred up, like some kinda zombie. He took off in another direction while this one was trying to drag me back to the villain’s headquarters.” He jerked a thumb towards Ochako. “Thanks to your friend, I decided I’d rather not.”
On the floor, Deku’s hands clenched at his sides, despair filling him. Sound was coming back to him, and with it, a weak feeling lead in his limbs. The panic was seeping through him, into the floor and leaving him drained and kitten-weak. Toga had used him, pushed and pushed his buttons until he’d been unable to do anything but bolt. Now he was paying the price, his voice struggling to come back to him and his limbs feeling like lead.

He could do nothing but watch as Toga destroyed everything for him, took the one person who had looked at him and seen more than a tool. The cruelty of it twisted his chest into knots, his breathing sharp and sour.

No. I can’t watch.

He could see Ochako, out of the corner of his eye. He couldn’t speak, but he didn’t have to. He could see her face, see that she thought Toga was him. Not even she could see it was a trap. Toga pretended to be him better than he did, and it was his own fault.

He was just a tool, and he had gone and let himself pretend for just a while that he wasn’t. It got him this, staring helplessly at the small of Toga’s back, where he knew her knife was tucked away. She kept getting closer to Ochako, to her friends. These people, children, who were supposed to become heroes. Never in his life had he felt so small, an shadow on the ground as he watched something far bigger than himself collapse around him. The rush of the numbers, his Quirk, swallowed him like an ocean.

Izuku pressed his face to the cold floor, a shudder passing through him.

At least half of them will die. Toga will kill half before they realise, before Dabi even bothers to get involved.

He didn’t want these facts, didn’t want them to be right. Izuku wished more than anything suddenly that he didn’t know them, could turn his Quirk off and curl up and hide so that he didn’t have to witness this. Not like this, not with no control, and no hope, and Ochako’s trusting expression directed at a person she thought was him. Hot, wet tears burned at the back of his throat for the first time in years. A garbled scream was locked somewhere tightly in the back of his throat.

He wouldn’t do it!

The paperclip. He had it tucked into his sleeve.

The pounding in Izuku’s skull reached a deafening crescendo.

The hoarse cry was like nails on a chalkboard. One moment, the other Deku was on the floor, the
next he was clutching a paperclip in bloody hands like his life depended on it, the cuffs clattering to the ground. He was on his feet, rushing forward with speed borne from desperation. He drove his makeshift weapon downwards with all of his anger, all of his fear.

Ochako dove, but she wasn’t fast enough. There was a horrible, wet noise as the paperclip found its place in the standing Deku’s shoulder. A horrified cry left her mouth, but it was cut short. The other Deku was panting, heaving breaths rattling his ribcage.

“Liar.” He growled.

It happened very quickly, then.

The warmth in standing Deku melted away like rain. He scoffed, a bored look materialising on his face. Ochako felt an inexplicable chill run down her spine, like a sixth sense of what was to come.

“Well, if you won’t even try to play along, then.” Deku sighed through his teeth, the smile slipping off his face like wet paint. “Looks like we’re doing this the hard way.”

“Round-Face!” Bakugou barked, but the villain was already moving. The image of Deku physically began to dissolve away, a grinning girl in his place. Ochako flinched back, and later she’d reflect on the fact that it was the only thing that kept the villain’s knife from finding a home in her stomach.

Wrong. She’d gotten it wrong.

Training kicked in then, and she went with the momentum. Ochako fell back even as Tsuyu and Bakugou dove forward, firepower. The vibration from Bakugou’s explosion ripped through the group as he met his target, jerking everyone out of their stasis. He was wrenched back from his own damage by Tsuyu’s tongue.

Momo activated her Quirk, pulling a staff from her middle. She blocked just in time as the smoke cleared, a knife barred inches away from her startled face. She found herself nose to nose with a fanged villain.

“You’re fast.”

Toga laughed. Her gold eyes squinted as she drove the knife down harder, testing Momo’s steel.

She didn’t get to try for long, a pink tongue had wrapped itself around her leg. The smoke cleared, and Tsuyu pulled. Toga was forced to go with the movement, Momo falling back. It didn’t last long, given that Toga now twisted, merely aiming for the Tsuyu instead. No, she was helping the motion along, angling herself so that she was headed for her face knife-first. It happened in the span of a breath, faster than any of them could register.

Bakugou got there first, a manic grin stretched across his face. He didn’t need to tell Tsuyu to get her
tongue out of the way, she knew that look. Explosions ripped up Bakugou’s palms, propelling him forward to meet the villain head-on. If Toga was fast, he’d be faster.

He hit her squarely, blasting her back. It wasn’t as far back as he’d been hoping, Toga sinking her knife into the tile. The accompanying wail grated against the linoleum.

*Now.*

Toga heard the movement behind her, and whirled in time to avoid being struck by Kirishima’s kick. She dove, striking her knife out at random only to find his uniform tore while her knife glanced off his skin like he was made of diamond. She snarled in frustration. *Stupid* Student-Heroes.

Kirishima in turn rounded himself, behind him the rest of his classmates moving forward. His usual cheery expression was drawn into a look of seriousness and concentration.

Backed up against the wall, Toga found herself in a loose ring of students, all of them on the ready should she choose to move. She pursed her lips, scanning the makeshift barricade for weak spots.

Even the one on crutches faced off against her, making the tail-end of the ring. The sight made amusement course through her. *Ha!*

It was almost cute, how they thought they were threatening to her at all. She licked her lips, her eyes darting back and forth. Which one to bite? Which person should she become to really tear these kids apart? What weak spot could she take and use to crack this united group of children into individuals to pick off?

Behind them, Deku was getting on his feet. He did this painfully slowly, tremors wracking his body. He’d been too close to the explosion, caught up in it while Toga had been able to move. His ears felt white-hot, and were ringing oddly. Everything felt a little too bright, too fast and too hectic. He thought he might be bleeding, a copper taste in his mouth.

His mask was cracking and falling, pieces chipping away to reveal one green eye. It burned as it landed on Toga, fear dissipating as his memories came back to him.

Izuku felt a cold rage throw him, choke him with its sudden appearance. It made everything slow as he directed his gaze towards Toga.

Momo spoke, her voice hard and clipped.
“Villain! You are being apprehended on accounts of extreme violence, breaking and entering, and intent to kill directed towards the students of UA. You have the right to remain-”

“No.” Deku’s voice interrupted her. His voice was cold fire. One by one, heads turned in his direction. Toga felt to her surprise hard gooseflesh break out down her back as he didn’t so much as look them, eyes trained only on her. “She’s mine.” His breathing had slowed, the purpling bite just visible at the line of his collar. Before Deku had been trembling, but now he was eerily still. In one steady hand, was the knife Toga tended to keep in a strap at her side.

She hadn’t noticed it’d gone missing in the first place.

Momo looked at him incredulously. There was a nervous twitch in her fingers, a sweat breaking out down her neck. Until now, she’d chosen to put her faith in Ochako’s promise that she thought of Deku as a good person. Now, as she faced down another villain… she wasn’t so sure. There was a chill around the boy that was staring at Toga, a certain unstable quality that had her teeth on edge.

“You don’t get to lay claim. We need to do this by the law.” She was surprised her voice didn’t shake, though she did flinch when Deku’s gaze landed on her. It was as if she were a bug, insignificant. Momo gripped her bow staff more tightly, the metal creaking under her hands. “We aren’t the law.”

“You don’t even uphold it.” Deku’s voice was hard, bitter as a winter wind. He spat the words from his mouth like they were poison. “You and your heroes couldn’t even be bothered to put security tapes in my room. Get out of my way.”

“Deku!” Ochako’s voice was clear, an anchor to latch onto. Her brown eyes were trained on Toga, but that didn’t matter. Deku’s head snapped to her like she was a commander giving him orders, his eyes pinpricks. He looked at her as if he’d only just realised she was alive, that she was there.

Her voice softened, but the steel undercurrent told Momo that she’d misjudged her friend. Ochako would fight Deku, if she had no other choice. She just preferred to exhaust all other options. “Stand down. Please.”

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Bakugou had gone rigid and silent. Only Kirishima noticed, his friend’s hands going slack like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Bakugou’s gaze stared unblinkingly at the villain, Deku, whatever the fuck he wanted to be called. He looked like… well, like he was seeing a Ghost.

Deku was equally still, the cold burn in his eyes dulling slowly into exhausted acceptance. Looking at him, it wasn’t hard to see why. His hands were a bloody mess, both from breaking free of the handcuffs and attacking Toga. There were singes and burn marks along his arms, and his green hair was dusty from ash. His mask had cut him when it broke, and blood flowed sluggishly from a cut
along one freckled cheek. The effort it took to stand seemed to be using whatever energy he had left. He looked like a corpse, still somehow breathing.

Toga saw her chance.

She dove towards Bakugou, the knife a bright flash of silver as she raised it.

She never got a chance to make a mark.

A black fire sprang between them, separating 1-A from the villain and they in turn from her. A moment later, Dabi appeared by her side. He’d flipped over the students and the flames as if they were little more than ants.

“Time’s up, kiddo.” He scooped Toga onto his back, minding her busted ankle. It was still bleeding freely. “Kurogiri’s given us our signal.”

Over the roar of the flames, class 1-A was yelling. Toga couldn’t make out their words. She grunted as she was slung like a sack of potatoes onto his shoulders, the fight still singing in her bones. She knew better than to argue.

“What about the brat?”

There was a pause, then Dabi shrugged. It made his ragdoll-like appearance somehow seem to have many joints where there shouldn’t be.

“He seems to have made his choice, right?” He exhaled, groaning as he let loose a small string of expletives. “Not that he ever thinks about what his actions will mean.”

Toga didn’t know what Dabi meant, exactly. Like a brother, he often kept things from her. She thought it was his own peculiar way of letting her be a child. She pouted into his neck, disappointed.

“You’re not gonna kill him?”

“. . . Shigaraki might not mind murdering children, but I have better things to do with my time.”

“You’re a softy, for a serial killer.”

He didn’t take the joke. His voice was distant as he lifted her, and backed them towards the window behind them.

“I have bigger problems to work out.”

She supposed that was true. There’d been another bombing today, and Dabi would’ve wanted to oversee it.

Her chin came to rest in the crook of his shoulder, exhaustion taking over as he dove from the window without hesitation. They left the heroes and Deku behind, lost in the chaos that Dabi’s flames left behind.
The silence of the woods around the school stretched around them, swallowing them with the darkness of the sun finally sinking past the horizon. The rhythmic noise of Dabi’s feet running against the dirt thundered in Toga’s throbbing head. She’d fucked up.

“I need clothes.” She muttered sulkily. It wasn’t cold out, but she’d need to be able to take the main streets with him when they were warped back near headquarters.

He grunted, cool gaze on the path ahead. Though he had a careless demeanour, Toga knew this meant he’d been listening.

“We’ll go to a thrift shop before we head back.”

Satisfied, Toga leaned more fully onto his back so she could tilt her head up towards the sky.

Today, she could acknowledge that Izuku had almost had the balls to kill her. *Almost.* That was a win that she couldn’t forget, despite the overwhelming losses of tonight. Toga had been pushing and prodding, nudging and manipulating Izuku for years, and had never seen that sort of reaction from him before. Really, the answer presented to her was obvious: He’d always reacted more to her liking when other lives were threatened. Often he tried to ignore her in the hopes that she went away. *This,* had been a special reaction, one she’d savour for a while. Toga filed this away for later thinking, for now satisfied as a whole. She knew though, that their failure today was going to have consequences.

“Shigaraki’s gonna be real mad that we didn’t bring Izuku back, huh?”

Dabi didn’t seem particularly concerned. He hummed, and Toga was reminded of a rather sleepy cat as he slid lazy blue eyes in her direction.

“It’s on me.”

“You sure?”

The grin that spread across Dabi’s face contorted his stitches, warping them into a caricature of a smile. Amused and unsettlingly insane. He’d always had alarming ways of showing joy. Toga could relate.

“Kid, what’s he gonna do? I’m already eighty percent burn tissue. Shigaraki’s not what I’m getting out of being here.”

Another good point. Dabi wasn’t with the league, not in the same way that she was. As a result, Shigaraki and him had butted heads before.

Toga let her exhaustion win out, gold eyes slipping closed. A woozy feeling swept over her as she looked down at her still bleeding leg. Damn Izuku, aiming for her ankle. His damn Quirk had known, she supposed.
She hated the sight of her own blood.

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In retrospect. Toshinori should’ve known that his room was right next to Aizawa’s. They had both been in critical care, and though neither had been well enough to visit the other, Recovery Girl knew of theirs and Present Mic’s relationship.

Still, Toshi had to swallow a yelp when he opened the door to his hospital room, expecting to find an empty hallway and instead finding his boyfriend trying to make his way blindly towards God-only-knew-where.

Finding a bandaged, mummy-like version of Aizawa struggling to make it down the hall with little to no vision and the willpower of spite alone on his side was a sight that made Toshi one part amused and three parts terrified on the man’s behalf. The terror won out after a split second, and he ignored his own smarting ribs in favour of chasing down the man.

“You shouldn’t even be up!” He ran, er, limped rather to Aizawa’s side, wondering how someone who was operating without his vision still managed to hobble faster in an attempt to get away. Aizawa seemed irritated, trying to shake off Toshi’s concerned hands even as the movement seemed painful and largely ineffective. Like shaking off an overly affectionate python.

Toshi was acutely aware of his own hypocrisy, even as he tried in vain to guide Shouta back to his room. This was a task much easier said than done, given that he himself was injured.

“M’fine.” Aizawa muttered from under layers of bandage wrapping, glaring up at Toshi. The dark curtain of his hair was greasy, and from what Toshi could see of his face Aizawa looked even more like perma-death than usual. Most of the time, that sort of corpse-like appearance was a little endearing to Toshi. If he’d been asked even three years ago if he ever thought having Aizawa falling asleep on his shoulder during movie nights would be in his future, he would have laughed the person off. It would have been a pipe dream, a glitch in the matrix or an alternate universe. Two years ago, he would have argued that Aizawa would need to be able to feel vulnerable, to even consider that.

He looked plenty vulnerable, now. In truth, Toshi wasn’t sure how much he liked it. It wasn’t often he had to deal with. Shouta liked his independence, and now was no different. Toshi didn’t know everything about the man’s childhood, but it’d made him rather stick his hand over an open flame than accept help. In a way, Toshi could relate.

It was clear though that this was approaching quickly towards unhealthy.

Toshi managed to guide them both to sitting against the hallway wall, tucked up against the corner of
“They healed my legs, so I can move fine.” Aizawa gestured to his perfectly functioning lower torso. He seemed grimly proud of himself. “Chiyo fought it, said my stamina was too low, but gave in.”

That was Recovery Girl’s first mistake.

Toshinori thought but knew better than to say out loud.

He scratched the back of his head, wincing as the movement pulled at the stitches in his side.

“Still my friend, pushing yourself will only slow down your recovery.”

Aizawa snorted, shooting Toshi a look that made it very clear just what he thought about that theory. His dark eyes flicked over him, taking in the bandages that were wrapped around Toshinori’s head, only half hidden by the collar of his shirt. His dry smile made the corners of Toshi’s mouth twitch upwards.

“Pot, meet kettle.”

Sitting as they were side by side, both of them did privately think about their own foolishness. They were cut from the same cloth, more than others noticed. Both had a self-sacrificing streak that was enough to make them excellent heroes and terrible at romance. Sometimes, it happened to bite them both in the ass at the same time.

Abruptly, Toshi had to laugh. It spilled from his lips, unable to be held back in his chest as he looked over at his battered partner, at his own bandaged hands. He could tell that under the bandages, Shouta was looking at him strangely.

“We’re a mess, aren’t we.”

It was said as a statement, not a question. Shota sighed, tilting his head back to look at the man beside him. Everything hurt, he hadn’t moved this much since before he’d woken up in a hospital bed. All of that seemed to shrink in the face of Toshi’s smile.

“Yeah,” Aizawa admitted quietly “We are.”

“What are we doing, Shouta?” Toshinori asked, wrapping his arms around one skeletal knee. “What use would we even be in this situation? Hizashi would wring our necks before we could do anything to help.”

“Like he’d be able to.” Aizawa didn’t pout, but he looked close to it. Shouta’s pride was easy to prick, and it was clear as he glared spitefully out from under the layers of bandages and broken bones that his helplessness in this situation threw him.

“We’re a couple of idiots, aren’t we?” Toshi murmured. “What could we even do, besides get in the way of those who might help?” Really, he hadn’t changed at all from his youth. Gran Torino would have smacked him upside the head if he could see him now. Being brave was one thing, but it took
someone else being the same level of exceptionally stupid for him to see that this hadn’t been bravery.

Some of Aizawa’s prickly demeanour cooled. He averted his bruised gaze, and so refused to answer. To try to justify their behaviour lately would be an insult in a way.

“…We did what he had to do, I’m not denying that.” Toshi continued, uncertain if his partner was even listening. It didn’t really matter either way. “What you did, what I did was to protect our students at USJ. But Hizashi made a point, when he thought I was unconscious. Neither of us are invincible.”

“…What would he have us do, quit being heroes?” Aizawa snorted “I can’t see you stopping for even a week, and I know I couldn’t. Put in the same position, I’d have taken on those Villains all over again. Hizashi knew what we were like when he started this relationship.”

He had been the one to start it, too. Sure, Aizawa and him had been dating since high school, but it’d been Hizashi who had led Aizawa by the hand towards All Might, encouraged him to see the quiet man underneath. All Might was a title, an act of a person, and was as such as impossible to touch or understand as a statue. Toshi was the sort of person who brought stray cats home, and sang to himself while making tea in the mornings. It was clear from the beginning which Shouta preferred, when given the choice. That didn’t mean that he always wanted to listen, when Toshi presented an answer.

Toshinori made a small, frustrated sound in the back of his throat.

“I’m not saying we acted wrongly, Shouta. Think about it logically if that helps you- neither of us had to leave our beds during this evacuation.” He gestured at the hall in front of them, as if to illustrate their ridiculousness. “Yet we both didn’t even think. We just ploughed ahead like we were one of our students. No plan, no thought towards relying on our colleagues!”

Aizawa didn’t acknowledge his point, but neither did he fight it. He’d become a little hunched, his shoulders pressed against the window at their backs like a defensive turtle. There was a mulish set to his jaw, oddly childish for him.

Toshi sighed, lowering his hands into his lap. He was disgusted with himself, for how blind he’d been acting as of late.

Of course Shouta would act illogically in this situation, just as he would have any other year for his class. The man was a bleeding heart for his students, and it was a blind spot that he carefully tucked away but no less guarded rigidly. Every year, Shouta tried not to get attached, and every year his partners watched him fall in love all over again with being a teacher.

“I should have picked an inheritor for One for All by now. We both, should have depended on the
other teachers at UA to handle the situation while we couldn’t. Above all, we should trust our students to handle themselves under pressure.”

Both of them were equally unhappy with the last fact. Toshi could guess what Aizawa was seeing in front of him, but it wasn’t the hallway. His gaze was faraway, back at USJ where his students fought for their lives and very nearly died. Toshi’s own thoughts kept lingering on his own childhood, his mentor leaving this world far too soon. He’d still been a child, and the loss of Nana had left a hole in his chest that sometimes still made him a boy, crying out in the dark. He’d risked doing the same thing to them, all of them.

_We are these children’s mentors. We cannot risk leaving them without that in good conscience._

Aizawa’s voice was a growl, but Toshi could tell by the twist of his mouth that his words had struck a chord at least.

“You are. Disgustingly noble sometimes, you know that?”

Toshi snorted, a grin lighting up his thin face.

“It’s mostly practice, I’m afraid. Can’t be The Symbol of Peace without pretending that the sun shines out of my ass.”

The rare curse made Aizawa chuckle, and the sound warmed something inside of Toshi.

He leaned his head gently against the man’s bandaged shoulders, mindful of Aizawa’s bruised and beaten hands strapped to his chest. This was new territory for them lately, the physical closeness. Both were still tentative about it, skirting around each other while Hizashi so often flitted between them, giving out hugs indiscriminately. It wasn’t bad, Toshi decided. Shouta was warm, far warmer than he could ever hope to be.

“We should go back to our beds, shouldn’t we?” Aizawa hummed, he sounded like he was already dangerously close to nodding off for a nap. The evening sun was creating a pool of warm light, and though his back wasn’t liking sitting on the tile floor, Toshi could admit it was pleasant. If the school’s alarm system weren’t still droning alerts every five seconds, he’d dare to call it ‘romantic’.

“That would be the ‘responsible’ thing to do, I suppose.”

A cry sounded from down the hallway. Both heroes turned their heads, and Toshi felt the tension that had leached out of Aizawa’s posture return. Craning his head, he saw why.

Kaminari was running down the hall, one hand pressed to the crook of his neck. He didn’t seem to have a destination, charging ahead like he was trying to just find someone to help. He was wild-eyed, his face melting in relief upon seeing Aizawa, if a bit confused about the ‘stranger’ beside him.
The confusion was ignored in his desperation.

“Sensei!” Kaminari slowed to a stop, struggling not to overshoot and fling himself flat out on the floor. He clutched his knees, taking in deep, grateful gulps of air. Bent in front of them, Toshi could see what Kaminari had been clutching at his neck for. A grisly bite had been taken from the boy’s neck, still bleeding sluggishly. He winced at the sight, a small sound leaving his lips.

“You have to help me warn people.” When he could speak, Kaminari’s words came fast and rushed. “There’s- there’s a villain. I was tryna evacuate and get other people to listen to the alarm but I ran into a person I thought was a nurse? But it wasn’t. Her Quirk, she bit me and next thing I knew I was looking at myself. It was so fucking weird jesus Christ she’s like some kinda terrifying vampire I nearly wet myself-”

“Breathe.” Aizawa snapped, shrugging away from Toshi to get to his feet as quickly as he could. Gone was the softer side, back to being a teacher and leader. “From the beginning. Tell me what happened. Slowly, if you can.” Kaminari nodded, flushing a little. His mouth popped open, likely to try again.

Unfortunately, at that moment, an explosion rippled distantly from the other side of the hall. A familiar voice was yelling, punctuating their words with blasts too well timed to be anything but a Quirk gone wild.

Toshi sent a silent apology out to the universe, and to Hizashi. He got to his feet, already recognising the swearing in the distance.

Bakugou.
Katsuki was twelve, and his wrists were burning as he sat in the plush leather chair. It was too big for him, leaving his feet dangling in the air and giving an appearance of drowning him whole.

His glare wasn’t shy as he looked at the soft-spoken man in front of him, despite this. Katsuki had never been good at holding back his feelings, and the twist of his mouth and the narrowed red eyes spoke for him anyhow—anger and fear.

His therapist adjusted horn-rimmed glasses, though why he needed them Katsuki never could figure out. Mr. Kyokan’s eyes were sightless, milky without pupil or direction. It offset his relatively young face strangely. Maybe that was why he hid behind prescription lenses.

“Your mother arranged this meeting today because she told me that you weren’t doing so well. I’d like to hear about your side of events and how you feel.”

Katsuki’s wrists and pride stung. He resisted the urge to fuss with the large, red hoodie he wore. Everything felt too fast and too slow at once, his legs screaming run and his mouth feeling like it was filled with cement.

“I.” The words froze, trapped in his chest. Katsuki tried to swallow past it. He knew he wasn’t getting out of this meeting alive if his mom found out he just ignored his therapist for the entire session. “I fucked it up.”

Mr. Kyokan didn’t react to the swearing, used to Katsuki’s blunt way of speaking. He braced his elbows against his knees, hands folded under his chin. It was a habit that made him look a bit like one of those statues at old temples.

“How so?”
Bakugou fidgeted, staring hard at the beige carpet.

“There was a news report. Some… some kid halfway across the world. Fucking. In the states. He’d gone missing two months ago, and the parents sent out a fucking international speech about it.” That had been bad enough. Katsuki had watched the entire coverage with sweat collecting in his palms and a sinking feeling in his chest. “Then last night, they found a body. It gained a whole lot of coverage and the parents were being harassed to make a statement and-”

And he hadn’t been able to look at the footage without seeing Mrs. Midoriya’s face overttop of the mom’s. His brain had kept touching the memory of her sitting by the window of her house, waiting for Deku to come home. Even after years, she still sometimes did it. Kacchan couldn’t meet her eyes when he caught her on his way to school, his hands wrapped around the straps of his backpack.

He’d done what he’d done because a part of him must be terrible. He’d felt only relief, seeing that something had come of the investigation of the American kid.

With Deku… people assumed he was dead. It was unspoken but by and large the most likely result. Yet that uncertainty, that big question mark of the unknown hit him sometimes and made him wonder. Hope would prick him, followed by despair and anger with himself for believing at all.

At least that family had some damn closure.


Katsuki bit the inside of his mouth, hard enough to sting. Maybe there really was something wrong with him. Disappeared was better than dead, right? There was still a damn chance, however illogical and ludicrous.

Mr. Kyokan hummed. In the weird way he had, he seemed to know the words Katsuki had left to die in the back of his throat.

“It’s not wrong to want closure, Bakugou. What happened to Izuku Midoriya was traumatic. Our brains naturally want traumatic events to have definitive closure. When we don’t get it, it can cause feelings of guilt… or feelings of self-destructiveness…”

Katsuki bit back a snarl, the shout inside of him that wanted to snap at him to Piss Off. It was a near thing.

“I don’t feel guilty.” He denied.

“Then what do you feel, Katsuki?” Mr Kyokan asked.
Angry. Resentful. Like he was constantly looking over his shoulder for the next disaster.

“Restless, like I wanna punch someone’s face in.” He said, because it was the closest one word answer he could give.

Fortunately, Mr. Kyokan knew him well enough by this point to know he didn’t mean it literally.

Still, the man nudged the ever-present fire extinguisher he kept in his office closer to Katsuki’s chair. Just in case.

He seemed pensive as he stroked his chin, trying to think of some sort of outlet that the child before him might find engaging. Somehow, he had the feeling that Katsuki wouldn’t take to breathing exercises and self-validation alone. He was a kid that had a lot of energy. An idea began to form in the back of the therapist’s mind.

“Have you considered picking up an exercise regimen?”

Katsuki looked at him warily. Mr. Kyokan raised his hands up in a surrendering way. “I’m just saying, you seem like a very active kid, it might do you some good to get that energy out in a constructive way instead of letting it blow up in your face.” He smiled apologetically at the pun.

“How the hell is running supposed to help me?” it sounded like a lot of bullshit, to Katsuki’s mind. His eyes narrowed, his arms crossing over his chest. Running wouldn’t bring Deku back. It wouldn’t make him feel less like he wanted to crawl out of his skin.

“It’ll give you a distraction the next time you feel like you’re restless.” Mr. Kyokan patiently supplied. He splayed his hands over his knees, shrugging a little. “You want to go into the heroics course, right? At UA?” Katsuki nodded reluctantly. “Well, you need a good level of physical fitness to get into the program, so running kills three birds with one stone. Routine, Exercise, and distraction in one.” He ticked them off with his fingers, a small smile on his face. “If you hate it, you can come back to me a week and tell me to ‘fuck right off’ or whatever you want to say to me. If you like it, then you’ve lost nothing and gained a new hobby.”

Katsuki considered it, mulling it over in his head. If he was being honest, he didn’t think it’d work. But it seemed better than some of the other things his mom had tried to instil in him from self-help books, like breathing or meditating or any of that shit.

“If I hate it, you’re not gonna tell me I’m being selfish?” He asked, hating even as he said it how pathetic he sounded. God, he couldn’t wait to get over being so fucking sensitive, vulnerable. Being a teenager sucked, but being a teenager like him was often just waiting for the next meltdown. Katsuki spared a small, longing moment for the future, when he’d be on his own and no longer had to attend these stupid sessions.

Mr. Kyokan nodded. He playfully nudged Katsuki’s knee with the end of his pen, making sure he had his attention.
"I’ll even give you a challenge. There’s a race coming up in two months’ time. Just five kilometers, nothing too extraneous for someone young like yourself. It’s a charity drive. I’ll be there cheering on my niece. If you sign up and do your best, work on working through this, and show less destructive behaviours, then I’ll tell your mother I feel comfortable enough at putting our visits to once a month, unless upon special request.”

It was an offer that was better than Katsuki expected, frankly. As it was, he was scheduled for once a week, and it made him feel like he was a bug under a lens. He blinked up at Mr. Kyokan, half expecting the man to laugh at him or reveal this all as some sort of elaborate joke.

No one had ever given him this much control over his own life. In part, Katsuki thought it was a little fair. His mom hovered, worried about her self-destructive son. His dad followed suit, never the stronger personality in their dynamic. Part of getting the help Katsuki needed for being trans involved being bounced between medical professionals, meetings and help groups and interacting with strangers whom he only related to in one small facet of his life. Yet here was this therapist, telling him just to run, and to stop if he hated it.

It was… refreshing. Still annoying, but refreshing.

It was just five kilometers? That was nothing. He’d absolutely destroy that race, if he just pushed himself. He felt a grin begin to split across his face, and struggled to push it back into his usual scowl.

After all, there was no need to let the blind bastard know that his proposal appealed to him. A secret part of Katsuki was desperately excited to work on something new.

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What in The Everloving Fuck.

It was the first thought that came to Katsuki’s head, rattling around in empty white shock like a marble. The next was equally loud in the ringing cotton sound that had stuffed his ears.

This Can’t Be Happening.

An apparition was standing in front of him. Somehow, the world had tilted, and Katsuki had fallen through the cracks into the Twilight Zone.

Deku.

Uraraka had called him Deku.
The kabuki mask had crumbled away, and Katsuki couldn’t tear his eyes away from the face in front of him. The longer he looked, the harder it was to breathe. Each inhale was a cold spike of disbelief and the growing, mounting, nameless emotion that threatened to cripple him where he stood.

If this was an illusion, then his brain was making a damn good job of making it realistic. His brain had even managed to age Deku, turn him into a teenager. Or at least a pale, skinny, tired attempt at a teenager.

Ochako was speaking, her hands raised and clearly trying to calm the villain down. The villain that was Deku.

Bakugou couldn’t hear most of what she was saying. His brain seemed to have lost all ability to communicate with the outside world, trying to overlay the memory of Deku’s face with the person he was looking at now. Every time he did, Bakugou could swear that he could feel something inside of him shaking down to his core.

The rage came, and it hit him like a wall that he could scarcely breathe through, red and violent.

For the first time since he’d been a child, Bakugou scrambled to get a leash on his Quirk as it reacted, the sweat pooling in his palms and igniting. As if in slow motion, he could see his classmates reacting, jerking back in surprise as he suddenly lit up, their mouths moving but no sound leaving their lips.

Then Deku looked at him, and everything that Bakugou wanted to ask, wanted to scream died behind his teeth as blank incomprehension flickered to vague recognition. The childhood nickname, one he hadn’t heard since the day Deku had vanished from the park was a thousand tiny knives lancing themselves under Bakugou’s skin. It burned.

“K-Kacchan?”

Something crossed the illusion’s face, an emotion too quick for Bakugou to read. Then, in a mockery of the smile that was still flashing in the far corner of his memory, Deku’s face twisted. It wasn’t a smile, more of a grimace that took up most of his face. A hard, brittle sound came. It splintered into a hysterical laugh, shaking the villain’s thin shoulders. To Katsuki, it was the sound of everything he had known unraveling.

“Izuku.” He said, and the name sounded old and rusted on his tongue. He said it to stop that noise coming from this illusion. Kirishima’s hand was on his shoulder, half pulling him back from the illusion. It was as if he half expected the illusion to lash out.

Ridiculous.

But Katsuki’s classmates were reacting to the laughter too, hedging themselves together as if to guard against this new threat. Kirishima’s voice was tight in Bakugou’s ear, the hand on his arm as hard as steel.
“Dude, you know this guy?”

Ochako stood between Katsuki and the illusion, the only one who hadn’t retreated into the protective ring of classmates. She was looking at Bakugou, something searching in her eyes as she barred his path. Distantly, Katsuki’s thoughts pieced together the evidence before him.

*She thinks I’m going to hurt him.*

Was he? He didn’t know, he wasn’t even sure he was himself, right now.

Whether or not he would, Bakugou wouldn’t find out. The laughter cut off, and Izuku Midoriya sank to his knees. Shock made him shake like a leaf, green eyes dazed and unseeing. Katsuki couldn’t look at the expression on his face too closely.

He was vaguely aware that his breathing had become scattered. For some reason, Katsuki couldn’t reign it in. Hands he recognised as Kirishima’s were moving him to sit. His friend was in front of him, cutting off his view of Izuku. A strangled noise left Katsuki’s mouth unbidden.

*No. Don’t let him out of your sight!*

His Quirk reacted, small sparks popping up his arms as he strained against his friend’s hold. Fortunately, Kirishima seemed to understand. He moved to Bakugou’s side, talking over his head. Something about getting First Aid and for someone to find Present Mic and tell him where they were. All the while, his hands were pressed to Katsuki’s shoulders. It was grounding, even as he felt like he was about to float up into space.

Ochako was doing the same to Izuku, a determined set to her jaw as she directed orders. Momo was creating blankets, one of which was wrapped around Izuku. The one offered to him was met with a snarl.

*He didn’t need a fucking blanket! He needed someone to tell him this wasn’t a fucking dream.*

“Katsuki,” He turned towards Ochako. She was crouched beside Izuku, an uncertain expression on her face. He couldn’t blame her, until now her only interactions with him had been unpleasant and awkward at best. “You said his name was Izuku?”

“Izuku Midoriya.” He automatically confirmed. Then, because he couldn’t seem to control his mouth anymore, he continued. “Deku was… a childhood nickname. We were… We were kids when-”

He couldn’t say it, the words tasted like acid at the back of his throat. Fortunately, Ochako didn’t seem to need anything more. Her hands reached out tentatively, curling the blanket more tightly around Izuku’s silently shaking shoulders.
“He’s in shock. Honestly, I think you are too. Don’t argue with me.” She shot a glare up at him, noticing how his mouth had opened to deny it. Bakugou’s jaw snapped shut with an audible click. “You can talk. I need you to support me when the teachers get here. I don’t think Izuku’s up for defending himself right now and without someone backing us up, this is gonna fall on him fast.”

Class 1-A all exchanged uneasy glances. None of them were exactly keen of the idea of their own mistakes being put on someone who was currently breathing through some sort of emotional trauma on the floor.

In the distance, running footsteps could be heard. Aizawa, flanked by Kaminari and a gaunt-looking man were running towards them. They were a sight to see. Aizawa was mostly bandages and plasters, but his legs were working fine and so he was running on his own, consequences be damned. At any other point, Katsuki might have been a little impressed at how terrifying Eraserhead could be even when incredibly injured.

Unfortunately, that meant that Izuku also saw them approaching. The numbness in his face splintered, and a wild look came into his eyes. He moved out of Ochako’s grip faster than she could catch him, his teeth bared and gaze empty, fighting something that no one could see.

Bakugou didn’t think.

His legs moved on his own.

He’d lied to his therapist, his biggest problem had never been restlessness. His biggest problem had been having to sit back, and do nothing.

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Kacchan was here. The thought came to Izuku, dimly from under miles of water. It wasn’t a dream, or at least, he was pretty sure it wasn’t. When he had those dreams, Kacchan was still five and yelling at the world through unrelenting pride.

The Kacchan in front of him was older, stronger, angrier. Though, Izuku supposed that Kacchan had always been angry.

There were other people too, people that Izuku didn’t really know. A girl with a high ponytail and sharp grey eyes was to his left, the Iida kid he’d injured at USJ to his right. They were talking, yelling and arguing about what to do, a girl with cord-like earlobes defending the ponytail girl’s points. The chaotic nature of it was unlike any of Izuku’s usual nightmares, too domestic.
Iida was in crutches, further solidifying the fact that this wasn’t a dream.

Which only left one other option, one that made Izuku’s heart beat faster and his hands shake. This was real.

Then there were strangers coming towards their group, and Izuku didn’t recognise either of them but his Quirk screamed that they were dangerous.

Trailing behind them was the boy that Toga had bitten, white energy crackling up his arms. He pointed at Izuku, and though the words he said sounded very far away, he somehow knew they weren’t flattering.

Izuku tried to will himself to stand, to go down kicking and screaming if that’s what it took. He was tired, and afraid and not entirely sure he wasn’t still hallucinating, but he had little choice. He was aware of how he must look: wild and desperate and ragged.

He didn’t expect Ochako to stand as a physical shield between him and the trio approaching them, her voice cutting through the white static in his head.

“Sensei, Deku’s in shock. He saved us from the other villains.”

That was Eraserhead? No wonder he was wrapped in so many bandages. Frankly, Izuku had half thought from what Ochako had described that the man wouldn’t be walking for at least a few weeks yet. As it was, he didn’t exactly look like he should be moving in the first place.

He startled as another figure came to stand in front of him, uncharacteristically silent despite his earlier outbursts. Kacchan defending him, seeming to protect him was a sight that made Izuku feel as if he were dreaming. He kept trying to rub at his eyes, dispel the illusion of it.

Though it was hard to tell under the bandages, Izuku might have thought that Eraserhead had quirked a brow at one of his students addressing a villain by his name. He slowed when Bakugou moved, and Izuku got the feeling that Kacchan wasn’t usually one to play protector. The look of muted surprise on everyone’s faces was too obvious.

Eraserhead’s voice was muffled from under the wrappings, measured.

“You were all supposed to evacuate the building and hold the front gate down with the other pros. Care to explain why you’re still in the school in the first place?” His tone was mild enough, but there was an undercurrent of parental wrath that made the students shoot nervous looks at each other.
Izuku wondered if Eraserhead always sounded like a very put upon babysitter of twenty-something odd children.

The girl with a ponytail stepped forward, nervously wringing her hands in front of her chest.

“It’s my fault, Sensei. As class rep, I was unable to lead my classmates to safety and instead was convinced to join them on this mission.” She bowed, shame written on her face. “Please, don’t take it out on the others.”

“I’m also class rep. I too should shoulder the blame.” Iida hobbled forward on his crutches, steel-faced and straight-spined. He was every inch his family’s name, the way he tapped his chest and took on the guilt. “Yaorozuru until the very end tried to talk us out of it, and I took Uraraka’s side instead.” He bowed too, so stiff and formal that it was a little comical. “For that, I too should apologize.”

Like a dam had been broken, Izuku watched in bewilderment as the rest of the group came forward, all so ready to take on fault.

“No, it’s my fault,” A girl with painted cheeks and short hair began. She was interrupted by the frog girl.

“Ribbit. I didn’t say anything either-”

“I got too into it, it was totally not the mature thing to do. I’m also at fault-” A boy with bright red hair interjected.

On and on it went, until Izuku was left confused and dazed. Everyone was so unthinkingly ready to share the blame, willing to stick their neck out for Ochako and by extension- him.

Why?
What was there to gain from it?

Why would they risk getting into trouble for someone like him? He wasn’t… He wasn’t worth it. He was a murderer, a villain that was ultimately responsible for injuring their teachers, their friends. They barely knew him.

An unnamed emotion was hovering dangerously close to the surface of Izuku’s thoughts, something hot and painful to look at too closely. He felt something burn at the back of his throat, his eyes.

It’d been so long since he’d cried, that it took him a moment to recognise the feeling for what it was.
“It’s a good thing you did,” Izuku’s voice was rough like nails, but it was enough to catch everyone’s attention. He tried not to flinch under all the stares, tried to steady the shaking in his chest. “Without your class, I wouldn’t have been able to buy enough time to bully Toga and Dabi into leaving.” He shot a grateful look towards the ponytail girl, to Ochako. “I owe you all… everything. So please, don’t punish them for—” For saving me. Izuku choked, the words a tangled mess behind his teeth. He ducked his head, sinking his teeth into his lower lip.

Eraserhead didn’t look entirely pleased with his answer. Beside him, the frail man with blonde hair looked hesitant. That was fine, Izuku could deal with anger. It was his fault, for not being quick enough, for having a panic attack before he could figure out a plan. He’d accepted the fact that this was going to go poorly for him, either way.

A gruff, caustic voice that was achingly familiar spoke. It was deeper than Izuku’s memories, but the tone and the blatant confidence in it was a mirror of his memories. It shot through Izuku like an arrow, piercing his spine and digging somewhere deep and painful inside.

“None of us are even fucking hurt. It’s fine. What you should be concerned with is the big fucking problem right in front of your nose.”

The red hair boy hissed something, probably chastising Kacchan for speaking like that to a teacher. If Kacchan heard him, he didn’t acknowledge it. His hands were crossed over his chest, something burning in his eyes. He didn’t flinch from Eraserhead’s cool gaze.

“What do you mean, Bakugou?”

“I mean that you’ve been sitting on top of a missing person’s file that’s ten years overdue being solved.” There was a brittle, knifepoint edge to the boy’s words as he spat them, and Izuku knew that tone. He felt himself tremble. He didn’t know what this emotion was, but it was a lot. Kacchan was angry, but not at him. Kacchan was angry about what had happened.

Kacchan hadn’t forgotten him.

The gaunt man stepped forward, his strange black and blue eyes peering at Bakugou.

“What do you mean, my boy?”

“I fucking mean that his real name’s Izuku Midoriya, and that he’s been missing since we were five fucking years old.” Izuku’s eyes closed, his name washing over him like a tide. Not Ghost, not Deku. “He’s not a fucking villain,” Katsuki’s voice was cutting, and the anger was bubbling over in his voice and the sweat pooling in his palms. Izuku felt a squeezing tightness in his chest. He curled into himself, and wished in that moment that the eyes on him would disappear. The guilt crashed into him, capsizing him like a wave.

You're wrong, Kacchan. I'm sorry, you're wrong.

“He’s a fucking kidnapping victim, not a villain.” Katsuki growled.
No. He was both.
Frostbite

Chapter Summary

y'all didn't think I'd forget about Shouto, did you? Warning in this chapter for Endeavour specific brand of shitty parenting, y'all probs saw this coming.

More great art this time of Dabi and Toga I love!

Next chapter will have more of Nedzu, and the issue of Inko will be brought up~

Thank you for the kudos and comments, I love them all~

Shouto really hated trying to fight against Quirks that made their user intangible.

It made beating them to a pulp incredibly hard, and it made his job harder than it needed to be. Though he wasn’t typically one for frustration, he was starting to feel it in this fight.

There were five villains, only one of them from the original USJ incident. Kurogiri by far, soon became the greatest threat to him and his classmates at the gate.

“Todoroki! Duck!” He moved on instinct, narrowly avoiding being bowled over by Tokoyami’s Dark Shadow curling up from behind. The bird-like monster opened its gaping mouth, bigger with the setting sun, bigger than Shouto had yet to see before. What had been a companion before was now a living tidal wave, and it was difficult to navigate around and helpful at once.

The shriek that it let loose as it sunk its beak into a villain that had been sneaking in on Shouto’s flame side rang through the air, nearly deafening this close. There was a shout as the Villain went down, followed by a howl of pain as he hit the concrete. Out of commission.

Shouto charged forward, free to take on the villain in front of him. His ice sprouted from his fingertips, crawling up his arm.

The villain’s short hair was needle-like and pointy, and she used them like projectiles. Her hair grew back fast, and she threw the needles with startling accuracy, cackling at him all the while. When one had narrowly missed Shouto’s foot, it’d cracked the pavement with its force, sinking deep. Deadly. He couldn’t afford to get hit by one, even by accident. It was making getting close to her very, very hard.
An ice shield covered his arm, expanding into a disk that soon caught more of the needles. Shouto charged forward, aiming a kick at the woman’s stomach. She danced back, mouth opening. Needles shot from her lips, catching Shouto off guard. He narrowly avoided a face full of spikes thanks to his shield, which began to splinter and crack. Not just her hair, then. He made a mental note, sweat cooling on the back of his neck.

A scream tore through the air, a soundwave made physical. Shouto could feel it vibrating in his teeth and clutched his head, half-crumpling to the ground. Everyone was forced to cover their ears as it tore through concrete, aimed at Kurogiri’s metal middle. The void villain moved just in time to avoid being ripped apart by the force.

Present Mic gave him barely enough time to recover, ducking and dodging between students and screaming all the while. There was a grim look on his face, one that hadn’t left him since Aizawa-sensei’s injury. Though Shouto would still hesitate to call him scary, there was threatening capability in the way he alone could withstand the force of his Quirk. It levelled even trees, and seemed to pick up wind force. How he moved so fast in leather pants, Shouto still didn’t know. He was just glad his teacher’s aim was very good.

His Quirk couldn’t be used without pause, though. Once Present Mic took a second to breathe, the fight was back on. He darted forward, ice sprouting up and around him. He felt a rumble coming from the ground, and saw cement rise to combine with his strike.

Cementoss had managed to knock out his opponent, his hand lifted in Shouto’s direction. The intent was clear. Shouto moved his ice, cutting off the girl’s escape path. The cement took the other direction, and both came together to cut off her exit. She was soon wrapped in a cocoon of the two, ice and cement expanding and twisting until only her eyes and nose were visible. Immobilised.

Cementoss gave Shouto a small thumbs-up, before turning to help Mineta. He was holding off a villain with some sort of Quirk that let them move and reshape their skeleton. (He was very vocal about how horrifying and terrible he thought said Quirk was).

The screaming picked up again, and Shouto hunkered back down to wait it out.

Present Mic was a valuable ally, but he did make extended fighting a bit of a challenge at times. Personally, Shouto was just glad that the man was on their side.

Hopefully, this would end soon, or UA’s front gates were going to be utterly devoid of any sort of vegetation or structural integrity.
At some point during the fighting, Shouto became aware that he was cold. It was as creeping as hypothermia, his thoughts and his movements sluggish and reckless. Frost nipped at his face, clouds of breath leaving his mouth. This was the longest fight he'd had to participate in, going on over half an hour, and he could feel the strain in his body and mind. His Quirk had become jagged, his mouth dry as he once again launched a villain back with a wave of ice. Thirsty. He was so thirsty.

Quirk Shock: He knew the signs, knew that soon his joints would begin to lock in place if he pushed much further. If he kept going past that, well. Having his skin cells start to die from frostbite would make his father absolutely livid.

Frustration hit him, anger and desperation driving him forward. His classmates looked equally drained. Kouda was bleeding from a gash on his forehead, someone’s dog from the surrounding neighbourhood snarling protectively in front of him.

Ashido’s acid had started to eat through the soles of her shoes. Still, her stamina hadn’t seemed to suffer much. She let out a hearty shriek as she gleefully pummelled a villain’s face in, cheering as Sero wrapped up the villain with his tape.

Even the teachers looked worn, Present Mic’s shouting having grown further apart. Shouto thought he’d caught him wiping blood away from his mouth once or twice.

Still, the villains kept coming. Whenever one or two were put out of commission, knocked out or injured too badly, Kurogiri’s void-like body would just introduce more. Anyone with a grudge against UA had apparently been invited, and even common criminals in big enough waves were exhausting to deal with.

Shouto couldn’t for the life of him fathom why the villain they’d captured would be worth this kind of effort. It didn’t make sense. The resources that were being just flung at them in sheer droves would have only been more ridiculous had Noumous been introduced.

He didn’t have time to think on it longer, blocking a kick from a villain that moved with incredible speed. The man’s jack-o’-lantern mouth split open to unleash a wave of hornets. Shouto bit back a shout as his skin instinctively crawled, flipping backwards. His joints screamed at the motion, tingling numbness starting to enter his fingers and toes.

No time. They were running out of time.
It happened fast, too fast for anyone to stop it. One second Present Mic had Kurogiri cornered between himself and Midnight, sweat making his normally feathery hairdo seem limp and dejected. The next, the sun had gone completely down, plunging the courtyard into darkness.

Tokoyami, who had been trembling before, fell to his knees with a strangled shout. Several of Shouto’s classmates turned instinctively towards the sound.

Shouto only vaguely remembered one of his first introductions to his classmate’s Quirk. It came back to him, even as darkness bled up and over the sky, blotting out the first few stars.

Dark Shadow is stronger at night. But harder to control.

An oily, black wave of darkness slithered and built, bigger and bigger until it blotted out the first stars. Shouto felt something in his chest constrict at the sight, two lantern eyes glowing in the seething mass. It moved with vicious speed right for the void villain.

Cementoss’ voice carried over the field, strained as he held back a wave of Quirk-controlled knives. His small eyes were wide as he looked at Dark Shadow.

“Hizashi! Nemuri!! Move!”

They both darted away, even as Kurogiri was struck by Dark Shadow in an explosion that rocked the ground and sent rippling shockwaves that threatened to take everyone’s feet out from under them. Shouto grit his teeth. Some Quirks, especially physical ones, could be incredibly powerful in niche situations. He also knew it drained the user, what goes up had to come down. Tokoyami would be feeling this in the morning.

When the dust cleared, Kurogiri was slightly left of where he’d once been, gold eyes slit. Though the villain couldn’t really sweat or bleed, it seemed by the flickering of his body that he’d only just made it out in time. When he spoke, it was a hiss of distaste.

“It appears that time’s up.”

For a moment, Shouto wasn’t sure what he meant. He blinked as his opponent was suddenly swallowed by darkness, flung to some unknown destination before his eyes. He understood, then. Anger filled his chest, but it was nothing compared to Dark Shadow.

It let loose a roar, claw-like wings grasping for Kurogiri’s metal middle, scrabbling for purchase.

“You won’t get away.” The creature shrieked.

Kurogiri snarled as another hit struck towards him, narrowly avoiding his weak spot.
Present Mic and Midnight had fallen back, not far from where Shouto was standing. Midnight’s voice was tense as she caught Shouto’s glance. There was a smudge of blood by her mouth where a villain had sucker punched her.

“No one can get in there, Tokoyami doesn’t have enough control of Dark Shadow right now. There’s no guarantee Dark Shadow won’t attack us. Kurogiri wants to warp out of here, but can’t so long as he’s fighting that Quirk…”

It was a stalemate, with only way to be broken. Shouto reached the same conclusion about when she did. Shouto turned, adrenaline humming in his blood.

A void had opened up behind Tokoyami in the chaos, unnoticed by everyone. Blue-white fire erupted from it, even as Shouto’s hand lifted. Too slow, his ice was not reacting fast enough.

The light struck Dark Shadow, Tokoyami ducking out of the way and rolling weakly to the side. It struck the monster’s dark form like fireworks, and a shriek of agony erupted from Dark Shadow.

Tokoyami’s Quirk shrunk in on itself, jerking back from Kurogiri to whip around towards the source of its pain. A scarred hand was retreating back into the void, still blasting balls of blue fire.

In the moment Dark Shadow was turned, Kurogiri’s void began to fold in on itself. The villain’s voice echoed, even as the heroes were left with an injured, shrieking Quirk and a scorched battlefield.

“You children continue to fight well. Truly, I look forward to the time when we’re allowed to kill you all. Goodbye for now. Thank you for providing a distraction.” He disappeared, the rest of the villains gone without a trace.

Shouto stood panting, half of his body ice cold and his hands clenched into fists. He was not the only one worse for wear.

Present Mic let loose a long-winded, complicated series of cursing. The fact that it was in English still left little to the imagination as to what he thought about the whole situation.

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It took two pro heroes and Kouda’s soothing presence to calm Dark Shadow down enough that Tokoyami could tuck him away from the night. Apparently, Dark Shadow was enough like an animal that he responded positively to Kouda’s Quirk.
Tokoyami himself seemed more scarred than anyone else from the incident. He kept apologizing to anyone that would listen, normally calm attitude rattled and skittish. His feathers, normally smoothed down were ruffled like a real bird’s.

Shouto could sympathise, he knew what it was like to be unable to entirely trust one’s own Quirk. His body continued to give him shit, even as he allowed himself to sit on the hard pavement until paramedics could be called to look him and the rest of 1-A over.

Now that the fight was done, he could notice that a few of his classmates were missing. Aoyama was the first to comment on it, an uncharacteristic frown on his glittery face as he looked around for Asui.

“✧・゚:*Where is La Petite Grenouille? Or monsieur Kirishima? ∶*:✧・゚:*”

“They may have gotten caught up in the evacuation of the other students?” Sero proposed. He didn’t sound overly confident about said suggestion, and frankly no one looked that convinced.

In the back of his mind, Shouto had a sinking suspicion that his class was out looking for trouble, and he’d just been lucky enough to avoid getting caught in that particular disaster.

Present Mic muttered something as he rubbed at his temples. He looked as though a headache was somewhere on the horizon for him. He looked to Midnight almost pleadingly.

“Maybe they’re evacuated with the students from the general courses?”

“The reporters are going to have a field day with this,” Midnight chose not to confirm or deny Hizashi’s hope. Her cautious tone made Present Mic lower his hands, looking to her tiredly.

“Yeah, they are.” He murmured. His voice was rough, like he’d been dragging it through sandpaper. “Principal Nedzu went to go ‘mitigate’ the outcome of this from the moment the alarm had to be sounded but we’re screwed for the next little while.”

He seemed to realise that he had a quiet audience, catching Shouto’s silent stare. Coughing in embarrassment, Present Mic forced a little cheer into his tone as he addressed him with his typical teacherly coaching.

“You and your classmates fought really well! Don’t you worry about what the reporters will say, we’ll have it covered!”

Shouto didn’t know what to say, so elected for silence. Present Mic seemed to search his face for some sort of positive reaction, and upon finding none wilted.

“You kids are growing up too fast.” He said, mostly to himself.
Shouto didn’t have an answer for that either. He wasn’t worried about what reporters would think, in truth. He was too busy being worried about his father, to worry about something as inconsequential as the press.

But there were things you could and couldn’t say, and when he was in doubt he’d learned that keeping a blank face and silent mouth worked wonders for getting by. So, Shouto did just that, tucking his fear down tightly underneath his skin and looking at his teacher until Hizashi grew uncertain and stuttered something about shock.

When the paramedics came, flashing blue and red light across the school concrete, they asked him if he was feeling okay. Shouto nodded, and he let them check his pupils for concussion and move his arm and knee around, gritting his teeth as they popped and creaked. If they asked questions, he answered in clipped sentences. He was responsive, but not talkative, an art he had learned to master.

Inside himself, he kept his thoughts occupied enough with what he had done wrong, and what he could do better. It was an automatic thing, a tally system that would later be held up to his father’s expectations and graded accordingly. Shouto wasn’t sure what side he’d end up on for this fight.

“That’s some Quirk you’ve got there.” One paramedic, a man with blonde hair and a wide smile commented, breaking Shouto from his thoughts. “You said you’ve been using it for nearly a half hour straight? I’m impressed, and you’ve only got a little joint pain! As expected of the Number Two Hero’s son, eh?” The man laughed brightly.

When Shouto didn’t laugh in kind, the conversation fell into an awkward silence.

His left side burned.

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The teachers were right about one thing- the news ate up the story of a second attack in a month on UA like children given free rein to a candy store.

Reporters had started to cluster outside the building as Shouto had been patched up, creating a small crowd as he was questioned by the police force. They were irritating by the time he’d put on a spare change of clothes. By the time he’d been told to wait for his father in an empty classroom with the rest of 1-A that’d been not too badly injured, they were an angry horde that could be seen even from the second story window.

“Geez, it’d only be worse if they had pitchforks.” Sero observed, lounging half out of a desk chair.
His chin was propped up with one hand, dark eyes narrowed in disgust and fascination in kind. “They’re kinda like rats, trying to pick up scraps while UA’s been hit.”

“They’re vultures,” Ashido corrected, limping over to them to sit on the edge of Sero’s desk. She sat in a lazy sprawl, staring up at the classroom ceiling as she lay half off the floor. Her feet had been bandaged, white wrappings peeking out from her shoes. She crossed them ankle over ankle, now. “They think if they hit us when we’re vulnerable, one of us will accidentally give them some sort of gossip they can spin into a good story.” Sero snorted, a sardonic grin lighting up his face.

“Think I can sell them a story about there being a villain that could kill things with just one punch?”

Ashido gave him a look of solemnity. “If you do… I’ll pay for your slushie next time we’re at the mall.”

Her fluffy, pink head turned to Shouta then. Shouto resisted the urge to squirm under her curious gaze. He told himself she was just being friendly.

“Do you know what happened to Ochako and the others by the way? Cause I tried to get some answers from someone and was given the go-around” She made a face. “Bastards.”

He hadn’t heard anything, but in truth he hadn’t been that interested. Shouto’s eyes were glued to the gate outside the window, where he knew eventually his father would have to step through to come collect him. He couldn’t seem to tear his gaze away. He shook his head, quietly relieved when Ashido took his nonresponse as an answer.

She sighed, throwing her head back and kicking her feet in the air. She was very good at looking like the entire world around her was inconveniencing her existence.

“Fucking figures.” She whined “We do the fighting, and then we aren’t even told anything about why the villains attacked UA again in the first place.”

“Look at it this way,” Sero patted her shoulder, shrugging his shoulders. “The way this is all going, we’re definitely getting at least a day or two off school. At the very least no homework.”

She whooped for joy, pumping her fists in the air. The sudden shift in energy nearly unbalanced her seat, and Ashido narrowly avoided toppling over the desk. Her face was alight with optimism.

“Why can’t villains invade the school during exam season?!’”

“Please don’t jinx us like that.” Hagakure called from across the room. Even being invisible, she somehow looked exhausted, despite being invisible. There was a floating smudge of dirt where presumably her cheek was from the fight. “I don’t think my heart could take it.”

Shouto sank further down in his seat, miserable and unable to express it.

_A day or two off school._

Great.
In the end, the kind of mood Endeavour was in could be described as thus:

He managed to clear the sea of reporters with his presence alone, even if it was only long enough to let him pass through the crowd without comment.

Shouto watched from the second story window, feeling his stomach drop into his toes. Oh, this was going to be bad. It was already late, late enough that his other classmates had been collected by their families. When Endeavour appeared at the doorway to the classroom, it was to find Shouto sitting silent and still, alone amongst rows of empty desks.

His father didn’t say a word to him all throughout the signing out of school process, merely casting a derisive look at the bandage on Shouto’s face and the plasters on his fingers. Shouto signed his own name on the attendance list made slapdash for this occasion, saying a quiet goodbye to Principal Nedzu before being led away. The principal gave his best apology to Shouto’s father, but in truth Shouto didn’t absorb most of it. There was shaking of hands, stiff and formal, and he was being led away by a heavy hand on his shoulder. He willed himself not to look back, his spine rigid and his breathing even and measured.

_Just get through this._

Everything hurt. Todoroki didn’t mention this to his father, his jaw clenched tightly shut.

The drive home was filled with silence, but the temperature in the car kept rising. Shouto tucked himself into the backseat and watched the city pass him by in neon blurs. He was so tired; his eyes were burning.

Halfway to their house, it started. Shouto had been expecting it, but he still couldn’t help but flinch when his father’s voice broke the silence between them.

“Your teachers told me you went into Quirk Shock, during the fight.” Shouto didn’t reply. His guilt was obvious by the fact that he still couldn’t stop his breath from coming in clouds.

Endeavour didn’t need a verbal audience anyway, just a captive one. He carried on brutally, signalling into the turning lane. His hard stare met Shouto’s in the front mirror. “I’ve told you a thousand times that this stupid, _childish_ act of rebellion is damaging to your form and to your body. Where would you have been if your classmates hadn’t bailed you out? If the fight had gone on longer? Are you prepared to lose fingers and toes over this? Because a half hour longer and I guarantee you would have. It’s disgustingly easy to mitigate too, if you’d just stop being so goddamn stubborn. I don’t have time for your childishness right now.”

Shouto’s hands tightened in his lap. He kept his silence, biting the inside of his cheek as hard as he
dared.

*Don’t react. He’s looking for a fight.*

He realised that his father’s silence meant that the expected some sort of answer. Shouto swallowed the acid at the back of his throat.

“I’ll try to keep my time limit better in mind, next time. Sorry.”

His father snorted, muttering something abrasive under his breath. The rest of the drive was spent in frosty silence, every minute passing leaving Shouto more and more tightly wound up like a clock.

The Todoroki compound was old, from before the days that Quirks had become a common occurrence. It stood an untouched relic of time, surrounded by its more modern neighbours like a wood in the middle of two intersecting highways. Rumour had it that the Todoroki family had once been part of a private police force for some sort of billionaire, but the truth was largely lost to time. As it was, nearly five thousand dollars went into repairs of the building every few years, Endeavour’s wealth going towards keeping up appearances.

Shouto supposed to an outside viewer it’d seem elegant, but to him the polished wood beams and tatami mats made him feel like his ancestors were haunting him. As a child, he had imagined them whispering through the paper screens, every shadow making him fascinated and frightened in turn. They’d spoken of his own incompetence, about how no matter how hard he worked he’d never live up to his father’s legacy.

His mother had been the only spirit that had ever answered his quiet, tentative calls in the dark. As if she too didn’t wish to disturb the hushed feeling the older parts of the compound gave, she had tended to linger in the more renovated rooms. The kitchen, the living room, or the gardens had once been her favourite places to pass the days. The memory of her presence haunted him, to the point where he’d rather stick to his bedroom when home.

Walking through the front door, the entrance to the kitchen was dark and silent.

Shouto’s brothers and sisters had all likely gone to bed long ago, or made sure to at least appear as if they had. Shouto toed off his shoes, the back of his neck prickling every time Endeavour moved in his peripheral vision. The organised lineup of footwear spoke of how much traffic came to and from this house. Shouto counted them, in total seven children, once eight. Fuyumi had moved out last year. It was a distraction for the dread pooling in Shouto’s gut.

He knew what was coming, but it was hard to predict *when*.

It came as he shouldered off his bag, too quickly to try and stop it.
The knee his father sent to his stomach was a shadow in the dark, but the pain was real enough. Shouto felt the wind get knocked out of him, an aborted noise leaving his mouth before he could clench his jaw. He managed to stay upright, but it was a near and fragile thing. He stood doubled over, hardly daring to look up should his father take that for pride.

“Get up and get out of my sight.” Endeavour snapped, his flames burning the dark hallway. His eyes were flat, disgusted. Shouto swallowed down the bile rising to the back of his throat. “Be thankful that I don’t punish you further for your actions tonight.”

Shouto struggled to catch his breath as his father turned away, headed towards his own bedroom. It was only when he heard the door to his father’s room slide shut that he allowed himself to slide to the floor. Finally, he settled his pounding heart and shaking hands. Shouto closed his eyes, his head tipping back to the wooden frame behind him.

When he could breathe without feeling his gag reflex, he stood up, did as he was told.
Katsuki had only met Principal Nedzu once up until this very moment, back when he had been considering applying to the Heroics Department. He’d been at the school’s Open House, looking appropriately a bit like a fuzzy mascot as he’d greeted and welcomed the potential new students at the gate. Back then, Katsuki had wondered how someone so nonthreatening, so weak, could be one of the most well-known heroes in the industry.

The principal made an impression due to his appearance, but his personality in itself was unique and unsettling. He was friendly to a fault, personable, and chatty. Rodent or no, he put most human beings to shame with his manners. Personally, Katsuki didn’t dislike him more than he disliked anyone else, but that wasn’t exactly a glowing review. He hated most people.

“Have some more tea, Bakugou.” This was his third cup. He had to pee. He didn’t even like green tea that much. He opened his mouth to say as much. Instead his cup was taken from him, refilled, and set back on the table.

Damn it.

“I must apologize again to your mother and father for the late hour, but given the circumstances, I hope you can understand.” Nedzu directed this at Bakugou’s parents, who were sitting by his side in the principal’s office, also sipping tea and looking uncertain of how to refuse more.

“It’s no trouble, really.” Ever the polite one of the family, Bakugou’s father rushed to assuage the principal’s guilt. Masaru smiled and waved away the apology. “I-if the situation’s as you say it is, I can understand the urgency.” He lifted his cup to his lips, drinking deeply. He looked a little stressed as the Principal leaned forward to pour him more.
Katsuki stared down into his teacup, a scowl on his face as he recalled the past few hours.

When Aizawa-Sensei had gotten a sense of the situation, he’d been coldly livid with all of them. Even under the bandages on his face, 1-A could tell that their homeroom teacher was pissed. It’d only be the skinny man he’d been with that’d stopped all of them from getting a year-long detention right then and there.

Bakugou hadn’t really cared about all of that in truth. There hadn’t been much other choice than to act, and he knew that Aizawa-Sensei was smart enough to come to that conclusion himself. It was only a matter of laying low until his anger with them faded into his usual logic, and ‘Mr. Skinny’ was helping him get there.

Regardless, all of that had fallen to the wayside given Izuku’s condition. Aizawa had taken one look at the borderline comatose teen, and snapped that he’d put himself into extended Quirk Shock and needed to be taken to a first aid station right away. He’d ordered them to report to Recovery Girl, with the threat that any dallying would lead to immediate expulsion.

No one quite had the reckless impulse to tell their teacher that at that moment he himself had looked like death warmed over.

The gaunt man that Bakugou still didn’t know the name of had suggested then that Aizawa-Sensei should perhaps put off all punishment until they could be sure that the villains had the gate had been handled appropriately and all injuries had been attended to. This, their teacher had acquiesced to reluctantly.

Bakugou heard rather than saw Kirishima’s quiet sigh of relief in response to that. Their teacher seemed to take that as an indication that his student needed something to do.

So Izuku had been slung like a rather unceremonious sack of potatoes over Kirishima’s shoulder, and they’d as a group made their way to the first aid station. Their teachers leading the way, everyone had kept their head down in an attempt not to meet Aizawa’s burning glare.

Bakugou had kept his own eyes locked on Izuku’s prone form, lost in thought and feeling as though he was still living a very twisted dream.

An inexplicable panic had hit him when Recovery Girl had seen them and paled, ushering Kirishima inside the makeshift tent that’d been put up at the edge of school grounds. The old woman looked
harried, and heroes and students alike were being carted into the tent behind her.

“Hurry, hurry.” She’d hissed, lifting a hand in kind to the rest of the students. “The rest of you need to wait outside, there’s little room in here as it is. And you two-” She’d rounded on Aizawa and the gaunt man, dark eyes sparking in fury. To class 1-A’s amusement, both men had flinched like schoolboys being caught putting tacks on someone’s chair. “I told both of you that bedrest was important and to take it easy. I have half a mind to take you both by the ear.” She broke off, muttering angrily to herself between barked orders at the other nurses. For a supposedly sweet old bat, there was no hesitation to follow her curt instructions. She had a core of steel, something Bakugou ordinarily would have respected.

Katsuki had watched Kirishima duck inside the tent, his panic ratcheting up when his classmate was shooed back out without Izuku in hand. The anxiety was irrational, but it swelled up from his chest and felt like it was doing its best to swallow him whole. He kept having to clench his hands, shaking off the jittery trembling in his arms.

_You can’t let him out of your sight. You can’t let him disappear again._

“All of you, report to Principal Nedzu at the evacuation spot. No fieldtrips on the way there or I will consider expulsion.” Aizawa shot a dark look at all of them. It was slightly curbed by the nurse that was firmly guiding him into the tent with a no nonsense expression set on his face.

The panic turned into full-on turmoil. Katsuki felt rooted in place, even as his other classmates slowly began to turn their heads towards the direction of the safehouse on the other end of the school. Torn between doing as he was told and his own screaming head, he stared down his teacher with a caught look on his face.

_Don’t let him disappear!_

“I’m staying.” He’d barely realised he’d said the words aloud until they were out of his mouth. Katsuki was aware that Kirishima was giving him a look that roughly translated to: _Are you out of your fucking mind??_ He kept tugging on his shoulder, trying in vain to curb the inevitable blowout that Katsuki was hurtling towards at full speed. Katsuki planted his feet all the more firmly.

Recovery Girl wasn’t very tall, but now she’d straightened to her full height of five feet. She levelled Katsuki with a long, considering look.

“Young man,” She said calmly “You’d better be sure that this is something worth arguing with me for. I’ve had to deal with two patients going into cardiac arrest from a villain’s Quirk today, and I’ll likely have three more before this night is out. I don’t have time for a temper tantrum.”

That was the wrong thing to say. Katsuki never fought for anything half-assedly, it was sort of his specialty. He’d never been so keen on defending anything this much before in his life.

In the background, Kirishima was putting his face in his hands.
“I’m staying.” Katsuki repeated. His red eyes narrowed at the old woman, something ragged in his voice as spoke. “I’ll stay out of the fucking way, and I’ll keep quiet. But I’m staying.” His arms crossed over his chest. “I’m not letting him out of my sight.”

“Dude.” Kirishima muttered. He said it with an edge of defeat, knowing Katsuki’s tone. The stubborn tilt to Bakugou’s jaw told him all he needed to know: his friend wasn’t budging on this one.

Recovery Girl seemed to reach the same conclusion: fighting Bakugou off would waste more time than giving in to his demands. She sighed tightly, directing her glare instead towards Kirishima.

“Fine. But you need to go to the evacuation station.” She crooked a finger towards Bakugou, moving the tent flap aside from him. “Not a peep from you, unless it’s to tell me your friend’s condition has changed. Clear?”

“Crystal.” Bakugou muttered, but the tension in his shoulders had gone slack. There wasn’t a point in correcting the lady about whether or not he could consider Izuku a friend. That was a question too complicated to even begin answering.

He’d given Kirishima one last look, seeing confusion and worry written on his expressive face. Katsuki couldn’t explain all of this, not right now, and not out in the open. He settled for lifting his fist up to bump. Kirishima met it without hesitation. Good, at least that hadn’t changed in the five minutes it’d taken for his life to go to hell.

“Tell Round-Face I’ll watch him.” He’d seen the way Uraraka’s eyebrows had been pinched in worry. He figured he owed her this much, for doing what she’d been doing for Izuku so far. He was a jerk not deaf, and heard her whispering in class with her friends the past week.

“You gonna be ok, bro?” Kirishima asked. Katsuki didn’t know, but he still snorted. He gave his best Asshole Glare, the one that could strip paint off the walls.

“I’m not made of fucking glass, Shitty-Hair.”

Kirishima had smiled, a tiny thing that seemed relieved.

“Tell me what the fuck’s going on when you get a chance, yeah? I think this’ll all turn out ok.”

“Yeah.” Katsuki replied. He didn’t have the heart to tell Kirishima’s stupidly optimistic face that he wasn’t so sure.

He’d remained unsure sitting there, watching the healers use their Quirks on Izuku and talking in coded, medical jargon. They didn’t seem to pay him much mind, a fact that Katsuki appreciated. He had a lot on his mind at the moment, and talking to people took a lot out of him. He let their talk wash over him, drown out the apprehension and clustering thoughts that were taking up too much of his skull.

Izuku didn’t stir once the nurses put him into a medicated sleep, and this gave Katsuki a convenient excuse to stare. So he did, distracting himself from the part of him that was clawing, screaming
The boy in front of him was not the same as the memories of the boy Katsuki used to terrorize. Izuku had been bright-eyed, freckled and a crybaby. He’d also been five years old, so Katsuki supposed that it made sense he’d be different.

This Izuku was a pale shell, compared to his memories. He was thin, dark circles seeming to be permanently etched into his skin. Like he rarely bothered to stay out in the sun, his freckles were barely there. His hair was longer too, long enough that his curls if washed could probably have been tied back. There was no mistaking the bright green colour of it, identical to his mom’s.

Then there were the scars. Katsuki’s skin itched when he looked at them, a sick feeling stirring up his stomach. In his worst nightmares, Katsuki had thought about Izuku as a body. Years of the police searching and turning up nothing had made his mother sit him down, talk to him about the idea that they were starting to look for a body instead of a person. The first time he’d thought about it, Katsuki had screamed and cried, accusing his mom of giving up on Deku.

When he’d gotten older, Katsuki had looked at the idea as a sick sort of comfort. Izuku wasn’t suffering, wasn’t afraid and crying out for someone to come save him. The lack of real answers had tugged at him, but it’d been something he could make an uneasy peace with. Izuku being dead meant his conscience might eventually get a chance to rest, someday.

By the time he’d entered UA, only Inko Midoriya still talked about Izuku as if he were still alive. Maybe that was why Katsuki always struggled to visit her, bad at comforting and convinced her son was dead.

This truth was painful to look at. This was… It was a lot to take in. The ‘Deku’ that Katsuki had known even as a child would have never associated with the title of ‘Villain’. For something so fundamental to have shifted, Katsuki thought to himself that perhaps it’d been kinder for them all if they’d found a body.

He hadn’t known his parents had been called in until they’d arrived. It felt like time slid from one segment to the next without any discernable indication. One minute he was staring blankly into space, the next he could hear his mom shouting outside the tent, demanding to be let through to see him. If Katsuki was stubborn, his mom was a force of nature. There was very little that wouldn’t bend back under the weight of her anger, and like a bear she was fiercely protective of her family. The level of tact she possessed was also, bearlike.

Katsuki found himself locking eyes with his mom from across the tent, who in her desperation only had eyes for her child. She’d pushed past the nurse that had attempted to meet her at the door, rushed forward with a muttered “Oh Thank Fuck.” On her lips. Her arms scooped him up, holding him to her chest like he was five years old all over again. It was both suffocating and a comfort, much like
Mitsuki herself.

Katsuki felt a wave of something brittle and boiling wash over him, held in his mom’s death-grip. He grit his teeth, a shudder wracking his body in an aborted sob. His mom was less reserved, the expletives that left her mouth made Katsuki’s dad flush as he tried to wave off the glares the nurses passing by were giving them. Finally, Mitsuki moved away, cradling her son’s head in her hands as she regarded him seriously. That’s when the lecturing began.

“Never. Ever do this to me again Jesus fucking Christ this school’s going to be the death of me—”

“Mom.” Katsuki tried to get her attention, but Mitsuki wasn’t through, had barely begun. She barrelled ahead, a speeding train with one destination. “-and I swear, if I find out you didn’t follow protocol and went ahead, I will kill you and leave your body for your teacher to throw into detention. Do you hear me, Katsuki? I can’t believe—”

“Mom.” Katsuki struggled in her grip, darting furtive glances towards the bed across from them. Out of the corner of his eye, Katsuki saw his dad give the bed a glance and turn white as a sheet, his hands to his mouth.

“M-Mitsuki—”

“Do you know how much you scared me? How much you fucking terrify me every time you just launch yourself into these kinds of situations? Do you want your mother to have a heart attack—”

Katsuki wrenched his face out of her grip, temper quickly sparking.

“MOM, WOULD YOU PLEASE JUST FUCKING LISTEN—”

“Don’t you fucking dare talk to your mother like that—”

“Mitsuki!”

Katsuki’s dad snapped, louder than he’d snapped at Katsuki’s mom in a very long time. Mitsuki straightened, blinking and straightening as she took in the tone of her husband’s voice. Her voice held an edge of impatience.

“What—”

“It’s him.” Katsuki said, and he couldn’t even manage that without his voice cracking unsteadily. Mitsuki followed his pointing finger, brows lowered in confusion as she turned towards the bed. It wasn’t often that her son was this close to crying.

“Katsuki, what are you going on about—”

It happened in if during any other situation would have been comically slow motion. Katsuki watched his mom’s face go from blank uncertainty, to realisation, to bug-eyed shock. She seemed to sway, and Katsuki had the brief incredulous fear that his mom might faint, then and there.

It’d been his dad that’d said what all three of them were thinking.

“It’s. This can’t be happening. This isn’t real.”
Katsuki, feeling the last of his composure slip in front of his parents, let out a barking cough of hysterical laughter.

“Please tell me I’m not fucking dreaming.”

“If you’re dreaming, then I’m having the same dream.” Mitsuki’s voice trembled, her gaze too bright as she stared down at her best friend’s son.

It’d taken convincing for Bakugou to trust Recovery Girl with Izuku’s care and go see the principal. He’d all but clung to the chair, betrayed by his parents as they tried to get him to leave his post. Katsuki didn’t have the words to explain why he couldn’t do that, the words stuck in the back of his throat and his heart hammering in his chest. What’d come out instead were insults, and even as he spat them Katsuki could see the dangerous glint that was entering Recovery Girl’s eyes every second his family spent invading her medical tent.

Mitsuki finally resorted to dirty fighting, shooting a glance at Masaru.

“Please, talk to him?”

Katsuki knew he was fucked as soon as she’d said it. Katsuki could fight with his mom for days and not feel an ounce of regret. His dad, just didn’t have the same kind of teeth they had. It was his ultimate weapon- he could have probably made a bunny rabbit feel shameful of their behaviour.

“Son,” Masaru had crouched in front of him, his dark eyes soft. Katsuki resolutely did not pout. “The principal called us today because you said you knew Izuku Midoriya. I know how painful this must be for you, for your mother. I knew Izuku too, and I know Inko.” His voice wavered just a little on Inko’s name. God, Katsuki could feel the guilt threatening to drown him. His crossed arms began to slacken, falling into his lap. “We need to talk to the principal, in order to make sure Izuku can go home now that he’s. Now that he’s been found.”

Found.

Katsuki felt his mouth twist into a grimace, looking again at the scarred boy wearing Deku’s face.

The police had stopped officially looking almost three years ago, how could anyone pretend like anyone had cared besides Katsuki’s family and Inko that a Quirkless child had gone missing?

“I. The villains. They wanted him. Wanted to take him again.” They’d almost succeeded too, and Katsuki might never have been the wiser.

His dad went in for the kill. He adjusted his glasses, and Katsuki could see wetness in the corners of his eyes as he took a careful, considering breath.

“We need to do this for his mom, Katsuki. Your mom, she was so scared when she’d heard that the
school had gone on lockdown.” Katsuki saw his mom’s hands tighten at her sides, her gaze cast to the floor. “Inko… she’s been feeling that for ten years.”

So have I.

Katsuki wanted to say, the selfish voice inside himself crying out. He knew that the words would be cruel, so he bit them back and sank his teeth into his tongue.

He walked out of the tent in the end, his hands clenched as tightly as his mom’s grip on his shoulder. Ordinarily, Katsuki might have batted the touch away as unwelcome. He’d put up with it, cursing his dad all the while. Just for tonight.

There was nothing worse than someone who empathised like his dad did, because Katsuki knew that none of what his father had said had been a farce. His dad was simply that emotional, that fucking sensitive in a way that made Katsuki so acutely aware of his own lack of emotional complexity. He didn’t know how his mother could stand it, when both of them were so often only made of joy or rage. It had to be exhausting, to be like his dad, so Katsuki had to take it easy on him. Or try to, at least.

They’d found themselves in Nedzu’s office, drinking cup after cup of tea and waiting for the mouse-like principal to cut to the fucking chase.

A knock on the office door brought in a man in a long coat and hat, who introduced himself as detective Tsukauchi. The man apologised for the wait, so Katsuki assumed that he’d been expected. Soon, it was found out why. Tsukauchi sat himself down beside Principal Nedzu, placing his hat on the coffee table.

“It’s not much, but with the name I was able to find what he had on Izuku Midoriya’s case for this discussion. Well, what I could access without any sort of guardian’s consent.” He held up two brown manila files, Katsuki feeling his stomach twist into knots at the sight of it. “For practicality’s sake, I also drew up the file on what we know of the villain: Ghost. I’ll be working on piecing together this story over the next few weeks.”

“Ah, thank you Mr. Tsukauchi!” Nedzu accepted the files with one paw-like hand. “I’m assuming that you’d like to be present for this discussion, as this case will likely be opened back up as of tomorrow?”

“If you don’t mind?” Tsukauchi turned his head, looking for any sort of disagreement. When none was offered, he settled down. He seemed tired, but he offered the Bakugou’s a courteous smile.

“Thank you so much for coming to this meeting, at such a late hour. I’m sorry that we couldn’t meet under better circumstances.” He folded his hands in front of him, a serious not entering his expression. “This case has rapidly become very messy, and is connected to a number of crimes that span over the course of ten years. I suppose my first question for you should be how do you know Izuku Midoriya, and ask if there’s a guardian we can call to inform them of his whereabouts as well as to gain permission to access his file.”
“Izuku’s mother and I go back to high school together. We’re childhood friends.” Mitsuki supplied. It was agreed that she should start the conversation, since Katsuki wasn’t sure he could without getting angry and Masaru hadn’t been as close to Inko and Izuku. “For guardianship, the first person I’d call is Inko Midoriya herself. She’s Izuku’s only living family, as far as I know.” Her gaze softened, turning mournful. “She was… devastated when Izuku went missing, about ten years ago now. Her husband had left her alone, and that boy… He was her world. She needs to know her son is alive.”

Tsukauchi nodded, writing down the information diligently in black pen on a notebook. When he asked for a number to call, Mitsuki supplied it from rote.

“I’ll ask you three to not share the information of this case, due to the sensitive nature of it. I know it’s hard, and Mrs. Midoriya will be informed first thing in the morning, but we need to make sure that telling her won’t put her life in immediate danger.”

A hard ball of bitterness entered Katsuki’s mouth. He could tell from his mom’s face that she wasn’t happy either. There wasn’t much either of them could do, by the time they got out of the meeting it’d likely be morning. Katsuki had the feeling it was about one in the morning, given the exhaustion headache steadily building behind his eyelids.

“My next question would be how you are connected to Izuku’s disappearance in the first place. From what I’ve read in this limited file, I know your son was questioned about the kidnapping.”

Katsuki could answer this one. He straightened, getting the detective’s attention.

“De-Izuku was one of the kids that used to hang out with my group as a kid. We used to hang out around the parks n stuff like that.” A prickle of old shame travelled through Katsuki from remembering how he and the other kids had used to treat Izuku. “The kid I knew wouldn’t have ever willingly become a villain. He loved heroes, thought the sun set on All Might, especially.” Was Izuku even that same kid, though? Things had changed enough, that maybe that piece of information wouldn’t be enough to clear Izuku of guilt. The thought ate at Katsuki.

Nedzu however, looked as though he actually believed him.

“We weren’t legally allowed to place a tracker on him due to his age, but a recording device was sewn into Midoriya’s clothes when he refused to give any information pertaining to the case. It was seen as precautionary, given his track record of being elusive. From what can be heard of his exchanges with the other villains, it’s pretty clear that he doesn’t have a good relationship with them. Which brings us to the problem at hand.”

Nedzu’s ears twitched unhappily, setting his cup against his knees.

“There’s going to be pressure given the latest break in to have security measures reevaluated here at UA. This brings young Midoriya’s care into question. I’m inclined to reunite the boy with his mother, but it’s also very clear that the trauma he’s experienced in life has made him ill-equipped to deal with suddenly being the attention of mainstream news. A witness protection program of sorts would be beneficial, but given the boy’s lack of trust towards authority might prove difficult.
Furthermore, anything we tracked via the bug placed in his clothes can’t be used in a court of law.”

“That’s bullshit-” Katsuki spoke without thinking, earning a sharp hiss from his mother. He sank lower into his chair, arms crossed over his chest. What was the point of him being here if the principal wasn’t even gonna offer anything fucking constructive?

“-As I was saying, this is why I’m calling together a council tonight of the heroes associated with UA. The decision as to whether or not Izuku Midoriya and his mother might find a safe house of sorts amongst them will remain up to the both of them, but I want to start the process as soon as possible.”

Nedzu leaned forward then, and though his eyes were animal-like they held in them the weight of an intelligence that was racing a mile a minute.

“The truth of the matter is this: The reason UA chose to get involved in his case is twofold. One, because he was a villain, and attacked our students, and two, because we believe he is linked to a longstanding string of cases that involve UA directly. Most of the public however, aren’t likely to understand this. To detract from suspicion as to why UA is interested in Midoriya, and not just handing him to the police, I am planning on proposing the notion of allowing Izuku to pose as a transfer student to UA, for a time. The reason I called your family specifically here today, is you, Bakugou.”

His dark eyes landed on Katsuki then, and the boy resisted the urge to fidget. “You, of all the people we have on short notice, knew Izuku Midoriya the best before his disappearance. I’m aware that he’s not the same person that he was when he was a young child, but I’m working with what we have. Do you, Katsuki Bakugou, think that the Izuku you knew would take well to pretending for a while to be a student here at UA?”

Katsuki didn’t even need to think about it, he knew the answer to that question because he’d thought it every time he’d thought about Deku and where he was now. The kid Katsuki had known would have willingly flung himself in front of a moving train if it meant he had a chance at having a Quirk, at being a hero. All Might’s influence, and Deku’s own instinctive eagerness to please had created a kid that, much like Katsuki had been at that age, would have gone to hell and beyond to be seen as important. The difference was that Katsuki had developed a Quirk that had given him that opportunity, and it’d made his pride inflate like a balloon.

But the kid that Katsuki had seen in that hospital bed was not Deku, not really. So why the fuck was he being asked about it in the first place?

Katsuki knew about trauma, and how it could change you. He’d never been hurt like Izuku so obviously had been, not physically. Yet the disappearance of his childhood playmate had left a yawning, gaping hole that he had scrambled as a kid to fill, bury and hide. For a while, he had let it change him enough that it’d been put into question whether or not applying to UA in the first place wasn’t just some shitty attempt at repentance on his part for Deku’s kidnapping. He’d thought about it too, during some of his more self-loathing periods.
Fuck all that, though.

Katsuki had pushed ahead, proven that even with all of the baggage, the fucked-uppedness of his own head, the endless therapy appointments, he was still the best. The strongest. He’d pushed and pushed himself, shoved down the self-doubt and given himself no other option but to win. Backing himself into a corner had been the only way to do that, because the alternative had been to face himself. His biggest enemy had only ever been himself.

Could Deku do the same?

Now, the memory of Izuku fighting those villains came to mind. The ruthlessness of it sat with Katsuki, the willingness to fight and fight and fight until someone told him he didn’t have to any more. If he’d been thinking of the kid he’d known, Katsuki would have been sure that Deku would break like glass when facing a villain. Though Katsuki wasn’t sure how he felt about Izuku having grown some steel, he could admit to it being there in this version.

In the end, he owed Deku, Inko, this much. To be reunited with her son, only to be told he was being put on trial, Katsuki couldn’t see that ending well for anyone. Even if his friend was long gone, this version deserved a fighting chance for surviving this long.

“I think to not give him a chance is to put his head on a chopping block, if I understand this shit fucking right.” He lifted his head, meeting Nedzu’s hard stare with one of his own. “Put him in our class, if you’re worried about student safety. I’ll kick his ass myself if I have to if it means he doesn’t whine and goes with it.”

Katsuki was painfully aware of how close he was to pleading. It chafed at him, but he held his back straight and refused to look away from the Principal’s gaze. As a result, he missed his mom’s soft glance in his direction, his dad’s shifting feet.

In the end, Katsuki won the staring match. Nedzu nodded, downing the rest of his tea and setting aside his cup with a mousy smile.

“In that case, I’m pleased to say that this meeting has been fruitful. Please, feel free to finish your tea, but you and your family are free to head home.”

“What about De-Izuku.” Damn it. The nickname kept coming back, like a thorn in his side. Katsuki really wasn’t used to minding his words.

“He’ll spend the night here, with Recovery Girl and the other healers we have on staff. I can assure you that he’ll be provided with the best of care.”

“He was kidnapped under your watch.” Katsuki snarled “Forgive me if that doesn’t ensure much confidence-“

“Katsuki,” Mitsuki held out a hand in front of his chest, stifling whatever cutting thing he had been intending to say. Her voice and face were suddenly exhausted. “Let’s go home.” Her eyes were glued on Katsuki’s hands, which he only realised now were giving off minute tremors. The sign of
weakness made Katsuki’s face twist into a sneer.

“All Might himself, once he’s treated for his injuries, has volunteered to be by Izuku’s bedside. He needs to remain at the infirmary anyway, from what Recovery Girl has told us.” Nedzu clucked his tongue thoughtfully, and though his tone was playful there was a note of gravity in it. “Is this enough security to put your mind at ease, Bakugou?”

It would have to, wouldn’t it? Bakugou downed the rest of his tea, the principal taking it as agreement.

“I’ll be keeping in touch with you, if that’s alright.” Detective Tsukauchi stood, offering his hand to shake with Mitsuki, then Masaru, and finally with Bakugou. He wore a determined expression on his face. “There’s a lot of paperwork to do, and most of it needs to be done as of yesterday. I’d like to be able to contact Mrs. Midoriya as soon as possible.”

“See that you do.” Mitsuki murmured. She wrapped her arms around Katsuki as they took their leave, protective. He could feel his parent’s eyes on him, but for once it didn’t irritate him.

Katsuki was too tired to be irritated, at this point. Something else was rising to the surface of his emotions, something fragile and threatening to overflow. He bit down on the inside of his mouth, stifling whatever it was and shoving it firmly under lock and key. Crying would only make this night stranger than it already was.

He made it to his room before he realised the impending meltdown, and made a beeline for the shower. Slamming the door shut was just a way to guarantee his parents wouldn’t knock on the door if he started shouting too much. It was too wet to ignite anything under the harsh spray of the shower head, and Bakugou needed that. He didn’t come out for a while.
After All

Chapter Summary

What would a mother not do for her child?

Chapter Notes

Hello naughty children it's update day. >:V

So not gonna lie, this chapter might make you cry like a bitch. For those of you that want to cry extra hard, the song this chapter is based around can be found Here.

I'm blown away by the attention this fic has received, and continue to love the kudos and comments as people read and enjoy :)

Though, I do recommend if you're binge-reading, that this is the chapter where you want to grab a snack, take a nap maybe before continuing.

Waking up came slowly to Izuku. First his toes, then his fingers, then his arms and legs had feeling come back to them. He flexed them experimentally, a sort of quiet surrounding him that he was coming to associate with hospitals. With it, came the awareness of a distinct lack of pain.

Before he’d finally given in to blessed unconsciousness, he’d taken stock of his injuries. At the very least, he should have been able to feel bruises. Yet there was nothing, just a fuzzy, floating sort of feeling and the sensation of being a little detached from the rest of himself. Pain killers? Maybe also Recovery Girl’s healing. It felt like a pretty even mix of both. He opened his eyes, struggling against the urge to sleep.

It was dark, that was the first thing he noticed. He’d been out long enough that the sun had long since sunk from the sky, a plastic window in a tent flap revealing the moon and stars hanging outside. Izuku squinted, taking in that this was some sort of medical space. There was a clean, clinical smell in the air, and rows of cot beds had been placed in organized lines along the tent’s length. It wasn’t quiet, either. Nurses in lab coats and uniform hustled back and forth, tending to patients in beds. Their Quirks registered in his sleepy brain, glowing or humming along their skin as they touched, breathed, spoke, or looked into the eyes of their patients.
Healing Quirks were interesting, in many ways. They came in a half-dozen different shapes and sizes, and ranged from being able to heal minor injuries to being able to bring someone back from the brink of death. They were also almost always activated through some sort of physical contact, and as a whole were relatively rare. UA was known for having the best doctor in Japan under its employment, but the rest of its medical team weren’t slouches. He’d never seen so many Quirks being bent just into the act of healing before, and it took Izuku’s breath away and left him feeling a little lightheaded. Or maybe that was the drugs.

A voice cleared their throat delicately by his side. Izuku’s head turned, and he noticed in a distant sort of way that he wasn’t handcuffed like last time. In fact, there were no restraints on him at all.

He vaguely recognized the gaunt-looking man sitting by his bedside, dog-earing the edge of a book. Though he too was covered in bandages, Izuku could see that the injuries were old. Still it made the already-thin man’s appearance a little ghoulish, in the dim lighting on this side of the tent. He spoke with kindness.

“You’ve been asleep for only a few hours, mostly due to shock.” The man’s voice was quiet, measured. He introduced himself with a nod. “Toshinori Yagi. It’s nice to officially meet you, Izuku Midoriya.”

His name brought memories rushing to Izuku, clamoring all at once. He winced, trying to grasp onto them and only half-succeeding. The thin man before him had been with Eraserhead, after the fight with Toga. Back then, the obnoxious colour of his suit had barely registered, but now it stuck out by the way it swallowed the man whole. It matched his hair, crumpled and banana-yellow. It was an ensemble that made little sense, professional and unprofessional at once, and with the pain meds in his system it made it hard for Izuku to assess whether or not the man was of any importance to UA. Then again, maybe that was the point. He squinted, trying to speak through the soft cloud that felt wrapped around his tongue.

“I’m sorry are you… a cop? Or…” His Quirk provided the answer, seeing the book sitting in Mr. Yagi’s lap: *Teaching for Dummies.*

“A teacher.” Mr. Yagi confirmed, a smile lighting his tired face. “I teach in the heroics department, though in a more um… *Administrative* position. I’ve been assigned to your care and protection, since I’m well enough to stay awake for it.”

Izuku couldn’t help but look at him a little skeptically. *This man? Protect him?* A strong gust of wind would bowl him over. He looked like he had the structural integrity of uncooked pasta.

The man chuckled a little self-consciously, reading his expression. He scratched the back of his head.

“I’ll admit; my physical form doesn’t do my Quirk much justice. Please, don’t worry. You’re safe here, and are probably in one of the safest places in the world.” He gestured around them, and Izuku saw what he meant.
Most of the people in hospital beds wore colourful costumes, under blood and bandages. Heroes, or student heroes, surrounded Izuku. He’d never been around so many before in his life. His overactive mind listed them off with the unexpected giddiness of a small child. Ectoplasm…Cementoss…. Kamui Wood…Student Hero Cannonbuster…

Izuku’s gaze came to rest at one bed in particular, off to the side and close to his own. His heart leapt into his throat as he recognized the bandaged face, broken arms and unruly dark hair.

“Ah. One of my students told me you had a fascination with Eraserhead.” Yagi followed his stare, something unreadable in his odd blue eyes.

Izuku nodded, not entirely trusting himself to speak. Eraserhead seemed to be sleeping, though it was a little hard to tell given all the wrappings. This close, Izuku could take stock of all of his injuries, from the minor to the obvious. From the broken arms to the concussion to the ocular damage, all of it was laid out like a map for his fuzzy head to read.

The knowledge he’d caused these injuries sent a funny feeling lurching through Izuku, not quite direct guilt but close. Since Uraraka’s outburst, he’d recognised that Eraserhead was a man under the costume, and well-loved by his students to boot. The thought that he’d damaged that bond made his stomach do its best to tie itself into knots.

“He’s alright, more or less.” Mr. Yagi murmured “Though Recovery Girl wasn’t impressed with either of us. Aizawa should make a mostly full recovery, though the state of his Quirk still remains to be seen.”

“He might lose his Quirk?” The thought sent a stab of panic through Izuku, the feeling growing.

“Aizawa knew the risks he took when he took on The League. His desire and duty to protect his students came first. That should not be something you blame yourself for.”

Well it was all well and good to say that, the reality they faced still sat between them like a stone. Izuku’s mouth twisted into an unhappy expression. He didn’t have the words to describe the helplessness that threatened to swallow him at the news that Eraserhead might never regain his Quirk.

Mr. Yagi didn’t press him, letting him instead work through his thoughts. The memories of the fight with Toga, his actions came back to him, and added to the tight feeling in Izuku’s chest.

“Kacchan.” He whispered, half to himself. Kacchan had been there, and hadn’t been a dream. It scarcely felt real to Izuku, and now he looked at Yagi with mouthfuls of questions.

“Where’s Kacchan? Ochako? Are they ok? You can’t punish them for my actions, please-”

Mr. Yagi held up one spidery hand, effectively cutting off anything else Izuku might have said.
“They are all relatively uninjured. Young Bakugou had to be convinced to leave your side, but in the end was taken home by his family. Both Uraraka and him were anxious about your wellbeing.”

The relief hit Izuku squarely in the chest. He breathed out, his limbs feeling too loose. Thank goodness. “The topic does however bring up something I was instructed to talk to you about, should you feel up to speaking.”

Izuku looked at Mr. Yagi curiously. The man fidgeted in his seat, seeming to find the words but unsure of how to present them.

“The authorities are aware effectively, that you were taken at a young age by the League of Villains. As young Bakugou offered your name, we were able to track down your records and have the opportunity to notify your next of kin.”

A cold breath caught itself in Izuku’s chest. The police had connected him to his kidnapping? The mental image of what Shigaraki would think of that, what he might do sent nausea curling up the back of his throat. He swallowed, his pulse picking up in a dull thud in his ears.

“Your mother,” Mr. Yagi started delicately, noticing the uneven pitch of Izuku’s breath. “She’s alive, and well. As you’re a minor, she’s to be called in the morning and notified that you’ve been found.”

Izuku’s immediate response was denial. No. No, they couldn’t do that. They didn’t understand. Shigaraki would, he’d-

“They’ll kill her.” Izuku’s voice came out strangled, because even as the words left his lips he felt an old longing take over his heart. The aching memory of his mom, the vague memory of her arms around him had always been a dream. It’d been what had pulled him through, at times. To meet her, to see her was a scenario that he had blocked off from himself long ago. “You can’t tell her. The League will kill her because I told you about me.” It’d be his fault. It’d be on his hands. Izuku couldn’t stomach it, the idea turning the knots in his stomach into full-on cramping. His arms came to wrap about his middle, his breathing turning jagged.

Mr. Yagi leaned forward, gently resting a hand on Izuku’s quivering back. His voice was steady, and his touch was gentle. Izuku felt like the kindness was too much, unused to being comforted. He refused to feel bad about how he flinched under the man’s care. Still, Mr. Yagi didn’t seem angry. He seemed instead to have expected this, though a little sadness lingered in the back of his eyes. He kept his voice soft, as if soothing a frightened animal.

“UA has given the circumstances, offered you and your family protective status. I understand that you don’t have the most faith in the heroics department, but there’s been sufficient evidence stockpiled in your case to indicate that you wouldn’t be held accountable for crimes you’ve committed while with The League.”

Izuku didn’t know what ‘protection’ meant for UA, and he frankly didn’t care. He couldn’t risk his mom like that, couldn’t risk Kacchan like that or Eri. It wouldn’t end with just his mom, Shigaraki would make sure of that. Telling people about the League would lead to everyone he’d ever cared about being put on a hit list. He couldn’t risk anyone else for his own mistakes.
A pained whimper left his lips, and he scrunched his eyes shut to block out Mr. Yagi’s too-concerned face. Unable to speak, Izuku curled in on himself as best he could, hiding amongst stiff hospital sheets. His knees could touch his chest; he was so small.

Mr. Yagi’s hand still remained on his back, not a forceful presence just… there. He spoke, not knowing whether or not Izuku was actually listening. Izuku didn’t think he sounded mad, or frustrated. He sounded… well, Izuku didn’t know. Sympathetic?

Something like that. Perhaps empathetic. Somehow, it felt like he’d had to comfort someone who was very afraid more than once. There was a way about the man, who was very tall and yet seemed very skilled in seeming smaller than he was. He kept up the gentle rhythm on Izuku’s back, never pressing but making sure his presence was known.

When he did speak again, it was only after Izuku’s breathing had returned to something approaching normal.

“I can imagine you miss her.”

What kind of question was that? He could’ve laughed, if he hadn’t still been trying to keep his lungs out of his mouth. He settled for a shaken wheeze.

“Of course I do. That’s not why-”

“I know.” Mr. Yagi moved to put his book aside, his hands clasped loosely together between his knees. No longer touching Izuku’s back, he made sure to catch his gaze instead. Mr. Yagi looked uncomfortable in the chair given to him, mostly limbs without any sort of structure, but he leaned forward anyway, making sure Izuku was looking at him. “I know you’re frightened, and tired, and have had more to deal with in the past few weeks than anyone your age should have to go through. Your fear is justified.” Mr. Yagi exhaled, the sound long and searching. “But, I think your mother misses you just as much as you’ve missed her. And though I can’t offer much, I can offer a place to stay, for the both of you. A safe house, to regroup at for the weeks to come.”

That doesn’t keep Eri safe, though.

A treacherous part of Izuku’s mind hissed. There was nothing that could keep her safe, he’d already blown his one chance at fixing what he’d broken. He wanted to sob, to yell at this quiet man who was sitting by his bedside and telling him he could have everything he wanted. How could he? How could he just let Eri go, go back to his mom as if nothing had ever happened? He couldn’t be Izuku Midoriya, the shy and stuttering child that had put so much faith in heroes like All Might and saw hope for his future.

What if his mom hated this version of him, looked at him and didn’t see her son but an imposter taking his place? He couldn’t have this, and yet it was being extended to him, like Ochako had offered him food and a warm presence to talk to and pretended that he, was worth the time of day. A wave of self-hatred hit Izuku squarely in the chest, choking him.
“You have until morning, before she’s notified.” Yagi murmured, breaking Izuku out of his thoughts. “Please, do think upon my offer. It’ll be up to you and your mother to decide if it’s necessary. But please do know that I do not mind, and that I will not be much trouble to you both should you accept. I’ll be here for the rest of tonight, should you need me, but you should try to rest. It won’t be just your mother tomorrow, but the detective assigned to your case file to take a statement if you’re up for it.”

He made as if to turn back to his book, leaving Izuku to his panic but not far away should he be needed. In a way, Izuku was grateful. He didn’t think he could explain to anyone right now his nameless terror, the drowning feeling of being caught between two equally desperate wants.

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At eight in the morning, Inko Midoriya received a phone call. She’d answered in the midst of scrubbing the dishes. Her Quirk moved the sponge across a plate even as she dried her hands off to answer the ringing. She’d cradled the phone between chin and shoulder, the usual greetings hovering at her lips. She hadn’t bothered to check the I.D, assuming it was Mitsuki or maybe her job asking her to cover an extra shift.

The words died as a man introduced himself as Detective Tsukauchi.

Inko listened to his words blankly, nodding against the phone stiffly as she caught bits and pieces of words here and there: Izuku, and Found and Ongoing Investigation. She listened without absorbing for about fifteen minutes, until the man on the other end of the phone paused.

“Would you… like us to send a police escort to your home, Mrs. Midoriya?” He sounded uncertain, her lack of emotion probably registering to him over the phone.

“Yes, that would be lovely.” Inko answered, her tone polite and utterly blank. There was nothing in her mind, only a white wall that seemed impossible to scale. Her fingertips were points of static contact with the phone.

It was only as goodbyes were exchanged and she hung that the words the man had spoken registered. The plate, once floating, crashed to the sink and shattered amongst other dishes in the sink. The sponge also fell, sudsy and bereft on the floor. The hard, jarring noise was a background sound to her.

Inko pressed a trembling, shaking hand to her mouth. She gazed sightlessly in front of her, tears welling in her eyes. She crouched in front of the sink, gripping the countertop with white knuckles while her other hand muffled the sounds of her sobbing.
The police car came within a half hour, pulling up in the driveway. The police officer was a kind man, who introduced himself as Detective Tamakawa. He had a cat-like head, and a bell about his neck. Inko scarcely heard him, allowing herself to be lead to the front of the police cruiser by a paw-like hand. They drove in relative silence, a packet of tissues handed to her from the glove compartment of the car. Inko took them, for once not in the least bit self-conscious about her tear-stained, blotchy face. She watched scenery whip by in silence, time seeming to stretch and speed up the closer they got to UA.

*Where her son was.*

That started the tears again, an aching pain clutching Inko’s chest. Thankfully, the police officer seemed to understand, and merely handed her another packet of tissues. He kept his silence, save for the occasional offhand comment about the scenery flying by.

Inko had never grown up lucky or rich enough to even consider a school like UA as part of her education. She found the ornate gateway intimidating, and the clustered group of reporters lurking at the entrance even more so. Thankfully, she was lead around and back, towards an entrance that seemed more like a side door to the school’s kitchens.

“Sorry, they’ve been like vultures ever since news of the attack reached them.” Detective Tamakawa’s ears were flat against his head, apologetic.

He led her down hallways, twisting and turning down laminate floors until they came to a hallways of classrooms. Here, they came to an office with curtains obstructing the inside. Detective Tamakawa stopped here, turning to give Inko a small nod.

“Here we are. He’s inside, waiting for you.”

Inko nodded her thanks, wringing her hands together. The catlike detective jerked a paw to the side. “I’ve been assigned to wait out here. When you two are ready, I’ll be here to escort you to Principal Nedzu.” He offered a feline smile then, small and quick. “For all that he swore at me, you should be proud. He saved a lot of kids lives, last night.”

Inko didn’t respond. She honestly wasn’t sure how to. She’d dreamed this scenario again and again, and she still wasn’t completely convinced she wasn’t still dreaming. Any moment now, she’d wake up. Any second, and she’d find herself staring blankly at the walls of her home with an empty ache in her chest and resignation weighing her down.

She was left alone to face the door, staring at the handle with her heart pounding away in her chest. This dream wasn’t ending, though it had run longer than any others she’d had before. Behind the door, only silence could be heard. She was half afraid that reaching for it would trigger her waking, or reveal a nightmare in disguise of a dream. It was hard to say after all, dreams were unpredictable like that. She wanted the moment to drag out longer, wanted to bite the bullet and see whoever was waiting for her.
She wanted to hope time and time again that she was wrong, that this was real. It felt real, more so than most of her other dreams.

Inko didn’t wait for long, she couldn’t afford to. She’d waited for so long, too long for this day that might never have come. So she steadied herself, and mentally prepared for whatever she might find. Dream or no, she faced the door and breathed and tried to gather herself.

She needed to be there for her son, even if it was only for this moment, this illusion’s sake.

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The room Izuku had been told to wait in was nice, in theory. Though on the outside it was a classroom, it was clear that it was in practice used more as a break room for staff. He sat in the middle of it on a soft red couch, a pot of tea in front of him that had been graciously supplied by UA. Izuku stared at it and the untouched cup by his hand, trying to steady his nerves.

He’d been given new clothes, ones that made him feel not altogether himself. A plain, green shirt, a pair of sweatpants just a little bit too big for his waist, and a hair-tie that he’d kept on his wrist instead of in his hair. Red socks, and he’d insisted on keeping his shoes. He’d been allowed to shower in the school’s locker room, an unscented bar of soap and shampoo leaving him unidentifiable but clean. He was in truth cleaner than he’d been in months, and Izuku couldn’t help but feel like he’d shed an old skin to reveal something new and unknown underneath. He was Deku 2.0, now shinier than ever before. The thought made him smile.

The downside of the shirt and the shower, was that his scars were prominent lines along his arms and hands. Izuku didn’t know how he felt about his mom seeing them. He still didn’t know how he felt about seeing his mom.

Left alone, Izuku had a tendency to think himself into a pit. His Quirk didn’t help, pointlessly pointing out that the table in front of him was from IKEA and that it hadn’t been put together entirely properly so the leg was wobbly, or that since he’d left the nurse’s tent an hour had passed. Maybe that meant his mom wasn’t coming, maybe she didn’t want to see him after all, he could understand, no one would want to face the fact that their son had become a villain-

The knock came, breaking Izuku out of his thoughts. It was gentle, hesitant. He stood automatically, he could hear his own heart beating in his ears, the wet sound drowning out the noise of the door sliding open. He tried to ignore the fact that his knees were trembling.

The figure that entered was both smaller than Izuku remembered, and softer. When he’d been a kid, his mom had been working three jobs. His father had left, a hazy memory that Izuku felt no love nor hatred towards. The three jobs had left his mother worn down and thin, tired.

The woman before him was still tired looking, but in a different way. The marks around her eyes were habitual, as if she never really got enough sleep no matter how well she rested. Her face was rounder, her body having filled out with age. She paused in the doorway, a peculiar, lost expression
on her face as she looked at him.

Those eyes, so like his own were still the same. Still green, still filled with sadness underneath their usual comforting presence. That sadness was deeper now, seemingly endless. It shone back at him, and Izuku couldn’t look at it without feeling a twisting in his lungs. His breath caught as he met them, and he froze like a deer between crosshairs. Anything he might have practiced saying went out the window in favour of staring like a codfish. Neither of them said anything, Izuku unable to and Inko’s expression unreadable. It was like there was a pane of glass between them, two inches thick and sound proof.

Then, like a shuddering film coming back to life, Izuku’s brain righted itself. The words all came too fast, rushing to his mouth and clustering behind his teeth. What would sprout from his lips? What was trying to escape him with unavoidable force?

“M-mom?”

His mom sucked in a tiny, shaking breath. Slowly she came forward, as if she were afraid that Izuku was a mirage, that he’d slip away if she came too near. He closed his eyes as her small hands cupped his chin, cradling his face.

A wet, tearing noise came from his mom’s chest. Izuku’s eyes flew open as he was suddenly crushed in a full body hug, tugged forward so quickly he nearly lost his footing.

“My son.” She sobbed, clutching him so tightly that it was clear she thought he’d vanish at any moment. She smelled of things Izuku thought he’d forgotten, her laundry soap, mint tea, her favourite shampoo. He absorbed it all with both his five senses and his Quirk, imprinting on it and memorising it all over again. He’d never forget it again. *Never.*

Izuku’s arms came to wrap around her, clinging so tightly he half worried he might hurt her. Inko only responded by tightening her hold.

Now he did cry, big, helpless sobs like he was five years old again. They came and Izuku was powerless to stop them, unable to see anything but vague colours and streaky lights with his tears. His mom joined him, the two of them crumpling to the floor in a heap. Izuku clung and cried, cried for Eri and cried for his mom and cried for himself and cried until he was hoarse and empty and felt both disgusting and fragile. His mom held him through it, stroking his hair and refusing to let go. She was here. *He,* was here.

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“A safe house?”

The word felt unreal to Izuku, a placation. When presented to him, he’d found himself staring at his
hands, to the floor, anywhere but Mr. Nedzu’s unbearably pleasant face.

Beside him his mother cradled a cup of tea, her own expression a little dazed as she struggled to take in all the information that had been given to her in the last few hours. It was admittedly, a lot.

When they’d finally been able to let go of each other, Izuku had painfully tried to tell her how he’d come here, who he was. It’d come in shuddering starts and stops, some things coming easily to him, others hovering in the back of his throat just beyond reach. Through it all Inko had never looked at him with horror or disgust, merely cupping his face or holding his hands. Izuku didn’t know how much she’d absorbed, but she’d been attentive in wiping away his tears. She’d begun to cry again when he lifted his own hands to cup the ones on his jaw, seeing the scarring along his rough palms. Izuku had swallowed his own shaky, fragile grief and sat her down on the couch.

There was much to talk about, and much still left between them. No one had ever told Izuku how to mend a relationship with his mother, or anyone from his past for that matter. There wasn’t a manual he could follow; no video he could watch. It felt messy, and so as he always did when things were messy, he overanalysed everything he did. Was he sitting right? Did he look too nervous? Not nervous enough?

This led to a silence dragging between them in which Inko stared at her son, and he stared into his lap until Detective Tamakawa nervously announced that the principal of UA would like to discuss housing options with them.

So here they were, discussing Izuku’s future over tea with a mouse-bear-person that looked a little like a character out of one of the picture books he’d stolen for Eri to read. Beside him, Mr.Yagi kept trying to catch his eye. Izuku studiously did his best to avoid such contact. He thought he might be succeeding, the only price being that the only thing within his field of vision that he could real about Mr. Nedzu was the somewhat disturbing tail he had tucked by one leg.

“We’ve arranged, should you agree to it, a safe house of sorts for you and your son to live while he begins the process of recovering from The League of Villains. Mr. Yagi has an apartment near UA, and we’d arrange it to be a temporary protective measure while the police and our heroes investigate your case.”

Nedzu’s nose twitched, he gestured to Mr. Yagi sitting beside him.

“Mr. Yagi is a fine member of our staff, and a man that I for one can vouch for being capable of offering protection should the need arise.” The skeletal man gave them a nervous smile. Izuku’s Quirk once again tried to read why the man was considered one of UA’s ‘best’, and drew a frustrating blank. Nothing. There was no indication of what the man’s Quirk even was or what it might help with. It was an usual black hole in Izuku’s knowledge, and it made him uneasy. All he knew was that Mr. Yagi looked like death warmed over, and kept a blood-spotted handkerchief in his breast pocket.
It was irritating, and it made his trust in this whole situation no better. He couldn’t just ask however, about the nature of someone’s Quirk. He’d been raised a villain, not an animal. Staring wasn’t polite either, he supposed.

“I own an apartment that I do not use very often. It’s spacious enough to house the two of you, and I do not make much noise or cause trouble.” Mr. Yagi offered promptly. His eyes were odd, too, Izuku decided. Sunken in, with no whites to speak of. Only the piercing blue iris could be seen.

“I appreciate the offer.” Inko’s voice a little shaky, but her gratitude was genuine. Izuku could tell she had her doubts about the arrangement too. Still, her knowledge of UA’s prestige and the heroes that worked for them overrode any doubt she might voice aloud. She offered the man a smile. “It makes me feel a little better, knowing that we’ll have heroes keeping an eye out should this ‘League’ decide to take action.”

Izuku didn’t have such compunction. He gave Mr. Yagi a critical look as he crossed his arms over his chest. He probably wasn’t very intimidating in these plainclothes, but he pretended as well as he could that he still had his mask and his weapon.

“Look, you seem like a nice enough person and all, but the villains that’ll be after me aren’t small-time. I don’t mean to be rude, but the information I’m working towards sharing with UA is… sensitive to say the least. My… ex-boss isn’t going to be happy about it being compromised.” Izuku flinched internally, Shigaraki brought to the forefront again. With it, the echo of an old memory, a dark cell, and a creature that used to be a man.

Don’t think about it.

The chill went by unnoticed.

“Hmm, yes. About that information,” Principal Nedzu set down his cup, his expression taking on a serious tilt. “I’m under the understanding that you’ve talked to Detective Tsukauchi, and agreed to share said information with Aizawa.”

“He’s the underground hero that was assigned to many of the crimes, though he never found out they were connected exactly.” Izuku confirmed with a small nod. His hands fidgeted in his lap as he explained carefully, very much aware of how much he wanted to share in front of his mom. “I’d… sometimes get a chance to watch the news, or find a public library computer. I don’t know everything but… I think Mr. Aizawa would be the best to know about this information given his connections to the ‘Ghost’ cases.”

More importantly, it’d give Izuku time. Aizawa wasn’t going to be well enough for a while to go chasing all the leads Izuku could give him, and it was a fact that he was pathetically grateful for. Izuku still needed to fiddle with who he wanted to reveal, how much, and how long he had before he had before he could get Eri out of there. One thing was certain. He wasn’t trusting heroes with that.
“Giving us any information will increase the likelihood of building a strong defence case for your situation, of course. As for Mr. Yagi’s safety, you need not worry. He’s a good friend of All Might’s and this is a favour of sorts to him. You and your mother will be more than adequately protected.”

This surprised Izuku. The man was a friend of All Might? He looked like the sort of man that spent his afternoons at gardening clubs, not sparring or hanging out with Japan’s top heroes.

Mr. Yagi had turned a light shade of pink around the ears, coughing into his fist. He seemed a little self-conscious. He fidgeted with the drink in his hands and smiled in the face of Izuku’s incredulous eyebrow-raising.

“Yes, well… All Might and I have been friends since before his namesake was made. I know I am… not the most confidence-inspiring individual, but I do mean it when I say I feel you will be safe under my care. It would also not be too far from UA, which may prove to be beneficial for you.”

Izuku’s eyes narrowed, but his mom beat him to it. Her eyebrows were furrowed in confusion.

“Why would being close to UA be helpful? I thought the villains knew Izuku was being kept here.”

Izuku half expected the answer, but it didn’t help the dull sting that came with the answer.

“Though we know that Izuku’s involvement with the League was involuntary, the police have asked us to help organize a fake identity that he might assume, in order to aid his reestablishment into society. As a whole, we felt he might have an easier time having access to the resources he needs if he were to pose as a student here at UA.”

The unspoken indication was clear, and though it was likely true it didn’t make Izuku feel less like a bug under a lens. He was determined to be too dangerous to be let back out in society as a mere citizen.

“And if I refuse?”

The question had meant to come across mild enough, but there was a barb under the cool tone. Izuku couldn’t look at his mom as he said it, sensing her emotional turmoil. He instead directed his glare toward Nedzu, chin raised as if daring him to try and talk his way out.

Heroes had done nothing for him, to this date. With the exception of class 1-A, all of Izuku’s experiences with heroes had been bullies and people with far too much money beating the shit out of the mentally ill. It was a pattern that was hard to ignore when he had a Quirk that so regularly saw too much. The rich and the wealthy were heroes, the poor crowned criminals as soon as their Quirks were inconvenient.

Yet despite being labelled as a villain; he wasn’t overly fond of that side either. Izuku’s experiences with villains were more varied, but often more directly cruel. Villains had made him, took him away from everything he had ever known and loved.
He rested in a decided grey area, not quite a vigilante due to his circumstances but not a willing participant in his crimes. When he’d been a small child, all he’d wanted was this: the chance to become a hero, to save people. Now, it left a sour taste in the back of Izuku’s mouth, because it meant owing a debt to the biggest hero of all.

“Whether or not you want to be a hero, will be up to your abilities.” Nedzu replied with a smile. “I was thinking of placing you in 1-A, since there is a vacant spot available due to the grade differences between Gen Ed. students and our streamlined class. A number of students in said class have already interacted with you, and it’s my belief that you’ll adjust better if with classmates you recognize from the start.”

Nedzu leaned forward to pour more tea into Izuku’s cup. He steadfastly placed his hand over the top of it, his jaw set. The principal sighed, but didn’t press the matter. “It also gives you access to the school’s resources. We’ve been known to have some of the best counselling services in Japan, a fact that has helped the majority of our heroes achieve balance in their work to home life. For those that seek it, the school therapist has proven to be worth her weight in gold.”

Izuku detected no hint of a lie in Nedzu’s face. In fact, something in the Principal’s expression seemed to say he was speaking from personal experience. Izuku’s gaze traced the principal’s scar and wondered just what a rat with above human intelligence made of human beings and their treatment of him.

He didn’t want help. He didn’t need help. That was what the small voice in the back of his mind was shouting. Izuku had relied on that voice to get him through most of his life, and even as he knew it was a product of fear it was difficult not to listen to. He didn’t want to give the real reasons he was afraid of entering school again, afraid of trying to be a citizen. Deep down, he knew that he was terrified that he couldn’t do it. He hadn’t been in any sort of structured education since he’d been kidnapped, any opportunity to learn the basics in maths or science was through his own power. He didn’t know what normal people did, only had a vague idea through television shows and his limited interactions with the outside world. It felt like he was a particularly convincing puppet, trying very hard to be a real boy.

Shigaraki hadn’t wanted him to be educated, and Izuku wasn’t so stupid that he didn’t know why. Any time he tried to imagine a life outside of the League, he was given a vacant and empty canvas. He had no grade school certificate, a criminal record, and the idea of sitting in a classroom filled with other kids terrified him on a level equivalent to skydiving. Top all of that off with a crippling fear of failure, and the idea of being a functioning citizen was damn near laughable. How could he ever believe this was feasible?

“Izuku,” His mom’s voice cut through his down-spiral of panic. Izuku looked to her, the sick knot in his stomach loosening a little as he saw her concern. Inko’s eyes were soft as she reached for his hand, emboldened when he didn’t immediately flinch away. “You don’t have to make this decision
alone. You know that, right?” Her small fingers looped through his, and Inko’s other hand fidgeted in her lap. She looked at him, and away, and her guilt was a palpable force as she tried to smile through it. “You’ve been through so much… and I wasn’t there. I didn’t even realize that you had a Quirk before… before you were gone.”

“Mom; that wasn’t your fault.” She couldn’t be blaming herself, could she? The idea made Izuku’s throat feel tight. He’d only just gotten to see her again; he couldn’t already mess this up.

Inko shook her head. She gripped his hand tighter.

“I want to be there for you.” She said, conviction raw in her voice. “I want… I know that trusting people is probably hard, and trusting people you don’t know is probably harder. But please know that I’m here for you, and I’ll help you no matter what you decide you want to do. You don’t have to look at this like you’re going in on your own. So give yourself a fighting chance.”

That’s what this was really, wasn’t it? It was an olive branch, an exchange offered to him in return for information. At least, it was easier to digest that way. Izuku couldn’t look at it as something like pity, because that sent all sorts of terrible, no good thoughts racing through his head and he’d soon be having a panic attack in front of two strangers and his mom.

He breathed through his nose, silently trying to steady his own tumbling thoughts. An exchange, then. He could deal with this by viewing it as a business transaction. He gathered his thoughts, pausing before admitting them in a sort of hushed way.

“I’m. I um. I haven’t gone to school. Like. Ever, really.”

“That is alright, my boy.” Mr. Yagi spoke. His voice was kind. “Many of our own students require supplementary classes for their grades. Strong Quirks do not always mean strong academic skills.” He chuckled, an embarrassed flush alighting his face. “I myself was one of them, once upon a time. You can arrange meetings with teachers at any time to do support classes. As well knowing Aizawa, he will want to give you an initial exam, just to see what areas need to be worked on.”

Okay. That was… Izuku wasn’t sure what it was, but it was a little better, somehow. The prompt and non-judgemental offer of help soothed his nerves, even as a dozen other questions filled his mind. They were mostly clamoring for some other excuse, some reason that this might all fall apart. There were many of them, too. Izuku grit his teeth, trying to see past the fear in his chest.

Once, he had believed in heroes. Once, they had been his world. Could he pretend, even for a moment, that he might one day feel the same once again? Did he really have a choice?

He gave the tiniest, most hesitant of nods. it was to the palpable relief of the adults in the room, who all unconsciously released the breaths they had been holding. Izuku steadfastly ignored the voice in the back of his head, offering a crooked, tired smile that felt very hard to keep. How did villainy seem easier than being a high school student?
Mr. Yagi’s apartment as it turned out was nice. Nicer than Izuku expected, in truth. It was about a half hour car ride away from the school, situated by a park on one side and a mall not five minutes away.

Izuku drank in the simple but expensive décor in the front lobby. A quiet bamboo fountain tipping back and forth in one corner while plush sofas lined the other. Beside it, an elaborate vase held willow stems curling in some sort of functional design that quite frankly looked a bit like a Pinterest craft.

It was the kind of functionally rich place that made Izuku’s fingers itch, his eyes look about habitually for something small and high value to steal. He barely realised he was doing it, but he kept noticing the shabby and frayed ends of his mom’s sweater. He made a mental note to get her a new one as soon as he could, she looked cold. Izuku had spent ten years away from her, and already the same childlike, protective urge was rearing its head in unexpected places. He didn’t exactly dislike it either. Instead, he felt like he had to treasure the feeling. He still wasn’t totally convinced this was going to last.
The elevator sat at the far wall, and Mr. Yagi pressed the button for the twelfth floor for them as they all stepped inside.

Since leaving UA, a quietness had settled between the three of them that was thick with awkwardness. Past the tearful reunion, Izuku felt as if he were walking on eggshells, uncertain of what his mom knew and didn’t know about him. How much had the police told her about his criminal past, and how much left was there that he wanted her to know? The easy answer was nothing, he wanted to play at this life as a blank slate, but that wasn’t fair. He didn’t want to screw this fragile opportunity up, so he kept his mouth shut. His Quirk fussed restlessly in his head, analysing the only people around.

When he’d been a child, his mom had worked three jobs just to keep their family afloat. Izuku’s father had left before he could talk, and from what little he could remember it’d been a somewhat messy separation. Inko had refused in a rare display of pride to ever accept any kind of money from the man, choosing instead to work herself to the bone to get Izuku fed and dressed and on his way to preschool. His mom back then had been a tired, anxious person. Very kind, but prone to fretting.

His mom now was very much the same, but there was a tinge of sadness that hadn’t been there before. Izuku kept finding himself looking for the woman that had always managed to bring a smile to his face and found instead someone profoundly affected by his absence. In a way it was relieving, but in another it filled Izuku with grief.

Then there was Mr. Yagi, who as in himself an enigma. He was polite, if quiet, but he kept avoiding Izuku’s sharp gaze like he was worried of being read like a glass window. He was definitely hiding a secret, and Izuku would have bet all that he had that it had something to do with the nature of his Quirk. Was it truly such a terrible power that Mr. Yagi felt self-conscious about it? Or was Izuku still not trusted enough to know?

It would make sense if he wasn’t. Until literal days ago, Izuku would have been seen as nothing more than a villain. In truth, the label still stuck better than a citizen. It could even be that Mr. Yagi found the nature of Izuku’s Quirk uncomfortable, repulsive. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d met someone who felt that way about him.

The apartment that Mr. Yagi led them to was revealed to be a distinctly unlived in space. It was clean, so clean that Izuku was immediately reminded of a prop space used for furniture magazines. The décor gave off a modern feel, with the one notable exception being a kotatsu table placed in the centre of the living room.

All in all, Izuku was a little worried to set his meager backpack of things down (which was filled with what was left of his villain costume and nothing else). Out of the corner of his eye, he could see his mom having similar hesitations.

“Well, this is it.” Mr. Yagi spoke, scratching the back of his neck a little self-consciously. He extended a thin arm half-heartedly about him. “It’s not much, but I do hope that you two will make yourselves at home.”
“Thank you.” Inko murmured, gingerly putting her own overnight bag on a high chair by the kitchen island. Tomorrow she’d grab more clothes, and some of Izuku’s old things, but as it stood they’d both been in agreement that today would be used mostly for relaxation and talking. She padded her way barefoot across the kitchen, and after removing his own shoes Izuku did the same.

He had never been in an apartment before as far as he could recall, and never one this nice. Izuku’s curiosity was already piqued by the shining metal stove and the metallic promise of the refrigerator. With the League, he was often responsible for his own food, despite the fact that he was only given money as a reward for doing exceptionally well on a heist or crime. He was used to scrounging, and truthfully didn’t often ‘feel’ hungry any more unless he’d gone without food for a while.

“Please, help yourself to anything you’d like.” Mr. Yagi noticed his staring, waving him towards the fridge with a small smile on his face. Izuku’s eyes narrowed, trying to detect if he was being caught in some sort of trap. There was no hint of deception on the man’s face, but Izuku was beginning to suspect that Mr. Yagi was a better than average liar.

He decided to approach the situation with caution, creeping forward and opening the fridge—only to gawk. It was entirely full, the fullest fridge that Izuku had ever seen. Fruits, vegetables, meats and bread all made a rainbow of colours that Izuku struggled to take in all at once. Not just the basics, the freezer revealed a tub of strawberry ice cream, as well as several frozen to-go meals that clearly had more of a dent taken out of them. He gaped, hardly understanding why someone who lived alone could need or have so much food. This could feed him for months.

“When I was asked to house you, I asked a friend of mine to run to the store and stock up on things you might like. Mostly, I end up eating the frozen foods or make smoothies.”

“If it’s alright for me to use the kitchen, I was thinking of making Katsudon as celebration. So don’t ruin your dinner, okay Izuku?” Inko interjected from the living room, where because of the open space concept of the apartment she could be seen nervously tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

Katsudon.

A memory rose to the back of Izuku’s mind, unbidden but bright through the eyes of a small child.

“You used to make that when it was my birthday.” He muttered aloud. His mom seemed to flush in pleasure, nodding enthusiastically as a smile split across her face. However, she was quick to revert back to nerves.

“I-if you don’t like it any more, I can make something different. Just say the word and-”

“I’d love katsudon.” Izuku gently interrupted her, his voice strangely fragile and his chest tight. He watched his mom slump in relief, his hand still wrapped around the handle of the fridge. The moment of intimacy was gone too soon, but it left Izuku strangely vulnerable.

He reached and grabbed the first thing that was easily available: which happened to be a single-serve
slice of chocolate cake. Holding it like it was made from stars, Izuku turned a childlike expression of bliss towards Mr. Yagi.

“Your friend is too good for this world.”

Yagi stifled a laugh by coughing into his hand. Hizashi had five siblings, all younger than him. When asked to go grocery shopping, he’d approached the task with what a kind person would call enthusiasm, and others might call ‘manic glee’.

Izuku sat himself down at the kitchen island on one of the high seats, and dug in. It was only after a couple of minutes of vocal noises, happy sighing and licking chocolate from his fingers did the boy catch his mother’s amused and slightly horrified stare.

“There’s forks in the cupboard by the stove, young Midoriya.” Mr. Yagi piped up, a small smile on his own face. His lanky form brushed by as he went to rifle in said cupboards, revealing a fork and putting it by Izuku’s plate. He didn’t sound too bothered, but Izuku’s entire neck flushed dark red.

So he was a little rusty with his table manners. There were worse things to have to work on. Eating with a fork was much slower and inefficient, anyway.

After cake, Izuku was left to explore the apartment to his heart’s content. He could tell that it made his mom nervous to let him out of her sight, but she was trying to be reasonable about it. He worked with it by not wandering very far within the apartment, purposefully making more noise as he walked than he would have dared with the League. Mr. Yagi similarly kept his mom company, offering to chop up vegetables or to reach for pans that were a fair bit higher up. He was suddenly grateful for the man, as he divided his mom’s attention enough that Izuku could feel better about taking the time to get to know his surroundings.

It was an old habit, but one that had stuck with Izuku from a very young age. He liked to know where everything was, and by extension how his Quirk might interact with it. Padding down the hall, he counted three bedrooms in the apartment, two of which were left open and the third shut. The two open bedrooms sat across from each other, while the third closed one was at the end of the hallway. Peering into the open ones, he quickly saw that they were guest bedrooms, and that one would probably end up being his for the foreseeable future.

They were far larger than any bedroom Izuku had ever had before. With the League, his bedroom as a child had been a cell, graduated only to a shoe-closet of a room when he’d proven time and time again that any resistance had been beaten out of him. His old room had no windows, a flickering fluorescent light, and had perpetually smelled sort of damp.

Stepping into one of the rooms at random, Izuku found it cozy and clean. A window gave a view of
only a parking lot, but in truth it was worlds more than Izuku would have hoped for. He stared down at the cars moving in and out of their places and felt a little giddy.

The bed looked so soft. It was covered in a plush blue and white striped comforter, and called to Izuku with how comfortable it looked. He flopped down on it, already deciding he wanted this room and so claiming it.

Rolling about in the clean sheets, he noted not for the first time how wild his curls were at this length when they were actually washed.

Izuku wondered as he kicked his legs against the side of the bed if this was how most homes felt like: Warm and safe and quiet. He laid there for a while longer, his fingers running again and again over the novelty of linen sheets. He wished Eri could see this, wished he could tell her about it. The thought lingered until his mom announced from the kitchen that dinner was ready.

As he sat up, an idea came to Izuku. He darted a furtive glance towards the doorway, making sure that no one was peering in on him. It was a slim chance, but he thought that he knew someone who might be able to help him. Provided of course, that he could match their price.

Padding to the window, Izuku’s peered at the glass. A thin layer of condensation sat on the inside, the temperature between the panes making a faint sheen. Lifting a hand, he carefully traced a symbol, muttering under his breath words that had been spoken to him as a child.

Trace a star and think of me, and I’ll find you.

Dripping moisture, Izuku’s handiwork sat before him. A child’s star, five points across the pane. Already it was fading, the cold air and warm apartment making it disappear like a magic trick.

If he hadn’t known what to look for, Izuku would have missed the faint purple glow that burned for a moment behind it.

Eating was a quiet, somewhat stilted affair. Izuku spent most of it in truth cramming food into his face and marvelling over how anything could taste so good. There was so much of it, too. More than he could ever possibly eat in one sitting, though he made a valiant effort. In the end, he managed to clear two bowls, and might have tried to go for a third if his stomach hadn’t literally felt like a pained bowling ball in the middle of his torso.

“I take it that it’s still as good as when you were a kid, then.” Inko looked fondly at her son’s empty bowl, her green eyes soft. She pressed one hand to her cheek as the good mood faded, a pained look entering her expression. She looked suddenly fragile, and the abrupt shift in mood was something Izuku was beginning to realise they were both in danger of. They likely would be for a while. “I um.
I thought I wouldn’t get to have this again. So. S-so this is nice.” She smiled, a wobbly thing that made Izuku look away and down into his lap. He shot a glance out of the corner of his eye towards Mr. Yagi, who was awkwardly picking at what was left of his food. There was quite a bit, though Izuku supposed the man was pretty thin. He wasn’t sure what to say, his throat tight as he thought of how often he’d dreamed of just sitting at home again, and how eventually even that had been a luxury he hadn’t been able to afford.

Izuku had used to tell Eri about his mom, when he’d visited her. He’d talk about how his mom had used to put up with his obsession with All Might at the time, how she’d pack his lunchbox the night before with sandwiches that had been cut into the hero’s face. He wasn’t sure why he’d told her, other than the fact that Eri’s face always got a sort of wistful look when he’d shared stories. Though she didn’t speak often about her own past, Izuku knew that she’d never known her own mom. Maybe that was why he’d done it, a sort of attempt to make the reality that they were both facing tolerable.

Eri was a tight hand clenched about his heart right now, though. He couldn’t think about her without his breathing growing unsteady and the food in his stomach churning sickly.

He’d told Nedzu he’d wait until he could give the proper information to the authorities, but everything in him was screaming that they were running out of time. Everything in Izuku kept shouting that he was better off leaving this all behind, that it was a trap and not a dream he was in. Something was going to tip, and he’d find himself on his own again, only this time Eri would be the one to pay for his stupid mistakes.

“W-when is a detective coming to take my statement?” He asked this skittishly, still unused to viewing police officers as anything but a nuisance.

Mr. Yagi was the one who answered promptly. Izuku could feel the weight of the man’s gaze on him, though he couldn’t bring himself to lift his head.

“It’s been agreed that until you give your express permission, no statement will be taken from you or your mother. That being said, if you’re volunteering yourself, I can get detective Tsukauchi here as soon as is possible.”

_The Human Lie Detector._

Izuku narrowly avoided making a face. He truthfully didn’t hate Tsukauchi, but the man’s Quirk made him nervous. Izuku had survived this long largely through lying, and it felt like cheating that someone could posses a Quirk that just surpassed the skills he’d developed over time.

Perhaps sensing his hesitation, Mr. Yagi continued.

“I am also here if you or your mother for that matter wish to talk at any time. Though I’m no therapist, and no detective, I have contacts that I can pass on notes to. If you’d rather just talk, and not have me share said information, I can do that too within reason.” Mr. Yagi rose from the table, collecting his half-finished dish and Inko’s empty bowl. His free hand reached for Izuku’s bowl as well. The gesture was coupled with a smile that Izuku found genuine, if a bit too large for the man’s
frail appearance. “I’m here to help, after all.”

This man is ill.

His Quirk whispered to him, hearing the creak of Mr. Yagi’s joints, noticing fine red droplets on the napkin he’d wiped his mouth with. There were permanent circles around Mr. Yagi’s eyes, like he didn’t sleep much. Despite all this, the life in his eyes seemed larger than such a thin body could hold.

The information sat with Izuku, rolling around his already-full stomach like a stone. Why a man that seemed to be chronically sick seemed so optimistic, he didn’t understand. Izuku frowned to himself, handing his host his bowl.

Try as he might, the words sat useless in Izuku’s mouth, just out of reach.

He spent the rest of the evening wrestling with his guilt, in between helping his mom and Mr. Yagi clean up the dishes and, when invited, sitting with them in the living room for a little late night TV. The show that they’d settled on was something Izuku had never seen before, though he’d admit that wasn’t hard to do. It was some sort of sitcom, the kind with the creepy background audience laugh track and characters that were all just a bit too sarcastic to be real people. It was tolerable. Izuku sat with his feet tucked under the kotatsu, across from his mom. Mr. Yagi took the larger couch, giving his gangly limbs freedom to sprawl. The show was in English, but subtitles had been added. Occasionally, Mr. Yagi would laugh at some joke a half beat before the captions came on. Izuku stored the information away in the back of his mind, onto the growing list of peculiar things about their new host.

Good understanding of English. Spent time out of Japan?

Maybe it was the food, or the warmth of the kotatsu, or the subdued cheer surrounding him, but Izuku found himself struggling to stay awake. All too quickly his eyelids were growing heavy, and he kept listing to one side. The weight of the blanket on his legs was comforting and safe. He couldn’t fall asleep here, knew that he had a perfectly good bed in another room. It didn’t make it all the more tempting, the easy view of a window and the front door soothing the anxious side of his personality. He’d just rest his head on the table for a bit, revel in this new feeling of home a little while longer. His eyes slipped shut without him quite giving them the go ahead, and Izuku’s last conscious memory was the feeling of his mom’s hand reaching across to brush his own.

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Eri heard the noise before she saw the face, opening her eyes in the dark. It was late, a fact that made the noise all the more unsettling. It’d been footsteps, rattling in the dark. She pressed herself further into the corner of her cot, technicolour eyes peering out between slatted cells and into the dark. She covered her mouth with one hand, fear rabbiting in her heart next to the vague, sick hope she’d been keeping for almost two weeks.
Was it Izuku?

There seemed to be a long, drawn out exhale, the tone of which she recognised. Eri felt her heart squeeze painfully as Chisaki’s silhouette came into view. She met his cold eyes, awake and unblinking in the dark. His voice was always polite to a fault, but it never failed to make Eri feel as if she were small and insignificant.

“We need to move. Pack up your belongings.”

“Why?” She didn’t often ask questions, but when she did it was a gamble as to whether or not Chisaki would indulge her curiosity. It made Eri nervous, to speak out like she was. Her keeper paused, golden eyes lanterns in the dark.

“Our base has been compromised. Everyone’s moving out at different intervals to the new one.” He didn’t offer further explanation, instead jerking his chin towards the hall.

The words didn’t make sense to her. It was as if Chisaki had come to her cell, and announced that they were going on a vacation to some far off resort. The idea of leaving the bar that Eri had spent so much of her life in was a vague concept, but until now had never been tangible. She was rarely even allowed out of the basement, unless she’d been particularly well-behaved.

Eri bit her lip, wringing her hands together indecisively. She cast a glance at the book tucked under her cot, safely stowed out of sight and out of mind. She knew what it looked like by heart, the Sailor Moon volume thin and water-stained but still her most loved personal item. Izuku had given it to her back when she’d first met him. She’d fallen in love instantly with the pictures and with the story, Chisaki insisting that she know how to read. She’d told Izuku all about Chibi Usa’s adventures, narrating to him excitedly and pointing at the pictures. It wasn’t the first volume in the series, far from it, but that didn’t matter. Eri loved this volume in particular, because her favourite character had fallen in love with a unicorn. The creature’s white hair and curling horn had registered with her, as did Chibi Usa’s character. She read it almost every night from back to back, so much so that she practically knew the story by heart.

It was a gambling act to ask questions, but Eri gathered up the courage to do so with a voice that quavered.

“W-what about Izuku?” Her brother, as she privately thought of him, had been gone now for just over two weeks. She knew that he was alive, because she could hear Shigaraki yelling about it now and again through the vents. He was always breaking things upstairs. Yet no one had bothered to tell her anything else, and a desperate sort of fear had been building in her chest for days, only growing the longer she didn’t see her brother’s familiar face.

Chisaki paused, the bird mask he kept on his face making it hard to read if he was angry. His cold eyes glittered in the dark, his head tilted in reptilian consideration.

“Izuku Midoriya has proven himself to be a traitor to the League, my dear.”
Eri didn’t understand. She frowned, her fingers tangling in the ends of her long hair, nervously braiding.

“I-I don’t”

“He’s left you, Eri.” Though Chisaki’s tone was sympathetic, there was a false note to his placations. “I’m sorry to be the bearer of such bad news. Izuku’s run away, left to join the heroes. He’s forgotten all about you, it seems.”

Her immediate thought was that Chisaki was lying, and being particularly mean about it. He’d done it before, and Eri truly didn’t want to believe him. Yet the longer she looked at him, trying to see his usual tells, the less deceit she saw.

“That’s not true.” It couldn’t be. Izuku wouldn’t do that, wouldn’t leave her just like that without even a ‘goodbye’. Eri’s chin trembled, and she fought to steady it. There was a frustrated burning in the back of her eyelids.

Chisaki made a small clucking noise, thin shoulders shrugging. He came forward, and Eri flinched as a gloved hand came to rest on the top of her head, combing through her white hair. She hated how sometimes, she could almost imagine a parent doing this to her.

“I’m afraid it is, Eri. I know it’s a hard truth to hear.” He tilted her face up towards him then, noting the tears starting to well and overflow in her eyes. “Sometimes, the people we put our faith in turn out not to be worth that trust. Do you understand?”

She made a sound, and it might have been a whimper. Eri was still unable to believe it, though something tight and bitter stung in her throat.

Chisaki took her hand in his own, and Eri took it because she was afraid and trying very hard to be brave.

“He’s coming back.” She murmured, whether to herself or to her captor, she wasn’t sure. He had to.
Reflections

Chapter Summary

Even as a villain/budding vigilante? Izuku has terrible fashion tastes. Luckily, Yagi's is worse.

Chapter Notes

Secrets? All Might? It's more likely than you think!

Thank you for all the kind kudos and comments! After this small detour (this chapter and one more) we're onto the sports festival! Which means you guessed it- finally getting that sweet, sweet interaction with 1-A (As well as a certain purple-haired, sleep deprived boi).

Izuku woke up somewhere around seven, his internal clock nudging him for sleeping too long. He woke startled, a little surprised that he hadn’t dreamt at all. Blearily, he realised that he’d been moved at some point from the kotatsu to the couch while he slept. A giant, star-spangled blanket had been wrapped about him, tucked in at the corners so that he was a veritable burrito. How he hadn’t startled through it, was anyone’s guess.

It was strange, waking up and not immediately feeling cold, or hungry, or still tired. In truth, Izuku couldn’t remember when he last felt so rested. He sat up slowly, squinting at the morning sun that streamed through the living room window. It was this, he realised, that had woken him in the first place.

No one else seemed to be awake. Though, if he knew his mom still she would be up within the hour. The thought made a small, incredulous smile lilt on his face. He wasn’t sure what Mr. Yagi’s schedule would be, but a gut instinct told Izuku that he was also an early riser.

Getting to his feet, he soundlessly decided that now was a good time to get a better read on their gracious host. He padded noiselessly into the hallway, checking his steps carefully for creaking floorboards.

The first place Izuku decided to make a beeline towards was the bookshelf. It sat in the hallway, filled with an assortment of texts. These didn’t interest Izuku as much as the photographs that were peppered between them in frames. Most of the photos Izuku took in were of other people, a fact that was a bit disappointing. He didn’t recognise a lot of them. There was a photograph of a middle-aged man in a yellow and beige costume, smiling widely at the camera. His handsome face wasn’t one that Izuku knew. In another, a faded photograph of a woman with dark hair. She was caught mid-laugh, dressed in civilian clothes and giggling at something out of the frame. Izuku took in her broad
shoulders, strong arms and sharp gaze wordlessly. Another hero, probably. He didn’t recognise her either, and it made him frown.

Then there was a picture of Mr. Yagi himself, tucked almost like an afterthought between two texts. Izuku zeroed in on it, and found himself surprised. The young man in the photo was healthy, and clearly so. Though Izuku supposed that few people were simply born sickly, this version of Mr. Yagi seemed fit and bright-eyed. He was dressed in a UA uniform, muscular, and his scraggly hair was not as limp as it seemed now. In the photo he was flushing, trying to wave off whoever was holding the camera. The sunken look to his cheeks hadn’t appeared yet, and this Yagi had bulk to balance out his height. The smile was the same, self-conscious but taking up his entire face.

Izuku stared at the photo a little longer, lost in thought. What had made Mr. Yagi so ill-looking, that a photo of his younger self was nearly unrecognisable? He stored it away as another little mystery, a puzzle he had to solve. This was almost becoming a game, and Izuku was determined to win it.

He moved on down the hall, careful not to keep his breathing quiet as he passed the bedrooms. He came to the front door, where a round mirror sat above a rack for shoes. He was hesitant to look at it, but curiosity soon overtook himself. Izuku hadn’t seen his own reflection in a very long time.

Now he looked, and he wasn’t entirely sure what he thought about the person that he saw. Izuku had known that he hadn’t looked well, but he was honestly a little startled. His eyes were shadowed by permanent-looking eye bags, little cuts and scars were flecked across his face amongst his freckles. His hair was long, long enough that unless he tied it back his bangs threatened to fall into his face. It made his eyes seem huge and nervous. The pale, sallow look from not spending enough time out in daylight made him seem oddly vulnerable.

His Quirk automatically tried then, to analyse himself. His own image became blurred, overlapping as information clamored to be heard in a feedback loop. Izuku found a pressure headache begin to blossom between his eyes. He grimaced, quickly averting his gaze before it could become a full-on migraine.

The sound of someone clearing their throat drew his attention away from that particular issue with his Quirk. Mr. Yagi stood hovering in the hallway, dressed in a sleep shirt and comically patriotic pyjama bottoms. Strange, muscular presidents were printed into the fabric, all blazing various kinds of American memorabilia. Izuku snorted at the sight, covering his mouth. The man seemed to look down and actually register what he was wearing. The tips of his ears turned bright red.

“They were uh, a gag gift from a friend.” Mr. Yagi muttered.

“Your friends have a funny sense of humour.”

There was his self-conscious smile again. Izuku found it surprisingly easy to coax out.

“It makes sense that you’d find it funny- Hizashi does have the sense of humour of a fifteen-year-old.”
Izuku’s smirk only widened.

“Hizashi Yamada? Present Mic, right?”

“You really do know your heroes, huh?” Mr. Yagi nodded. “I’m friends if not acquaintances with all of the staff at UA.”

“Knowing heroes means my Quirk can analyse them.” Izuku explained a little shyly. He knew that his Quirk made him sometimes seem like a mind-reader, if not just obnoxious. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of the sweatpants he’d been given, bare feet nervously kneading against the floorboards nervously. “I can stop though. Voicing my observations aloud, I mean. I know it can be…uncomfortable.”

“My boy, if a child’s Quirk could make me uncomfortable that easily, then I would not make a good teacher.” Mr. Yagi waved away his embarrassment, gesturing towards the kitchen. “Come, I’ll make some breakfast for us and your mother, once she wakes up.”

All of Izuku’s instincts had expected annoyance in face of his Quirk. He trailed behind Mr. Yagi, feeling a little dazed. This place really was a strange paradise. He watched as Mr. Yagi got out eggs and some chives, digging around in the kitchen drawers until he found a knife suitable for cutting. He worked quickly, pausing only to explain here and there what he was making and what needed to be done to create the dish. Izuku realised belatedly as he sat down that Mr. Yagi was teaching him, perhaps on autopilot. He absorbed the information greedily, though he’d never had much use for cooking until now. The idea that he *could* cook something, should he want to, was strangely exciting.

“The trick to a good omelette is to make sure your pan’s greased properly, and very hot.” Mr. Yagi demonstrated, pouring eggs and milk into a pan and letting them sizzle. “You don’t want to poke at it too much, but now and again you want to see if it’s burning underneath or needs to be flipped. The rolling of it’s the hard part.”

Izuku watched him do this, his Quirk taking in the angle, approximate heat and time that Mr. Yagi gave the eggs before flipping them. Once he thought had it down, he pushed back from his chair hesitantly.

“I-I think I’ve got it.” He said. Mr. Yagi seemed a little startled, but willingly flipped the finished omelette onto a plate.

“Are you sure? I’ve only shown it to you once.”

Izuku nodded, eager to please. Mr. Yagi took him for his word, handing him the spatula and vegetable-milk-egg mixture.

Izuku ran through the steps, wordlessly pouring the mixture into the pan once it’d been greased. Mr. Yagi watched as the child carefully waited a sustained period of time, before flipping the omelette. It came out unbroken, and soon Izuku was moving it from the pan to the plate and rolling it carefully up with chopsticks. The finished result was an omelette virtually identical to the one sitting beside it. Izuku looked between the two carefully before turning to Mr. Yagi. Though he didn’t say it, there was a clear craving for approval, an anxious tick to Izuku’s hands.
“That’s alright? I know the seasonings aren’t identical, but I don’t love spicy food and I thought-”

“That really is a powerful Quirk you have.” Mr. Yagi said, a little in awe in spite of himself.

His charge seemed embarrassed, or perhaps just surprised to be complimented. Izuku’s normally neutral expression had twisted itself into anxiety and pleasure.

“It’s not that powerful.” He mumbled, though more to himself. “I’m not very strong or fast, and even if I can see something it doesn’t mean it’s necessarily correct. It seems to rely on statistics and past experiences, and a good liar can navigate around it. It’s not flashy or cool, either.” He said the last part with a self-deprecating smile. “People for a long time thought I was Quirkless, because it wasn’t very obvious.”

“I think it’s very strong, a bit like a few heroes I know, even.” Toshi thought of Nighteye as he spoke, avoiding the topic of how their relationship had soured over time. He was a hero that many respected in his own right, and he had built that reputation by his brain as opposed to brawn. “Just because it’s not a physical Quirk, doesn’t mean it can’t be used well.”

Izuku didn’t look exactly convinced, but neither did he argue. Though he’d shown steel in times of stress, he looked awfully timid in a way that made Toshi’s heartstrings tug. The boy was clearly expecting to be ridiculed, or worse, and just for using a power that was naturally a part of him.

It gave him the inexplicable urge to comfort the boy, but was rather hopeless as to how to go about doing so. He settled for nudging the omelette towards Izuku, sitting across from him and digging in. He’d talk to Hizashi, or maybe Nemuri about how to comfort children. Hizashi had experience with siblings, and Nemuri despite her hero name had always been oddly good with them. They ate in companionable silence.

“Well, it looks like you two are already getting your day started.”

Inko Midoriya made her way into the kitchen, a smile on her face. Toshi watched as she came around first thing to hug Izuku, a gesture he leaned into like a sunflower searching for sunlight. Despite the time apart, both mother and son seemed keen on mending their relationship where they could.

“There’s coffee.” Toshi offered, which Inko helped herself to gratefully. As she sat, Toshi took a break from his own omelette to work on one for her. She seemed delighted and surprised, stuttering her way through thanks. Like mother like son, apparently. Mr. Yagi hid his smile as he started mixing ingredients.

“I was thinking of going out and getting some clothes today, as well as some of our things from the house.” Once they were all seated and eating, Inko spoke. “I imagine you’ll want clothes that aren’t from a lost and found before school starts, Izuku. I also want to get some personal items.” Izuku looked down at the oversized, navy-blue shirt he was wearing. It had a ‘It’s Always Sunny in Vegas’ logo on it. He nodded seriously.
“There’s a mall not too far from here, and I’ve been meaning to also get a few things here and there.” Toshi offered. “I’m supposed to be with you when out in public, but it’s convenient for all of us anyway.”

“It’s settled then.” Inko nodded to herself, pleased.

Izuku found himself quietly excited for the outing. He told himself it was his mom’s own enthusiasm rubbing off on him. It was just a mall, he told himself. There was no reason to feel like it was Christmas morning. He still couldn’t keep the grin entirely off of his face.

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Coltan Plaza, being relatively close to UA, was a mall that very clearly catered to young heroes. Upon arriving, Izuku had to resist the urge to blink and rub at his eyes, to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. Every store had something interesting going on, from the shiny to the modern to just plain odd.

In one corner, there was a store dedicated entirely to Hero costume designs. They were bright, a little tacky, and proudly claimed to be made of durable fabric ‘Guaranteed to last a hero career!’. In another, there were gadgets and machinery that probably required a license to buy. They were metallic and shiny, some floating or spinning or blinking with multicoloured lights. Izuku didn’t know what any of them did, but they caught his attention and held it. Art and functionality in one seemed to be the trend. All of this was on display with some sort of pop music playing from an overhead speaker, a thudding bass promising a headache and the repeat of mindless jingles to anyone who listened for too long.

There were lots of people too, more than Izuku was truly comfortable with. When he’d been able to duck out of the League’s hideout, it’d often been at night when there were few people out and about. This was the early afternoon, and belatedly Izuku realised it was also a weekend. Most teenagers would probably be embarrassed to have their mom hold their hand in a crowded shopping mall, but Izuku couldn’t quite bring himself to mind at the moment. Inko’s thumb ran soothing circles on the back of his hand.

“If at any point you need to get some air, we can.” His mom had a mulish expression on her face, her chest puffed up as she seemed ready to defend her son from the world. Izuku had forgotten about this side of her, the part of his mom that had gotten along so well with Kacchan’s mom. Back when Inko and Mitsuki had been high schoolers, they’d apparently been almost inseparable. Oddly, her confidence made Izuku feel a little better.

“Let’s find some clothes, first.” Mr. Yagi gestured, leading the way for mother and son by virtue of being tall. People moved for them more easily, with a scarecrow leading the way.
Izuku found himself immersed in clothing racks, trying to decide what might fit him and what might look nice and what he even might like. Apparently, wandering around in a grubby hoodie and jeans wasn’t going to cut it either, because his mom was pushing all sorts of fabric into his hands and having him try each item on before buying.

His sense of fashion was apparently, terrible. Izuku fell in love with a highlighter-yellow hoodie, three different shirts which had logos on them such as Flannel, Tank-top, and T-shirt, and refused even as his mom offered to replace his bright red sneakers. They were comfortable, why would he spend money to replace them? Izuku also picked out five pairs of nondescript jeans, two pairs of pyjamas, and under some prompting, dress clothes. The last were the strangest to Izuku, who stood in front of a mirror looking everywhere but his face. His Quirk made him resort to quick, furtive glances at himself while his mom fussed a little by his side.

“It’ll be for if you need to attend a formal occasion.” His mom explained, humming to herself as she looked him up and down. “I think this will do, don’t you think?”

Izuku was dressed in a white dress-shirt, rolled up to his elbows. He’d originally pinned the cuffs to hide his scars, but found the material too uncomfortable to wear that way for long. A black tie (tied by his mom) and black waistcoat set off the green tones in his hair, making his already pale skin seem paler. It was tighter than any sort of clothes he normally wore, and the result was a plain but good-looking teen that Izuku might have seen at a nice restaurant or if he’d been older, at a bar. He fidgeted with the buttons on the waistcoat, uncertain if he should leave them open or closed.

“I think red would’ve been better for the shirt.” He muttered half to himself.

“Why?” His mom asked. Izuku caught himself before he could respond with his initial thought: that white stained easily. He saved himself from coming up with another explanation by craning his neck, looking around curiously. He couldn’t see a blonde head of hair anywhere around them.

“Where’d Mr. Yagi go?” Izuku asked, hoping to divert attention from himself. His mom looked around too, turning her head. The last time they’d seen him, Mr. Yagi had been looking at a rack of cargo pants with enough deep consideration on his face that Izuku had instantly known his fashion sense was equally terrible.

A scream broke Izuku’s growing confusion, turning it to razor-sharp focus. His head snapped to the entrance of the store, out in the main part of the mall. People were running away from a man, and it was soon clear why. His arm was transformed into a sharp, black blade, held to someone’s throat. He was yelling in a gruff snarling voice.

“No one moves or the kid gets a permanent haircut!”

In his arms was a crying child. Izuku felt his stomach drop out from under him, a rushing noise in his ears. Distantly, he felt his mom grabbing his arm, trying to get him to step back, further into safety.

“We need to get away so the heroes can do something.” Following protocol. Right. That’s what citizens did, try to make space and wait it out until someone with a strong Quirk could do something about the situation.
Izuku couldn’t tear his eyes away from the child. They had some sort of physical Quirk that gave them fish-like qualities, ears delicate and luminescent fins on either side of their head. Their hands had at some point during the attack shifted into webbed, clawed digits that were now digging fruitlessly into the villain’s blade-arm. Huge tears were making tracks along a face dotted with bioluminescent freckles. They were clearly, openly terrified.

No one was doing anything. Everyone was waiting, cowering behind clothing racks and crying or calling the police. The crowd seemed content to treat this hostage situation as impossible, waiting for luck to arrive in the form of a passing hero.

*They’d be too late.* Izuku belatedly realised. The girl was already suffocating, grip on the man’s arm beginning to slacken.

“Mom,” He spoke before he’d registered what exactly he was saying. Izuku’s voice was steady, his Quirk already taking in the space around him in the span of a blink. His mom looked at him, first with confusion, then with growing terror as Izuku grabbed a face mask out of an accessory bin. He tucked the elastic behind each ear carefully. When he spoke, it was slightly muffled. “Try to find Mr. Yagi, okay?”

“Izuku. No.” His mom’s grip on his shirt was like iron, but he still somehow managed to pry her fingers away. There was a metal stand where a clothing model would normally stand. He reached out, testing how firmly it stood in the stand. Izuku breathed a small sigh of relief when it popped out without fuss. It was no bo staff, but it was light weight enough while still packing a punch if he used it.

Izuku moved, feeling steadier than he had all day. He wasn’t going to wait, not for a hero.

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In truth, Toshinori wasn’t sure what to make of Izuku Midoriya. The boy was quiet, and it was hard to get a read on him. Though he had gone into this determined to get to know the boy better, all he had gleaned so far was that the boy loved his mother, and rarely smiled.

It was a little hard to find a niche in which Toshi might bond with the boy, as a result. He didn’t want to get in the way of Izuku’s mending bond with his real family, and though Toshi had questions about the boy’s past he firmly believed those could wait. He needed the boy to trust him if he was to help him, and Izuku had made one thing clear: he was used to being punished for having opinions. It was why Toshi didn’t comment on the bitter edge to Izuku’s words every time heroes were mentioned. It pained him to hear someone so young be so disillusioned, but Toshi saw the value in Izuku’s feelings. There was a spark that had yet to be killed off in him, a craving to see justice carried out.
UA could work with that, given time. If that will could be guided, taught kindness in a world that
had only been cruel to the boy, then Toshi would consider himself finally to be a teacher.

Still, all of this took time. What mattered first was making sure Izuku felt like he could relax. This
was why Toshi navigated his way out of the bonding experience with Inko, recognising his presence
as stressful. He was meant to watch the Midoriyas, and did take his job seriously, but Toshi knew
that mother and son needed to have moments alone. He settled for getting everyone some coffee,
ducking out of the clothing store and making his way towards the food court.

His phone was out in his hands automatically, fingers navigating the text feature. Toshi ducked in an
archway, sparing a quick glance about himself to ensure no one was looking at him.

He messaged Hizashi, knowing he’d likely be with Shouta.

*How’re you two holding up?*

There wasn’t a long wait for a reply. Toshi felt a smile tug up at the corners of his mouth as Hizashi
sent a blurry selfie of Shouta’s bedside. It was clear the nurses had been trying to bully the man into
eating Jell-O, with mixed results. Shouta looked pained, glaring into the camera with the promise of
death in this eyes.

*Holding up!! How’s the Kid?*

How indeed. Toshi fiddled around for a few minutes, searching for the right words. He settled on
keeping it simple.

*Pretty sure he hates heroes and All Might especially. But polite enough. A bit skittish, but that’s
understandable.*

*You gotta show him that Plus Ultra Positivity :) he’ll warm up soon enough.*

Always the optimist. Toshi felt a small bubble of warmth bloom in his chest amongst the anxieties.
He watched as Hizashi’s text bubble showed him typing, waiting for what his partner said next.

*Shouta says hi. He’s nagging about your health in that Shouta way he has. He’s saying make the
kid like ‘you’ if he can’t stand All Might.*

Toshi frowned a little, choosing not to respond to *that* gentle nudge. When he and Shouta had first
started navigating their relationship, Eraserhead had similar feelings about Toshi’s hero persona.
'Symbol of Peace' was a title that some admired, while others looked at with extreme criticism. In the end, Toshi still wasn’t sure that Shouta ‘liked’ All Might, per se. Rather, he understood what All Might stood for, and why such a hero was necessary. However, he still made no secret that the man he’d first gained interest in had never been the Number One Hero. It’d been Toshi himself, though he still wasn’t entirely sure why or how. If he knew, perhaps he could act a certain way, or do something to get Izuku to find him at least tolerable. Though, he had the feeling that the boy’s Quirk would make seeing through any kind of mask all too easy.

Toshi was already keeping one massive secret around a child that saw too much all the time. He doubted he could work in another unnoticed. Honesty was the best policy in this situation, but Toshi was so used to lying that being truthful was sometimes a struggle. How did you remain honest to a child that needed your help, but would reject it the moment he realised you were the hero he hated? He was two sides of the same coin, Toshinori Yagi, and All Might. One, tied to the other. He wasn’t a different person exactly when he was fighting crime, but there was a Difference. The dividing line between a broken man and a symbol for good often felt like the span of one pained breath.

He made to reply to Hizashi, intending to ask him and Shouta for their opinions on the whole troubling matter, or maybe just to brush off their worries with a joke.

Either chance was taken as a hair-raising scream rose amidst a sudden flurry of terrified movement. Toshi looked up, ears picking up where the sound came from. He felt his mouth go dry. The noise had come from the main hub of the mall, the clothing section. In the distance, he could make out a figure running towards him. Inko’s plea carried across the food court.

“Mr. Yagi! It’s Izuku! There’s a villain, and he-“

Toshi was already moving, his heart in his mouth and his phone crammed into his back pocket, forgotten.
In which Izuku fights Knife Hands McMike and gains a friend in the process.

Maybe he should’ve been afraid. Izuku had the feeling that most fifteen year olds would be, when suddenly faced with a hostage situation. He was weirdly calm, nothing in his head but what he needed to do and what needed to be done. The earlier feelings of nerves from being in a crowded mall had just faded, turning instead to a sort of white noise.

The villain noticed him pretty quickly, for obvious reasons. It wasn’t like Izuku was wearing the subtlest outfit. Dark eyes narrowed, and a sneer pulled up on the man’s face. Izuku noted a scar, running down the man’s chin and down his neck. Izuku didn’t recognise him, but that wasn’t as uncommon as with heroes. Many villains deliberately took steps to keep themselves under the radar.

“Stay back!” The villain barked, pressing his blade closer to the child’s throat.

She whimpered, trying and failing to scramble back from the man’s hold. She had strange, mismatched eyes, one calf-brown while the other was brilliant blue. Izuku thought to himself that it had something to do with her Quirk as she looked at him, hope and fear on her face.

Izuku halted at the man’s threat, but didn’t retreat. This villain seemed angry, not crazy. He wasn’t dressed like some of the weirder villains Izuku had met- no strange costumes or edgy, pointed armour. Instead what the man was wearing seemed practical, leather gloves and wrist guards and basic knee pads.

Could be reasoned with?
Izuku glanced again at the man’s Quirk, his arm having transformed into a shining obsidian knife. It was steady as it lay a hairline away from the child’s throat.

*Willing to kill. Maybe not.*

“You some kinda new hero?” The villain spat, clearly not impressed with Izuku’s guts. “You look like you only just starting riding a bike without training wheels.”

“Not a hero,” Izuku answered honestly. He tested the weight of the metal pole in his hand, knowing it wasn’t heavy enough to kill someone. That was good. He wanted to knock this guy out, not end up having another police record on him. He twirled it with one hand, trying to get a feel for its dimensions. “Call me a concerned citizen, if you want.”

The villain snarled, then to Izuku’s surprise barked out a hard laugh. The girl he flinched at the noise.

“You’re a little fool, is what you are. How old are you, kid? Fourteen? Fifteen? Go home before I turn you and the girl to shish kebab.” The villain turned, clearly more interested in getting what he came for: the cash registers of the nearby stores.

Izuku moved, the metal pole lifting over his head. He brought it down as hard as he dared, making contact with the man’s shoulder. The result was instant, the villain yelped in surprise, blade hand retracting from the girl’s throat. The moment was all Izuku needed to duck, his leg coming around in a side sweep.

The villain went down with a small surprised grunt, his eyes widening as he was thrown onto his back. He’d let go of his hostage entirely, scrambling to regain his balance. The girl took the chance to book it, and Izuku thanked whatever luck he had that she hadn’t just froze. His good fortune didn’t last long. Realising that Izuku was anticipating his movements, the villain had switched to fast and dirty punches and kicks. Izuku’s Quirk was soon a constant stream of split-second information, only just keeping up with the fight.

*Left hook. Right punch. Left, left, left. He favours his left punching arm. Eighty percent chance he’s left handed. Right, Left, Left-*

A shriek alerted him to a blur of movement in the corner of his vision. Izuku dove on instinct, narrowly avoiding a black spike that had suddenly jutted out from the floor where he’d been standing. When he looked back, the girl who’d been being held hostage had returned. She’d been the one to scream, clutching at the skirt of an older girl. The girl was on the phone, yelling something into the microphone. Her other hand was clenched in the little girl’s shirt collar.

*Sister. Calling the police.* His Quirk confirmed.

That was all he had time to absorb before a barrage of spikes moved from the ground, forcing Izuku to watch his footwork as he dodged and weaved his way along the tile ground.
“My Quirk doesn’t just apply to my body.” The villain laughed, diverting Izuku’s attention. He’d been backing him into a corner, he realised, trying to get Izuku to stand on the same type of tile as his own feet were planted on. It’d worked too. Izuku was trapped on a checkerboard design of linoleum with the villain, his back to a wall. “Whatever I’m in contact with, I can shape into spikes. But your Quirk didn’t tell you that, did it? ‘Cause you didn’t see me use it.”

His mocking words sent a cold chill sweeping over the back of Izuku’s neck. He fought back a shiver, the villain smiling at him a crooked grin. It widened slowly as he spoke, twisting the scar on his face.

“That’s right. I know who you are. The Ghost, right? The League’s missing skeleton key. Word’s been sent out about you, and the current gossip is you’ve decided to try your hand at heroism.” He tilted his head to the side, the action reptilian and thoughtful. “Seems the rumours were true, even down to your Quirk.”

Fear had begun to knot itself into Izuku’s chest, making a tangled ball he struggled to swallow past. He barely managed to move as another spike grew from the wall behind him, narrowly missing his ear. The villain cackled, his expression gleeful.

“This is going to suck for you, kid. I won’t lie. You want to know what I hate more than heroes? Fake Heroes.”

The spikes came from beneath then, forcing Izuku to jump forward to avoid them. He rolled, dodging as the villain made his arm a blade and struck towards him. It was instinct that lifted the pipe up to protect his face, the villain’s blade meeting it with a rusted shriek. Izuku was now a breath away from the villain, and starting to panic. The pipe in his hands were slick with sweat.

“What do you get out of this act?” The villain’s grey eyes were narrowed, boring into Izuku’s own. He grunted as he pressed harder, trying to break Izuku’s block. He smelled like sweat, like blood. His stare was impossible to look away from, it pinned Izuku in place like a bug against a window. “Who are you trying to fool, huh? You have more kills than I do, so where do you get off pretending you can just turn over a new leaf?” His voice lowered to a hiss, and Izuku felt like he was choking. There wasn’t enough air between them, his arms were aching with the strain. The blade was inching closer and closer to his throat. “You know what villains call you? What we call the kids Shigaraki recruits?”

Izuku knew. It didn’t stop the name from rising to the back of his mind like a large, neon sign. Its glow burned like hot coals, or maybe that was the clawing feeling at the back of his throat. “The Grim. Shigaraki’s Dogs.” Sour, hot breath washed over Izuku’s face, the villain’s eyes narrowed with hate. “My face got cleaved up because I happened to be in the same neighbourhood as your bastard of a boss on a heist night. Saw too much. He figured I needed a reminder to keep my mouth shut. If I gut you like the snake you are, maybe he’ll get a taste of what it’s like to lose something important.”

A yell tore itself from Izuku’s throat, his vision washing red. His wrists stung as he used all of his weight to throw the blade away from him. It was a hard enough push to cause the villain to stagger
back, stumbling against the fountain. He didn’t have time to recover before Izuku was on him, hitting him with blow after blow. Each one was met by his blade, shrieks and chips of paint flying from the metal pole with each strike. The ringing in Izuku’s ears drowned out everything else.

Izuku had managed to knock the villain back far enough that he was no longer touching the linoleum tile, backed up against the fountain. A scratch ran along the man’s face, bleeding sluggishly. It would leave a nasty, ugly bruise in the morning. He was panting, the laughter gone from his face, replaced open-mouthed pants of exertion. Izuku couldn’t tell if he was tired or not. His heart was rabbiting in his chest, and sweat was running down the back of his neck. His hands hurt from the recoil of the pipe, a distant sort of pain.

He wasn’t really seeing the villain in front of him. He was seeing Shigaraki, night after night briefing him on what he was supposed to do at his bidding. He was seeing Eri, small and trusting but so afraid of the world around her. He was seeing Dabi, scarred and crazy and dangerous because of a past he still didn’t know. He was seeing Toga, warped and twisted to a point where all she knew was hurting.

He was seeing Ochako, telling him that he hadn’t deserved it. He saw his mom, who had hugged him without hesitation and cried for him. He saw Mr. Yagi, sickly and strange but kind and not quick to judge him. He saw the villain in front of him, seeing his anger, his resentment and his costume that was frayed and worn down.

He saw the girl he’d rescued, crouched with her sister in the distance and afraid. Neither of them had moved, though almost everyone had run by this point. He met the girl’s gaze briefly, sliding to look behind her, towards the hallway.

His mom was running towards the centre, Mr. Yagi’s thin form behind her. The blue glint in the thin man’s eyes was brighter, crackling energy running along his limbs. His jaw was clenched tightly. Pain. His Quirk, an unknown that Izuku suddenly realised Mr. Yagi used without thought of himself, for him.

“You’re right, I don’t deserve it.” Izuku’s voice was tired, hard. The villain blinked up at him, seeming surprised at his blunt answer. “But no one deserves to be left behind. To be abandoned. And if I can stop it—” He lifted the staff up with blinding speed. The villain raised his blade, but Izuku was faster. He struck the man atop the head, where the cut was. It was enough force to knock the villain out cold, his Quirk disintegrating until his hand was just a hand. “-Then I can’t just let it happen to someone else. Someone has to help.” Izuku watched as the man collapsed, slumping against the lip of the fountain. He let the metal pole’s end rest on the ground, a thin trail of blood pooling onto the tile. He felt the knot in his throat loosen, no longer a noose to breathe around.

He wasn’t a hero. Not like All Might. Not like any hero he’d ever known about, really. He couldn’t be, but someone had to help. The villain’s words chased him, circling in his head until he thought he
might be swallowed whole.

*Shigaraki’s Dogs.*

That’s all he was. One of Shigaraki’s puppets, a piece that’d snapped itself loose from its place and was now left adrift.

It didn’t seem to matter. In the moment of silence, in which people slowly moved from cowering behind shop windows and clothing racks, a low roar began to thunder. Izuku could hardly take it in, but he realised in a vague way that it was clapping. People were coming out of their hiding places, surging around him and drowning out the shakes that were starting to itch up his arms.

The first person to touch him made Izuku flinch, until he looked down. It was the girl, having torn away from her sister’s grip. She’d made a beeline for him, wrapping his legs in a death-grip hug that threatened to bowl Izuku over. He stumbled, unsure of himself as his hands hovered over the top of her head. It’d snapped him out of his down-spiral, and now he was aware of how many people were surrounding him. It threatened to be overwhelming. The girl looked up at him with tears and snot streaking her face, the fins at the side of her head twitching with relief. This close, Izuku could see the luminescent freckles splashed across her nose. Her voice was high, and very quiet, but he could hear it clearly still.

“Th-thank you. M’ so glad you’re safe.”

Wasn’t that what *he* was supposed to say? What was the protocol for comforting random citizens?

It was a little disconcerting, to have a stranger worried about his wellbeing. Disconcerting, and flattering. Izuku felt a flush burn its way up his cheeks, only growing as the crowd started to press in around him. Everywhere it seemed people were cheering for him, patting his back or asking if he was alright. Being jostled back and forth like an ornament seemed to be how people showed their thanks. The back of his neck kept prickling, warning him to keep as many people in his line of sight as he could. Izuku struggled to keep the girl by his side, worried she’d be crushed. The adrenaline high still in his system made his own exhaustion yet to appear.

Thankfully, he and the girl were rescued quickly from the well-meaning mob. There was yelling, and rude jostling, and the sister was suddenly clearing a path. Behind her in the distance, his mom and Mr. Yagi were running towards him. The crowd parted, and Izuku felt like an awkward bystander as the girl’s sister crouched down in front of him, dragging her sister away from him and into a brutal embrace.

“Sayuri, thank *god* you’re okay. Don’t *wander* like that, you gave me a heart attack!” Sayuri readily traded her hug around Izuku’s legs for her sister’s hold, burying her face into her shoulder.

Izuku found himself looking into the grateful eyes of a stranger, the sister rising to her feet and levelling him with an even stare. This close, Izuku could see iridescent scales at her temples, bright green gems in contrast to her dark brown hair. She was tall, though she didn’t seem much older than him, though there was a gravity to her that made her seem older.
“Thank you, for saving my sister. I’m Aiko Nanase.” She held out her hand to shake, which Izuku took after a moment’s hesitation. Her grip was firm, her smile crooked and a little nervous. It took Izuku a second to realise she was expecting him to introduce himself. He stuttered his way over introductions.

“I-Izuku Midoriya.”

“Midoriya. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She cast a glance at the crowd, which were starting to part to let Mr. Yagi and Izuku’s mom through. “Are you a UA student?”

Technically? Izuku settled for technically, considering that if he said he wasn’t he’d be questioned about how he’d managed to take down a villain unaided. He nodded, and Aiko beamed. “We’ll look for you in the Sports Festival, then. I need to go call my mom, or she’s going to see this on the news and flip. Thank you, again.”

Aiko turned then towards Izuku’s mom, who was red-faced and looked ready to give him the lecture of his lifetime. Izuku winced. Okay, so maybe he had kind of just run into a dangerous situation impulsively. His mom hadn’t been the first thing on his mind. He supposed she had a right to look like that.

Mr. Yagi also had a grave expression on his face, though it was tempered with a glimmer of respect. Izuku wasn’t sure what that meant, though it made him want to scuff his shoes against the floor and look anywhere but the two guardians in his life.

Aiko thankfully intercepted them, her sister cradled on her hip as she stuck out a hand to shake at Inko.

“Your son is very brave. You should be proud of him.”

Whatever lecture his mom had been building up deflated, pink surprise colouring her cheeks at the unexpected interaction. Izuku watched as she spluttered a little, anger momentarily forgotten.

“Y-yes, well. I-I am and always h-have been. T-thank you.” Inko took the offered hand. Aiko turned towards Mr. Yagi then, lifting her sister’s hand to wave at the skeletal man.

“It’s time for us to say goodbye now, Sayuri. Oh!” She spun then, turning to Izuku. Her free hand began to dig through her pockets, revealing her phone. “What’s your number? So you can call me or text or whatever, in case the police want to reach me for a statement.”

Izuku didn’t have a cellphone, but he’d been given the apartment phone’s number. He dutifully recited it, watching Aiko carefully write it out in her contacts. She had a phone with mermaid scales on the case. He fixated on it for some reason, still a little thrown by the whole situation. Number written down, Aiko hummed a pleased note of satisfaction.

“There. I really do have to go now, but thank you again. Sayuri is… she’s my sister, y’know?” Her voice grew a little emotional. “I couldn’t find her… and then I heard her scream and… Let’s just say I don’t know what I’d have done if someone hadn’t saved her.”
It was suddenly very hard to look her in the eye. Izuku settled for flushing bright red and mumbling his way through some sort of excuse. Thankfully, Aiko only laughed kindly. If someone had told Izuku even a month ago that he’d been in this situation, being thanked for saving someone and then stuttering in front of a girl like a fifteen-year-old virgin, he’d have called them nuts. He hoped that he’d eventually stop being so thrown by everything he’d grown up knowing being turned on its head.

*Shigaraki’s Dogs.*

He shivered away from the thought. Maybe different was good, if it kept him out of the pit of anger that comment had hooked in him.

His mom was there then, and Izuku found himself swept up in a smothering hug. With it, came both praise and scolding in equal turns.

“You did so well- but also *oh my god you almost died never do that again do you hear me?* I love you. I thought I was going to watch you die I’m s-sorry-” She cut herself off with a shuddering breath, and the guilt hit Izuku like a hammer. Here was his mom, just having got her son back, and he’d run into danger at the first opportunity, in front of her no less. He accepted the embrace patiently, muttering apologies until his mom finally saw fit to let him go enough to look him over. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, I promise.” Izuku gave his mom his best smile, doing his best to make it reassuring. “He was just trying to rob the mall.” That probably wasn’t the best thing to say. His mom had a strained look on her face that she struggled to hide. She finally seemed to sigh, her shoulders heaving as she stared up at the sky as if searching for answers there might yield answers she wanted to hear.

“Though your bravery is commendable, I think what your mother is trying to say is that experienced or no, a villain is not something a child should face on their own.” Mr. Yagi, who had been oddly silent all this time, finally broke his quiet. His gaze was searching, and Izuku wondered if he had something on his face from the intensity of it. He shrugged, a little embarrassed by the attention.

“Someone had to do something.”

The skeletal man only arched an eyebrow, looking at the slumped and unconscious villain still left leaning against the fountain. There was an egg-sized lump on the man’s head, swiftly purpling.

“You do realise that students of UA aren’t supposed to use their Quirks outside of school, right?”

Izuku shrugged, making a small face. Yeah, he’d heard that one. He hadn’t really taken it very seriously, though.

“I mean, *technically,* I haven’t had a class yet.”

Mr. Yagi sighed, scratching the back of his head. His expression could only be described as patient
but a little stressed.

“We’ll wait until the police get here, if that’s alright Mrs. Midoriya. Talking to them in person about this… specific situation might prove to be the best course of action.”

Izuku’s nose wrinkled as he thought. His green eyes took on a calculating expression.

“Do we still have to pay for the clothes if I saved the store manager from being robbed?”

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The bravery to do what was necessary, in order to keep the peace.

What Toshi had been looking for in his successor, still for so long unfound, had sprouted in front of him like a weed. It wasn’t that the rest of class 1-A, or any UA student weren’t courageous. If the bearer of One For All merely had to be brave, then he’d have gladly given his power to half of the students he’d met and taught. All of them could be brave, or selfless, or even strong in the face of adversity.

What Toshi had been unable to picture for most of them, was sacrifice. His Quirk was not kind to the body, it took and took and stored all of the physical power away of its previous wielder, only to give it to the next. Though it was capable of incredible feats, the price was high.

Standing as he had been at the edge of the food court, watching in numb horror as Izuku had thrown himself up against a villain without regard for his own personal safety, Toshi had been reminded of himself at that age. It’d been a lance to his chest, how staggeringly similar he and Izuku were. So alike, that it bordered on concerning. Toshi had no interest of living through another sacrifice like Nana’s, or of sending a boy off to his death.

But that willingness to freely give, to openly enter a battle knowing that the odds were stacked, was something rare. Hostage situations so often ended badly, the villain having the odds tipped in their favour. Heroes had to play by the rules, heroes couldn’t do things that many villains did without question.

Heroes had to be selfless.

That he’d found this quality in Izuku Midoriya, a boy who by all accounts would wrinkle his nose at the title of hero, was irony at its height.

Toshi mused to himself all during the walk home, the thought an errant pebble in the bottom of his shoe.

“Someone has to help.”
God help him, the idea was as crazy. Toshi had the sinking feeling he’d like it more and more, the longer the boy and his mother lived with him. If any of his coworkers, his loved ones, knew what he was considering…

Gran Torino might actually get a laugh out of it, if he didn’t hit Toshi across the back of the head for the concept.

One thing was for certain, the boy as it stood would never accept All Might’s help or gifts.

It would be a matter he’d have to consider carefully. His mind had never been one for letting a thought go, and it rooted itself in the back of Toshi’s mind, blooming in secret. So he liked the boy. Sue him. It was hard not to like someone who looked at him like he hung the moon, all just for buying him an ice cream cone with sprinkles on top.
**Learning Curve**

Chapter Summary

In which Izuku learns that high school has a steep learning curve when you've been a trained assassin instead of a student all your life.

Chapter Notes

:) so some of you guessed one of the big issues Izuku's going to face in school in the comments. For those that hadn't, we start addressing the practical implications of receiving no real formal education.

Thank you as always for the kind kudos and comments! I hope if you have a long weekend like I do you enjoyed it~

“I don’t think I can do this.”

Izuku fiddled with his tie for the fiftieth time. The stupid thing refused to lie flat, and every time his mom fixed it his nervous fingers found their way back to his throat. It stuck out, as if to point out how ill-fitting the entire wardrobe was.

Not that the uniform UA had sent to him fit, but it still felt like a poorly made costume to Izuku. He was used to being able to move, and was generally very bitter about being made to wear dress pants instead of jeans or sweats. Hoodies and sweaters had been replaced with a shirt and blazer, the buttons cold and shiny and alien.

He did like how it was long-sleeved, and how it hid the scars zig-zagging their way along his arms. The pants were stiff and scratchy, he thought for how much they cost they should be comfier. The school also had no problem with him keeping his shoes, which Izuku continued to cling to as a source of familiarity in a sea of new and different.

Inko tutted from the living room, but she didn’t offer much comfort. Like a sky devoid of stars, the platitude felt empty. She’d been stress-cleaning all morning. The weekend event had shaken her, and she seemed reluctant to let Izuku out of her sight. It was probably for the best that Mr. Yagi had been called into work early- because she’d taken to rearranging his kitchen. Izuku had watched his mom compare mugs and glasses, setting them on a cupboard shelf only to return a few minutes later to switch them around. This happened about fifteen separate times, to the point where watching the
ritual made him even more stressed than he already was. They were sending each other into a bit of a feedback loop, and neither of the Midoriyas had ever been very good at calming down.

“Your handkerchief? Do you have your handkerchief?”

Izuku checked his back pocket, fishing out the handkerchief his mom had given him that morning. She sighed in relief, reaching up and fussing with the curly mop that was his hairstyle. Her anxious fingers drummed a rhythm along his scalp.

“You should probably get a haircut, if just to even out the ends.” The thought of scissors near his neck made Izuku’s skin crawl. He settled for a quick, nervous smile, and diverted the conversation.

“This is your last chance to barricade the doors. I won’t fight you. I could become a hermit, living off of the land.”

His mom snorted, some of her anxiety melting away. She looked a little teary-eyed, but she did her best to match his smile.

“What land? We’re in an apartment.”

“I’ll beg from the neighbours. Or just break in. Most of them don’t reinforce the hinges of their doors, I’m willing to bet.”

“No breaking in to people’s homes.” His mom tutted. She smoothed out his tie one more time. Both of them knew it would be back to being crooked by the end of the day.

After a long, drawn out silence, Inko sighed. She tucked her hands into her skirt, rocking back on her heels. A faraway look had entered her eyes.

“This will be good for you. I can’t keep you here, not forever. If I did that, I don’t think I could let you go.” She sounded unhappy, and Izuku knew how much it took it out of his mom to admit that much. She seemed small in that moment, her shoulders hunched against an invisible weight. Izuku wished he could take that away from her, the fear she felt when he wasn’t in her sight.

But that was unfair, because she couldn’t take away the haunted, hunted look on his face. Or the headaches from his Quirk. The first time he’d have a nightmare, and Izuku knew it was coming soon enough, he knew his mom would feel the exact same emotion he was feeling.

“I’ll call you when Mr. Yagi comes to pick me up after school.” It was an olive branch; one his mom took with a small nod and a watery smile.

“If it’s at any point too much for you, just call me. Okay? I’ll come and get you. O-Or one of the teachers will, and I-I’ll find a way-”

“I’ll be alright.” Izuku interrupted, not unkindly. Tears were definitely on the horizon, not necessarily just for his mom. She took his hands in her own, smaller ones. Points of anchoring.
“I know.” Izuku felt the pressure of her hands squeezing his own, before letting him go. She took in a deep breath, dashing the tears from her face with the back of one hand. Izuku watched, his chest tight with affection as his mom forced herself to straighten with a decisive nod. When she smiled, it was wide and cheerful.

“How a good day at school!”

“I will!”

Izuku opened the door, stepping forward into whatever this day would hold.

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UA was different in daylight, during a school morning with no emergency crisis. There was life to it that Izuku hadn’t been able to see due to his injuries, or due to his trying to escape. He’d spent most of the aftermath of USJ in a hospital bed, and so was unfamiliar with the grounds. There were students everywhere, shuffling this way and that towards class. Many sported colourful physical characteristics, from feathers to scales to stone. They all wore the school uniform, some with modifications to accommodate their Quirk.

Izuku couldn’t help but gawk a little at them, his hands gripping the straps of his bag tightly. The place was huge, far larger than he might’ve guessed, and more students than he’d realised called it home. It reeked of old money, from the shining arch at the entryway to the distant sounds of swimming pools and tennis courts. He felt like he stuck out like a sore thumb, a peasant amongst the rich, playing in their clothes. The students he passed sported crisp, clean uniforms, their hair done up in fancy fashions or expensive jewellery peeking out from sleeves and collars and ears. Izuku decided the best thing to do would be to keep his head down, and ask as little directions as possible. Like they might be able to sniff out the outsider that’d made his way into their ranks. He wandered for a bit, a little lost and a little disoriented. Until he saw a familiar head of hair, Izuku wasn’t about to let his guard down.

Ochako’s short, brown bob cut could’ve made Izuku cry with relief. She was standing a few feet from the entrance to the school, talking animatedly to another person Izuku found he recognized. This recognition came with a wave of uncertainty. The last time Izuku had met Iida he’d been in the midst of a panic attack, and the time before he’d been trying to kill him. It probably wasn’t he best first impression, all in all.

Iida was leaning on a set of crutches, and though the injury looked better than it had when Izuku had last seen it, the sight was sobering. There was no guarantee, and frankly no reason, that Iida or anyone else in 1-A would have warm feelings towards him. In fact, Izuku was pretty certain that if the roles were reversed, he’d dislike him too. The thought made his excitement dim, his footsteps slow. His fingers wrapped themselves tightly in his backpack straps, his Quirk on guard. There was supposed to be no fighting on school grounds, but Izuku wasn’t sure that’d stop him if he were in
He could just turn around now. Nothing said he had to meet people before class. But he didn’t know where class was, and the thought of turning up late on top of being new was sending Izuku’s stomach into flip flops. Too late, Ochako happened to glance up and notice him. Her entire face broke out into a wide smile, and she lifted her hand to wave at him animatedly. Iida turned at the motion, and Izuku took in the carefully composed blankness of his face and winced inside.

_OK, that was fair._ It stung a bit, but he’d expected that much. You didn’t just break someone’s leg then immediately become friends, though he wished that was how it was done. He tentatively waved back, approaching when Ochako gestured him over.

“It’s so good to see you! I’m so glad you’re alright, we hadn’t heard anything other than that we were getting a new student in our class today.” She was really good at making Izuku feel like a stuttering fifteen-year-old, and it was more apparent than usual. Something about having her, anyone’s, undivided attention caught him and made him feel impossibly flustered. Was she always made of sugar and sunshine? Did people like this actually exist?

“M-Mr Nedzu thought it’d be a good cover, and a way to get my education up to standard.”

Ochako nodded, humming in agreement with the arrangement.

“It makes sense. I’m so happy that you’re going to be in our class! I can’t wait to introduce you to the class.”

Iida came forward then, stiffly holding out one hand to shake. Everything about him in fact, was a little robotic. Izuku wasn’t sure if that was a personality trait, or his dislike being made known. Perhaps it was both.

“Iida Tenya. I don’t believe we met on the best terms last time.”

Izuku swallowed, taking the offered hand.

“Izuku Midoriya. Sorry I tried to kill you, last time.” He cracked a small smile, pleased when Iida offered one in kind after a surprised huff of laughter.

“Likewise.” And like that, the tense atmosphere thawed as both of them ended up chuckling at the ridiculousness of all this.

Ochako was pressing her fingertips together, a delighted smile on her face.

“It’s so nice to have you two finally meet. Oh! And you need to meet Tsuyu, and Momo, and Kirishima will probably think you’re super cool since you know how to fight…” She continued to chatter animatedly, filling the silence comfortably as she and Iida led Izuku to class. Silently, he offered thanks to any deity that might be watching that he was being cut a break. Ochako’s optimism was putting Izuku’s persistent anxieties on the backburner in favour of learning about his new classmates.
Izuku learned that class 1-A was made up of a good mix of Quirks, many physical but a few on the mental field as well. Kacchan of all people had placed first in the entrance exam, a fact that somehow didn’t really surprise Izuku. As children, he’d never could stand losing.

Ochako looked at him knowingly, as if she could read the unsaid in the lines of his face. She seemed satisfied, like Izuku’s expression confirmed something for her.

“So he’s always been like that, then.”

“Yeah. Kacchan’s… He’s always been an acquired taste.”

“Perhaps since you are childhood friends, you might convince him to keep his feet off of the school desk.” Iida seemed excited by the idea, and Izuku got the impression that order in things brought him great joy. Another thing he squirmed away, in the mental list of facts about these people he’d be in class with from now on. He didn’t tell Iida that trying to convince Kacchan to do anything he didn’t want to was like trying to beg a dead twig to turn into a tree.

Izuku followed behind Iida and Ochako, content to listen to the two of them debate whether or not Kacchan would win in a fight against a pro hero, and if his attitude made him good for media coverage. It gave him the opportunity to let his Quirk settle, taking in the milling students and the inside of UA and carefully cataloguing what he could for later. It greedily drank in the information like a sponge, hungry for new stimulus so that Izuku had to force himself not to stand and gawk like an idiot.

There were three exits within short distance from their classroom. Two of the hallways also lead to the cafeteria, where another exit probably was. He liked that, having multiple escape routes. Not that he needed those any more, but still. Izuku estimated offhand that in an emergency situation, He’d be able to get outside at around fifteen minutes. Twenty, if there was a fire. That also meant that there were around four possible entrances someone could break into if they made it past the school’s security. Not too bad, all things considered.

The classroom door Ochako led him to was made big and tall, probably for accessibility. Izuku hadn’t even thought about it, but it made sense in case there was a student with a physical Quirk that made them unable to use typical doorways. Inside the class itself, Izuku found several faces turning towards him. Conversations cut off, and he found himself under a lens as he suddenly stood in front of a silent crowd of teenagers.

…God.

Why had he thought this was a good idea?

Sweat began to collect at the back of his neck, his knees locking in place as he made eye contact with a little over a dozen strange teenagers. Hero, teenagers. People who’d decided they wanted to make a career out of taking down people like him. Like Shigaraki.

Maybe he could just slink out now, escape the inevitable questioning by sinking through the floor and disappearing out the nearest window-
“Everyone, this is Izuku Midoriya. He’s my friend.” Ochako interrupted his panicked mental gymnastics with a simple sentence. To Izuku, it created only more questions.

_Friend._

He was her friend?

She put her hand on his shoulder, as if solidifying the statement for all to say. If Izuku thought he was dying before, then he was mistaken. _This_ was dying, and possibly in a good way. He was basically made of wet paper, in that moment. “He’s um. The ‘exchange student’ all of you have heard about.” Her bristling, like an angry bear preparing to protect her cub, was both adorable and terrifying.

UA had decided that in order to keep him out of the public eye, Izuku needed some sort of alibi. Class 1-A had been instructed that they were to conveniently ‘forget’ that he had only attacked them a few days ago, and welcome the new exchange student ‘Izuku Midoriya’ to their class for the foreseeable future. The students that hadn’t met him directly hadn’t been told of his involvement, given the cover story in the hopes that it would pass under the radar in the news in light of the recent school attacks.

Izuku saw a few looks being exchanged between students, more or less from those that had met him before. Side eyes and shifting feet spoke what words out loud didn’t. He resisted the urge to fidget under the weight of their glances. Yaoyozuru had her lips pressed tightly into a thin line, Jirou looking away and to the floor. Though Izuku didn’t know them, he felt their discomfort with the situation.

He was uncomfortable too, but he was used to being uncomfortable.

_They’d_ been ordered to lie, and lies didn’t sit well in kids that dreamed of being heroes. He could understand it, he told himself. There was no reason to feel like he was the last to be picked in a gym game.

Luckily, Ochako didn’t seem too keen on letting them stare in silence for long. Grabbing his hand, she pulled Izuku forward, guiding him to an empty seat. He went willingly, too thrown at being so casually touched to offer much protest.

Her familiarity seemed to put the class at ease, at least a little. Though it was slow, Izuku found his desk only just a few moments ago claimed, bracketed on either side by strangers. One was a pink-skinned girl, the one Izuku’s files had read had an acid Quirk. Her bubblegum-pink hair made a halo about her smiling face, lit fluorescent by the classroom lights. The other was a kid with a lightning bolt streaking black through blonde hair, a crooked grin on his face. Izuku realised with a jolt that it was the kid Toga had bitten, the corner of a bandage peeking out at his collarbone.
Pink-skinned girl stuck out a hand to shake, clearly unafraid of starting conversation. She had odd eyes, black with no white and gold irises. She introduced herself as Mina Ashido. She exuded confidence, the loud kind that made people stop and look.

“We were told you lived in Osaka, but grew up here originally. Welcome to UA!” She beamed, practically radiating the intense energy of the easily distracted. “You don’t have an accent, do you? Or is that rude to ask? I guess it might be rude to ask—”

“Stop hazing him, Mina. Sorry for her. She gets excited by new faces.” The electric-boy interrupted, shooting an exasperated glance at his friend. He jerked a thumb towards himself, also holding out a hand for Izuku to take. “Denki Kaminari. It’s nice to meet you.”

Ashido pouted, but it soon disappeared when Izuku smiled back politely at both of them. He kind of liked her energy, in truth. It was a lot, but it was positive, and like Ochako helped rid him of some of his nerves. Actually, he thought that he liked both of them. He’d never been just casually asked questions before, with no ulterior motive hidden underneath.

“It’s nice to meet you both. No, I don’t have an accent. I grew up with my mom, and she grew up here, so I never really picked it up I guess.” He scratched the back of his head, resisting the urge to hide behind the mess of curly safety his hair gave him.

Ashido sighed, a wistful look on her face. She propped her head up on her elbows, leaning half on top of Izuku’s desk with instant familiarity. He got the feeling she didn’t have much in way of a sense of fear.

“Damn. Here I was hoping for something new. No offence but like, when a transfer student shows up right after some big fiasco in a movie, it’s an opportunity for some sort of Shoujo manga love interest.”

He quirked an eyebrow, his mouth running away from him before he could think his words through.

“Sorry to disappoint that badly. Though something tells me that if a girl with pink hair started dating a boy with green hair, we’d start being seen as a colour palette.” Then, Izuku turned bright red, realizing what he just said. Mina however looked surprised, then cackled. She struck the desk with an open hand, enjoying as Izuku stuttered and fumbled through his embarrassment. “I-I m-mean, not presuming anything. T-that is—”

“Oh. He’s going to be fun, Denki. Isn’t he going to be fun? He gets worked up like Katsuki, but not even in a mad way!” She smiled wickedly at her friend, and Izuku’s Quirk slid a puzzle piece into place for him. Mischievous.

Oh no.

He sank into his chair, silently looking over Ashido’s shoulder to where Ochako was sitting. She had her hand cupped over her mouth, clearly trying not to laugh herself. Some help there.

The mention of Kacchan’s name spoken so informally also caught Izuku’s attention. He’d half forgotten that Kacchan was in this class, or perhaps he had rather carefully not thought about it. For Kacchan, or at least the person he remembered Kacchan being, he was being awfully quiet. Izuku
spotted blonde spikes sitting over in the corner, his back deliberately turned towards Ashido’s teasing. Kacchan it seemed, hadn’t even bothered to look in their direction. His head was cradled in one hand, his elbow propped on his desk. He must have heard Ashido’s teasing, but he seemed to deliberately ignore it in favour of doodling into a notebook with a mechanical pencil. His shoulders were hunched in a way that seemed determined to close off the rest of the world around him.

Izuku wasn’t sure how that made him feel, but he supposed he shouldn’t have hoped for much. Still, he had to swallow past a small lump that had twisted itself into his throat. Kacchan had done his part, told the authorities who he was. He’d stood up for him, advocated for his right to a chance. Izuku knew this from hushed phone calls between Inko and Mitsuki, held when he was meant to be in bed and asleep. He supposed that in a sense, they were even, and so had no connection to each other anymore. Even as children, Izuku had been very aware that they were fundamentally different people. Perhaps the time had separated that connection, severed the tenuous threads that had been so weirdly snarled together when they were young for good.

Thankfully, Ashido didn’t have the chance to torment Izuku further, and so Izuku couldn’t linger on the concept of growing up and change. The door slid open, and Izuku and the rest of his class turned to see Eraserhead. Who was still bandaged head to toe. Who didn’t seem to able to see very clearly.

Right.

Okay.

Izuku was beginning to get a sense of why Recovery Girl seemed so put-upon, when he’d been under her care.

“All right, everyone sit down. I have a few announcements to make for homeroom today.”
Obediently, everyone took their seats, chairs scraping in a brief cacophony. Eraserhead made his way to the front of the class, dark eyes peering out from under bandages. His arms were still in casts. Izuku wondered if he’d just walked out of the infirmary when nobody was looking. “first off, for the sake of our new student, I’m going to introduce myself. My name is Aizawa, and I’m your homeroom teacher. Welcome to UA. Midoriya, can you please come up to the front of the class and introduce yourself and speak a little about your Quirk?”

It wasn’t that he hadn’t expected that he’d have to give some sort of introduction. Izuku just hadn’t thought he’d have to talk about the nature of his Quirk to people so soon. He swallowed, feeling a tightness in his chest as he stood and made his way to the front of the class. His feet felt like lead, and the weight of many eyes on him. Izuku half debated if rolling out the nearest window would be seen as being a ‘problematic’ student. Facing the class, Izuku was once again hit by just how many students were in the class, all of various sizes and shapes and Quirks. They all looked at him, some knowingly, others with a vague sort of curiosity. All except Kacchan, who was decidedly not looking at him but at the end of his desk with a very focused sort of interest.

Ochako shot him a quick, supportive smile.

Izuku offered a wobbly one in return.
“H-hello. My name’s Izuku Midoriya, and I’m a transfer student. I look forward to getting to know all of you.” That sounded okay, right? Izuku didn’t think anyone looked too put off by him yet. He took a deep breath, trying to steady his trembling nerves. He’d worked on this in his room, describing what it was he did. He had to get it right, he didn’t want anyone to think he was… that he was frightening, or threatening. “I-I’m. My Quirk is a bit difficult to describe, but. I’m observant. My eyes pick up on very little visual clues, and my mind fills in the gaps based off of that information. A-a-as far as I can tell, it doesn’t really um. Switch off. So. I’m sorry if sometimes I accidentally read you and say something I wasn’t supposed to know. Please, bear with me.” He bowed then, because that’s what he used to do in kindergarten, when meeting new people. When he lifted his head, his gaze briefly met a pair of familiar, red eyes. Kacchan’s gaze flicked back to the floor, his expression carefully smoothed free of any emotion.

Izuku took his seat, feeling something sinking in the pit of his stomach. He couldn’t even really explain why, but the feeling didn’t leave him even as Aizawa-Sensei instructed the class to open their notebooks, and write what he was saying down.

Izuku stared at his blank notebook, looking at the careful scrawl across the classroom chalk board. His pen sat by his hand, untouched.

The swelling feeling in the pit of his stomach grew, but Izuku kept his silence. He felt very stupid, for not realizing this issue sooner. Stupid, and embarrassed as he saw everyone take up the work diligently and without pause.

You couldn’t take notes, if you didn’t know how to write.

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“One more thing, before we get into some training practice. I want to announce that the UA Sports Festival is coming up soon. The school has decided not to cancel it, in order to show a strong front in the face of the recent villain attacks.”

This caused the class to erupt in excited chatter, though Izuku only had a vague understanding of why. He’d heard of the Sports Festival in passing, but had never really understood what it was about. As Aizawa-Sensei explained the concept, he began to understand the appeal. It was like a sparring match, but for Quirks and promising heroes. The chance to show off your skillset and attract the attention of possible sponsors was an appealing, shiny gem. It was clear that in his feelings, Izuku wasn’t alone. Around him, the other kids of 1-A begun to hum with excitement, chattering amongst themselves over the appeal such a competition gave. In a sense despite its serious nature, it was a relief. Like a sports day, or a group activity, it offered an outlet for what they’d been through. Children needed to play, and it was very clear to Izuku suddenly that everyone viewed this as a very high stakes, very interesting game.
Izuku gave a considering look towards Aizawa-sensei, when the man wasn’t looking of course. It was suddenly clear why he didn’t seem too fussed about such an event being carried out despite the recent attacks.

“Midoriya,” The teacher spoke to him directly then, suddenly meeting Izuku’s eyes. The act startled him a little, because Izuku was used to being able to observe people without them picking up on his stare. “You have the choice to sit out the festival this year, should you desire. Given your situation, it wouldn’t be fair to expect you to enter a competition without testing first your education level and training level. Speaking of which, I’ll have you stay after classes today to have you write a few tests.”

The unspoken was clear: Given the public feel to the Sports Festival, Izuku risked his face being plastered all over national television by participating.

There was a muttered objection, from a boy with purple, grape-like orbs on his head. He was not so quietly nudged into silence by a frowning student with a tail. Izuku weighed the option in his mind, mulling the idea over. The smart move would be to be quiet, lay low until he could separate himself enough from the League that being on television wouldn’t be a risk.

Another voice inside him pouted, because it was only nine thirty AM and he was already feeling restless. He’d forgotten what it was like to sit in a desk, and his leg was already starting to jiggle up and down as his Quirk fussed with being in one room for this long with the same people. It wanted to pin itself on a person, read what he could until he couldn’t, and mutter and tinker away at possible weaknesses and personality traits until Izuku would also inevitably start muttering. Which he didn’t want to do in class, for obvious reasons.

More learning curves.

He bit his lip in silent frustration, and forced his head down at his desk. If he closed his eyes, the stimulus stopped just enough that he could listen to what the teacher was saying. Izuku did just this, unaware of Aizawa-Sensei’s considering look and his new classmates darting him furtive glances between their notes.

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The training arena was effectively a giant gymnasium, with Quirk-related materials that could be used as buffers or supports for exercise. Izuku stepped outside to feel the breeze ruffle his hair, looking at the race track and clean-cut lawn with a bit of awe. There were training weights, and various pieces of exercise equipment that looked expensive. In the centre, there was a sort of boxing ring with a white circle crisply painted around it. Izuku had a feeling this would be a “who could stay in the ring the longest” sort of deal pretty quickly.

Training brought its own issues, though not in the way that Izuku thought it would. He didn’t have a
hero costume yet, and so had been given a pair of UA-approved gym clothes. The fabric felt weird, very elastic and breathable in a way that spoke of money and forethought. The sleeves ended mid-wrist though, and Izuku stepped a little self-consciously into the training arena with the rest of the group, very much aware of his scars.

His classmate’s costumes ranged from the cool, to flashy, to just plain weird. Izuku supposed that most fifteen year olds really shouldn’t be expected to design something like a super hero costume, at least not with a virtually limitless budget. The amount of glitter, spandex and frankly impractical armour made his head spin. He hoped everyone got a chance to redesign their costumes each year, for everyone’s sake.

“All right, I’m going to pair each of you off with another classmate. I’m right now interested in your sparring skills. Hand to hand combat, with some Quirk use but limited. This is a match, not a fight to the death.” Aizawa-sensei directed his gaze to Katsuki as he spoke, stern. Kacchan’s met him with an ugly scowl.

*Hasn’t changed that much, then.* Izuku hid a small smile. “I’ll pair you off with someone I think will be a challenge for you. Midoriya, your bo staff was sent into the tech department. It’s been cleaned and made… suitable, for training purposes.”

Izuku perked up. He hadn’t expected to see his bo staff again, much less have it kept for him. Aizawa-Sensei gestured to a rack by the edge of the training arena, where sure enough his bo staff was. It gleamed in the afternoon sun, and Izuku ran to grab it and hold it reverently. He could see what the changes were almost immediately, but wasn’t particularly surprised. Normally, his staff had three settings: Stun, Incapaciate, and Kill. The first was still there, but the dial had been carefully remade, so that instead of the last two other features had been added. One was titled *Flashbang*, the other *Pulse*. Both had a tiny smiley face next to their descriptors. Informative.

“Dude, you can use a staff?”

The voice wasn’t familiar, but the friendly tone caught Izuku’s attention. He lifted his head, finding himself face to face with a kid who had shockingly bright red hair. Izuku knew him, though only in appearance: Kirishima Eijirou. The one that had a hardening-type Quirk. He’d kept to himself until now, glued firmly to Kacchan’s side (who had been avoiding Izuku like a plague). His excitement seemed to have driven him to speak. His face was lit up, and when he smiled Izuku saw his teeth were shark-like and pointed.

“My uh, Quirk isn’t very physically strong, so my last school taught me how to use one.” The lie came to Izuku easily, and he felt a little pleased at how impressed Kirishima obviously was. He’d been one of the people who’d been there during Toga’s attack- he seemed relieved that Izuku had thought of an alibi already to use.

“Lucky. We haven’t had much weapon’s training yet, though my Quirk lets me turn my body into a sort of weapon I guess. Are you any good with it?”
Izuku considered the question carefully, thinking back to his own training. Or well, what training was like when your trainer was someone like Magne and Spinner. He settled on a modest answer.

“Good as I need to be. The voltage attached to it doesn’t hurt either.” Kirishima laughed, and the sound was warm and made Izuku feel a little more comfortable in the crowd of people around them. He wasn’t afraid of him, even though he knew who Izuku was.

“I look forward to watching your match then, if we don’t get matched up.”

They don’t get matched up in the end, but that’s alright. In truth, it wouldn’t make sense to pit Kirishima against him, their Quirks didn’t really match well. Aizawa-Sensei pointed instead to a girl with green hair, tied back in an elaborate bow. Izuku recognised her, from the Toga fight too. The Frog-girl.

“Tsuyu, Midoriya. You’ll be paired up together.”
Chapter Summary

Siri Voice: "It was then that Shouto realized that he was Gay. So Goddamn Gay for Izuku Midoriya."

Chapter Notes

whoo boy, this chapter was a bitch for whatever reason to edit haha. I think it turned out alright, tho!

Introducing Best Frog and Freezerburn a bit, as well as a special visit from a local purple-haired goblin ;) My boi.

I hope you enjoy the read! also HOLY SHIT THIS FIC HAS GOTTEN SO MUCH ATTENTION OVER THE PAST TWO WEEKS WELCOME NEW READERS. I lov u all.

ALSO: Spinner, and Magne, two villain favs of mine :)

Shouto at first didn’t really pay much attention to the new transfer student in their class. Maybe that was his own fault. He’d been too preoccupied with getting to school, with tip-toeing his way out of the house so as not to wake up his siblings. He was focused on the ache of hunger in his stomach, having slept too long to remember breakfast first thing in the morning, or on not drawing attention to the smarting red burn hidden in the crook of his elbow.

Izuku Midoriya escaped his interest or attention in homeroom, was so far down his list of things to worry about that in truth Shouto wasn’t even sure what the kid’s Quirk was. He was just another face, though one that the majority of the class seemed interested in.

The Sports Festival announcement didn’t come as news to him, only a repetition of what his father had been saying for a few weeks now. It was a time to represent himself as a hero to the world, and the hunger to prove himself outside his father’s legacy itched in him like ants on his skin. This was his chance, his out. If he could make someone notice him at the Sports Festival, then he wouldn’t need to continue a hero’s career under Endeavour. Shouto ached for a way to detach himself from his father’s shadow.
So Izuku Midoriya passed under his radar, only another odd, pale kid he’d have to tolerate until he graduated.

That was until training practice.

Shouto was paired with Tokoyami, both of them having abilities that could act as long range and short range weapons. However, Midoriya and Tsuyu had been picked first to start the match. The class collectively watched, the entire show a sort of informal boxing ring in which they all delighted in taking bets as to who would come out on top. At the start, most people seemed to have their money staked on Tsuyu. The Frog-Girl was stretching her arms at one end of the ring, a look of anticipation on her otherwise neutral face.

It made sense, given that everyone was familiar with her abilities, and didn’t know very much about Midoriya at all. Shouto certainly would have put his money on her, if he wasn’t too busy trying to figure out how to go about beating Tokoyami in his own eventual match. This pale, nervous-looking new kid wasn’t going to beat Tsuyu in a physical fight. He looked like he might jump at his own shadow.

The only uncertain one of the group kept their silence. Yaoyozuru had her lips pressed into a thin line, her arms crossed over the gap in the front of her costume. She kept whispering to Jirou, who was tucked by her side. Shouto frowned to himself. He wondered what made her look this nervous over a training match.

If anyone had been paying attention to Bakugou, they’d have noticed the sudden laser-sharp focus he gave the ring. His hands tightened around his upper arms, scowl deepening into something complex to read.

The fight from the start didn’t begin how anyone thought it would, in truth. Aizawa-Sensei stood to the side, lifted a hand and called a start to the match. His bored expression gave no hint as to whose side he’d take in this fight.

Tsuyu leapt forward. Her tongue extended in a fast, whiplash motion, too fast for normal eyes to see. Yet Midoriya was moving, suddenly incredibly light on his feet as he spun about face, the staff he’d brought into the arena extending behind him.

Tsuyu made a grab for it, and in a moment Shouto realised the mistake. A trap, set in a split-second decision. Her tongue wrapped around the handle, probably intending to yank it out of Midoriya’s grasp.

Shouto watched in disbelief as Tsuyu suddenly let out a startled yell, her tongue retracting. There was a splotchy pink burn on her tongue, no worse than carpet rash, before it disappeared back into her mouth. She rubbed a hand over her cheek, wincing.
Midoriya stood holding the staff in a block stance, shooting her an apologetic look. He twirled the staff so it stood back at his side, the end pointing downwards.

“It’s electrified.”

A hiss of drawn breath was taken somewhere from Shouto’s left. He glanced out of the corner of his eye. Iida was wincing, looking pale. Ochako patted his arm soothingly.

Too quick to process that, the two were moving again.

Midoriya was fast. Faster than he should have been. Not inhuman, but the sort of speed that came with being certain of where he was going without having to look. Shouto watched in growing disbelief as Midoriya made a quick spin, the staff flipping over one arm to another, striking for Tsuyu’s head with brutal force.

She blocked the strike by ducking low at the last second, her foot sweeping out to pull Midoriya’s feet out from under him. It took a lot of muscle to jump as far as she could, the air was displaced by the pressure of her kick. Midoriya winced at the strike, but used the movement to tuck and roll. He came out on his feet, staff already lashing out again.

This time, it came for Tsuyu’s middle, and made contact with a sharp ‘thwack’ that made most of the class grimace. The breath came out of Tsuyu sharply, and she didn’t have time to catch it again before Midoriya’s foot connected solidly with her middle.

She was sent flying, to everyone’s disbelief. Not as far as Midoriya probably would have liked, but far enough that her heel touched the inside edge of the white ring. Tsuyu managed to grab one of the ropes surrounding the boxing arena, slowing down her momentum. A trickle of sweat was beading from her forehead, her normally placid expression now fixed in concentration.

Midoriya’s own expression wasn’t blank either. His brows were pinched together in concentration, his movements on guard. His eyes hadn’t left her face, but he kept glancing last-minute at the position of her arms and legs, checking for minute movement.

What had been his Quirk? Some sort of analysis? Shouto could recall that much at least. The genius of Aizawa-Sensei’s matching came to him slowly, and he realised that this pairing was a test of their own teacher’s design. Shouto didn’t know much about Midoriya, but if he based his observations off of facial cues, then Tsuyu was a difficult person to read. Her face naturally fell into neutrality, partly due to her Quirk and partly due to her level head. In contrast, Midoriya’s weapon made it hard for her to use her normal method of attack- her tongue or hand to hand combat. It was a match made in hell in the real world, heaven for teaching purposes.

It seemed he wasn’t the only one to pick up on why this match had been selected, because Uraraka was shifting impatiently from foot to foot. Her own expression was pinched, torn between who she
wanted to win. She kept pressing her fingertips together, on and off.

“This is going to be tight.” Kirishima muttered, to which Bakugou merely made a face, uncharacteristically quiet.

“I almost don’t want to watch, he’s really not holding back, is he?” Sero was sympathy-sweating, a little put off by the whole battle.

He was right. Midoriya seemed to treat matches like real fights, the sweat rolling down the back of his neck as he struck again and again, meeting Tsuyu’s blocking with his own speed. She was more flexible, but he was stronger, and it was only a matter of who made a mistake first. There was a serious, deadly precision to Midoriya’s strikes, as if he were calculating the weight behind each blow before making it. He almost didn’t seem to be blinking, green eyes laser-focused on their target.

Shouto felt something in his chest begin to tighten, an uneasy choking feeling. Until now, his main competitors had been Bakugou, and possibly Yaoyozuru. Both he’d been confident were low enough on his father’s radar, and deep enough in their own flaws, that he’d be able to defeat them in a fight. These were statistics, running the numbers in his own head. He had no choice but to win, and unlike Bakugou it wasn’t just his pride that told him that. There were real, terrible consequences to him failing. He’d had no fear of those consequences, until now. A moment ago, he’d guessed with confidence that Tsuyu would be the winner of this match.

Watching Midoriya, Shouto felt less and less sure about his own gut instincts, and that wasn’t a good sign. They were what protected him, what had given him a chance at surviving. He’d gotten used to cold reading people, putting them into neat little categories. This was an outlier, and it was looking like he’d miscalculated badly.

Then, the chips began to slide in favour for the other side. Something in Midoriya’s expression shifted, turning uncertain. His strikes lessened in their force, his gaze flicking towards Bakugou. Shouto wasn’t sure what expression Midoriya had noticed on the boy’s face, but whatever it was distracted him in a split-second.

It was all that was needed.

Tsuyu leapt, and though her footing made her appear to be going for Midoriya’s right side, she last-second used her tongue to swivel herself mid-air. Her punch connected, Midoriya lifting his staff too late. His chin snapped to the side, body twisting with a teeth-aching motion. He was launched across the ring with the force of the impact, and Tsuyu wasted to time. Her foot connected next, forcing him to drop his staff as it struck Midoriya squarely in the ribs.

Collectively, the class of 1-A all winced. Most of them by this point had been on the receiving end of such a kick. Midoriya went flying, a surprised huff of air leaving his lips as he slid on his back to the edge of the ring. The silence that rang as everyone collectively held their breath was deafening. Midoriya lay there a moment, clearly dazed and hurting.
Shouto wondered how the new student would react to such a total takedown. Most people (himself included) would’ve been more than a little embarrassed to be thrown so quickly halfway across the ring, in front of so many new people.

Aizawa-Sensei after about ten seconds of waiting lifted his hand, calling the match. It went to Tsuyu, who looked a little concerned as Midoriya struggled back to his feet.

Except Midoriya had no harsh words, no flustered embarrassment on his face. His starry-eyed gaze looked at her, all shyness from his initial introduction fled as he heaved a stunned breath.

“Tell me how your Quirk works?” He begged, the words rushing out like he struggled to contain them.

Who was this kid?

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The bruising hit came at full force, and Izuku took the brunt of it. His staff went flying, clattering to the floor. A pained cry left his mouth, he could taste blood at the back of his teeth.

He’d never been so happy. He’d almost managed to land a hit on Magne. Well, before she’d blocked him and struck him across the face for the attempt with her magnet-staff. Little victories.

“That was a good attempt, kid.” The praise was hard-earned, but Izuku had been training under her long enough to recognise the proud edge to her praise. She stood in front of Izuku, hand on her weapon. Her long hair was tied back into a ponytail, sweat sticking the back of it to her neck. She had a grin on her face. “You’re getting good enough that eventually, I think you’ll be able to take Spinner on a run for his money.”

There was a huff of exasperation from the corner of the makeshift gym the League used to train. Spinner was sitting cross-legged, the edge of his scales glinting green by lamplight. He was reading a book, eyes able to see perfectly fine in the semi-darkness of night. Too many lights on at too early hours attracted attention to the bar. Spinner marked a place in the book, before setting it down on his knee to direct his gaze towards them.

“You’re being too modest, big sis. You’re stronger than I am. Izuku at this rate’ll be able to kill me, and maim you.” He said it with a smile on his face, the likes of which earned a shy grin from Izuku himself. It was rare he got praise, and like a thirsty flower leaning for sunlight he drank it greedily.
He was twelve, and if there was anyone he loved in this League, it was his two training instructors.

Magne knelt, both to help him up and to adjust his stance. She repositioned his grip on his staff this way and that, her critical eyes roving over the minute details.

“You’re bending when I strike like you’re afraid of getting hit. I need you to be solid, so that your arms take the hit instead of your face. Strong, yeah?”

Izuku nodded determinedly. It wasn’t the first time the instruction had been given to him. He knew by now that Magne’s criticisms didn’t come with hits, at least not outside of a match. It didn’t frighten him, but it did make him a little self-conscious.

“My Quirk keeps telling me how much it will hurt, when you strike.”

“It will hurt. You need to move past that pain, if you want to fight.” This was as close to comforting as Magne did, but there was a softness in her eyes. It was a poorly kept secret, why Izuku was afraid of being hit. “You’re allowed to be afraid of pain, you just can’t let it stop you, understand? Strong.”

Another nod. Izuku grit his teeth and held his staff straighter.

After another minute, Magne sighed and moved out of her crouch. Standing at her full height, she towered over Izuku. Her voice was strangely subdued.

“We’re finished for today. You’ve done well, kid. Let Spinner and I take you out for a meal.”

Izuku could’ve vibrated in joy, his stance forgotten. An early finish, and food! He really must have done well. Letting out a small ‘whoop’ of joy, he scampered to find his normal day clothes, tossing his hands up in the air. Magne and Spinner laughed amongst themselves, watching Izuku stride proudly like a peacock to the change room. He left the hollow training staff on the floor, but Magne didn’t mind this time. She kicked it up into her hands, twirling it once. When she set it next to the other staves in their shelf, it was with a look of fondness on her face.

The truth was, Izuku adored going out with Magne and Spinner, because Magne and Spinner didn’t tell him to shut up and do as he was told. They told him stories instead, and laughed along with him instead of at him.

His favourite stories were about Stain, The Hero Killer. He was a vigilante, not hero, not villain. He believed in a world where heroes and villains didn’t exist, where people existed based on their merits as people instead of the worth of their Quirks. Izuku thought the idea sounded like heaven.

“I heard, Stain killed Shooting Star and exposed that she’d been embezzling charity funds for her
hero business for years.” Spinner whispered as he swiped a bag of chips off the shelf of a dingy corner store. He was the best at smuggling food, because people often had trouble guessing what his body should look like under clothes due to his Quirk. Izuku admired how he kept a straight face even as he slid his gaze to the store manager. They were flipping through a magazine, not a care in the world. Spinner’s fingers were nimble and soundless as he reached for a sleeve of crackers, straight out of a larger box. He sighed, the sound utter adoration for Stain’s legacy. “Man, he’s so cool.”

Shooting Star had been pronounced dead that morning, in the wake of controversy over her finances. Izuku had caught snippets of the news, in between jobs for Shigaraki. He’d been wiping the blood off of his staff as he’d heard the latest.

“I heard that story! Pro hero Eraserhead was apparently trying to pick apart that case for years, and it’d been blown wide open and he had to fight his way out of a gang Shooting Star’d been giving money to since he’d gone undercover!”

“That’s the problem with hero work, kid. Everything has to be done by the rules. Even if everyone knows that a hero’s a scumbag, they have to tiptoe around the situation until enough evidence comes to light. Pah.” Spinner made a derisive sound, shaking his head in disgust. “Eraserhead just feeds into the corrupt system.”

“Let the boy have his heroes, Spin.” Magne murmured, shooting Spinner an admonishing glance. As she spoke, she quickly swiped a box of strawberry pocky and tucked it into the hood of Izuku’s sweater. He automatically brought it up about his ears, the pocky balanced between his shoulders and neck. He thought to himself that he didn’t need to keep heroes like a little kid, but didn’t say it out loud. It wasn’t like Magne was wrong. Izuku did admire Eraserhead, but mostly because he was exception to most heroes. He was actually cool, for starters.

Magne had been quieter than usual, this trip. Usually, she was the first to praise Stain, and the things he’d accomplished. There was something brooding in her expression that Izuku couldn’t place. She seemed distracted as she swiped three chocolate bars and some animal cookies.

Spinner seemed to sense it too, whatever it was. He didn’t argue, settling for grumbling only a little. His scaled hand came to rest on Izuku’s head, making the boy giggle.

“Alright. But Stain is still better, agreed?”

“Agreed.” He smiled, the fight easily won with someone so good-natured. Izuku’s expression didn’t waver, even as he checked the security camera out of the corner of his eye, and pocketed a packet of instant ramen for later.

That smile stayed even as they ducked out of the store, stuffing the broken off price tags in some other late-night shopper’s cart when they weren’t looking. No one chased them, and Izuku stared up at the grey morning sky and felt a sense of warmth and peace that he so rarely felt. This was a good morning, a morning that felt like he was far away from Shigaraki, from the League, from anything
but Spinner and Magne’s stories.

In these mornings, he was no one. Just a kid.

Together, the trio went to their usual spot, a small park. This early in the morning, there wasn’t anyone about. Only a lone swing-set greeted them, the likes of which Izuku quickly claimed. The seats were damp, but he pulled on the edges of his frayed sweater until it covered his butt and protected him. Magne took the seat beside him, Spinner choosing to sit on the end of a nearby seesaw.

Izuku happily rummaged their spoils, digging into the pocky as Magne lit a cigarette and watched him with fond amusement in her eyes. The smell of it was familiar to Izuku, and though adults sometimes got mad at Magne for smoking in public spaces, he found it comforting.

He offered her a strawberry pocky stick, which she took. Izuku handed Spinner another, then happily began munching on his own. The park was filled for a time with a friendly lull as they enjoyed their spoils.

It was inevitably Izuku who broke the silence, as children often did. His Quirk didn’t often like him sitting still, and the creak of the swings was loud as he kicked his feet back and forth, watching Magne smoke and Spinner stare into the distance in silence. A question had been forming in Izuku’s mind for a while now, but he’d thought it a little rude to ask. He shied from insulting either Spinner or Magne, even if he knew they’d never hurt him. The fear stuck, but Izuku’d been told already today that he needed to be braver.

He sucked in a breath, bracing himself for the plunge.

“Hey, Magne?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“How come… How come Shigaraki or the others don’t seem to like you or Spinner much?”

The question didn’t have the effect Izuku had feared. Spinner barked a laugh, tossing his head back. Magne looked amused in a sort of bitter way, her lips twisted upwards around her smoke. She glanced at him from up over her shades.

“Kid; no offence, but people like me and Spinner… we’re not much liked by anyone.”

“Why?” It didn’t really make sense to Izuku. Spinner and Magne were the nicest villains he’d ever known, and maybe besides his mom, the nicest people. He didn’t get how Shigaraki eyed Magne with thinly-veiled disgust, or how Overhaul avoided touching Spinner like he had the plague.

“Because not everyone has your Quirk, kid.” Magne sighed, and with it came a gust of smoke. “You
see us and see clearer than any of ‘em. You see to the heart of things.”

Izuku frowned. The answer she’d given him wasn’t an answer at all. He saw too much, if anything. It all got cluttered in his head, going round and round in circles until he felt like he needed to sit in a dark room and breathe it away. His confusion must have shown, because Magne puffed two more hits of her smoke and flicked it away to smoulder. She turned to face him, taking off her sunglasses so that her brown eyes met Izuku’s. She took his smaller hands in her own, her gaze intent.

“When you look at me, Izuku. What do you see?”

What did he see? He blinked, scrambling to concentrate the many observations his Quirk was constantly trying to scream at him.

“U-um. Y-your Quirk is Magnetism, a-and y-you’ve been training with weapons and a staff for a-about seven years-” She shook her head, her long hair brushing her shoulders. Magne didn’t look mad, just driven to make him understand.

“No, what do you see? Do you see a man? Or a woman? Do you see a villain, or a hero, or a vigilante?”

Oh. Izuku looked hard at her. He saw the stubble running along Magne’s chin, her broad shoulders. He saw hard hands callused by hard work and strain and struggle. He saw scars from knife fights and armed robberies and freckles from being out in the sun for too long and dark circles under her eyes. He saw hard muscle earned through years of fighting. He saw long hair, and painted nails, and a kind smile.

“I see you.” He said, uncertainly. “I see… you and I see Spinner.”

Magne hummed quietly. She reached out, ruffling Izuku’s curls. Her hand was warm.

“Adults don’t see us, kid. They see what we’ve done, and what we look like, and assume it all just came out of thin air. Poof.” She made a motion with her fingertips. “You see the paths, the roads we had to take with your Quirk to end up here. It’s why you have a hard time doing what Shigaraki tells you, and why he’s afraid of people like you. Remember that, okay? Remember that not everyone sees as clearly as you do. People rarely end up being how they are for no reason. Everyone’s been seen through clouded eyes, and everyone hurts each other for it.”

“Why?”

Spinner’s voice was sombre, even as his green fingers were coated in orange chip dust. He licked it off while speaking.

“Because no one looks past their first impression. And at first impression, I’m Godzilla, and Magne’s-”
“-A man trying to be something he’s not, with a history of violent crime.” She finished.

“That’s why we need Stain. He’s breaking the rules because the rules say people like us don’t become heroes. We can’t even get regular jobs!” Spinner huffed, crinkling the chip bag in his hands. “The law lets kids like you fall through the cracks, taken by fuckers like Shigaraki, and no one does anything about it.”


No more was said, and Izuku was left to stew over this revelation.

It was the first time he learned one of the world’s harshest truths: Not all men are created equal.

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“Ribbit. So I see, Aizawa-Sensei paired us together because you rely on facial expressions to read people.” Tsuyu (or ‘Tsu’, as she kept insisting he call her) was in fact, not a sore winner, and more than willing to explain to Izuku over lunch the nature of her Quirk.

Izuku took full advantage of this, forgetting his embarrassment in favour of his interest. He’d messed up the match, getting caught up by a certain someone glaring at him. It’d made him sloppy, and he’d taken the hit for it.

Damn it, Kacchan.

Maybe this was how it was meant to turn out, though. Tsuyu was strong, and Izuku’s excitement had broken past her reserved nature.

So he sat in the cafeteria, nestled across from Tsuyu and Ochako, a tray full of food in front of him that probably cost more than he’d ever eaten before in one sitting.

The matches had panned out relatively to be expected, with his and Tsuyu’s being the notable exception. Kacchan had gone against Ashido and won, Ochako had dominated against Denki after distracting him long enough that he could be touched. The grapelike boy had been flattened without mercy by Jirou, a wicked gleam in her eye as she’d done so. The only other fight that had really caught Izuku’s attention had been Todoroki’s who’d been paired off with Tokoyami.

Though Izuku didn’t know much about the boy with red and white hair, something about the fight had seemed a little fake. He’d taken out Tokoyami with cold precision, no sense of unease on his face and a blank look in his eyes. Unfortunately, it’d lasted only a minute, a wall of ice shoving Tokoyami out of the ring in a time that would’ve been embarrassing against any other opponent.
Izuku never got to ask about the boy, either. Tsuyu and Ochako had pulled him away from the rest of the class for lunch, intent on having him try Lunch Rush’s cuisine and to answer his questions about Tsuyu’s Quirk. There were lots of them, as Tsuyu soon found out.

“I didn’t account that physical Quirks could change someone’s range of facial ticks. How strong are your punches and kicks compared to a normal adult? How far can you extend your tongue? Are you sensitive to pollution or dehydration like a real frog?”

Tsuyu blinked, setting down her food tray to sit and think about Izuku’s questions. He was so genuine with his interest, she found herself thinking about each response before giving it.

“Ribbit. People when I was younger said I was ‘off-putting’ because of my face, honestly. My kicks and punches I’d say are about twice as strong as an average girl my age and size. Pollution doesn’t affect me too much but I do get dehydrated very easily, Ribbit.”

Izuku nodded to himself, already muttering about the given information as his brain turned it this way and that.

“It’s stupid that people find it off-putting, it’s advantageous. You can hide information more easily, and make Quirks like mine more difficult to use. It’s fascinating, really. I think your Quirk is incredibly strong, and would be stronger if you focused on training its physical limitations.”

Tsuyu took the opportunity to shovel a spoonful of rice into her mouth, inwardly a little pleased by the positive attention her Quirk was being given. A slight flush had crept up on her otherwise impassive face.

Ochako smiled, her head cupped in her hands.

She was glad that someone else was noticing the beautiful things about her girlfriend that she’d noticed from day one.

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Izuku’s long day drew to a close with the appointment he’d least wanted to participate in. He’d dragged himself to the counsellor’s office with a budding headache from over stimulus, and a grouchiness beginning to bloom in his chest.

He wasn’t looking forward to meeting the therapist UA had set up for him, no matter how much they assured him that she was good at her job. He consoled himself by rehearsing his exit strategy, to extricate himself from this mandatory expectation as quickly as he could. All he had to do was convince this woman, whoever she was, that he was sane and as well-adjusted as he could be, given his circumstances.

Easy, right?
He took a deep breath at the doorway, his legs threatening to turn to jelly on him.

When he couldn’t justify standing outside the room any longer, Izuku pressed forward—

Only to get the sudden neck-prickling sensation of being watched. He jerked his head up, eyes searching in the empty hallway for any sign of life. The setting sun stretched swathes of light on empty linoleum floors, the pervasive silence thick in his ears.

Quick as it had happened, the feeling had vanished.

Izuku frowned, unable to quite shake the momentary chill that had crawled down his spine. Automatically, his hand brushed the band of his trousers, fingers lingering on the handle of the small pocketknife he most certainly had not told his mom he kept on him at all times.

Maybe he did need a little therapy, after all.

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Pressed into the shadow of an adjacent hallway, Hitoshi Shinsou breathed soundlessly through his nose. He waited until he was absolutely sure that the New Kid had gone into the student counselling services’ office before he allowed himself to relax.

Violet eyes narrowed in thought, he reached up to scratch the side of his neck. Izuku Midoriya, A transfer student. He smiled to himself, the expression twisting into something catlike and self-satisfied. Reaching into his pocket, he checked his phone again for the news article. Bold letters lit up reflections in his irises as he read the headline again:

*YOUNG VILLAIN CAPTURED BY UA VANISHED WITHOUT A TRACE.*

Transfer students didn’t just reach for weapons hidden under their uniform. The smile soured with an edge of bitterness, before fading into neutrality.

And people called him untrustworthy.
Izuku’s therapist introduced herself as Momoka Nara. The first thing someone might notice about her was the nature of her Quirk, as it was difficult to hide. Izuku stared at the strange flowers sprouting from her short, dark hair, a network of calla lilies, peonies and sweet-smelling irises. They framed her soft face, bloomed from under the collar of her white blouse, around the sleeves and spilled onto the carpet. She was well, a garden, breathing and living a rainbow of plants. Dark brown eyes peered out from amongst the flowers, lined at the corners with age. Though he couldn’t see it, Izuku thought she might be smiling.

“You must be Midoriya, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” She extended her hand to shake, which Izuku took automatically. Her touch sent a feeling of calmness through him, too unnatural to be anything than a facet of her Quirk. He tilted his head in fascination, anxiety momentarily forgotten in favour of curiosity. Luckily, she seemed used to people inquiring.

“As a starting point, I’ll tell you a bit about myself. I like to establish a basis of openness and trust with my patients.” She chuckled a little. “Most people at first find the involuntary aspects of my Quirk a little unsettling at first, please know I do my best to keep its effects as mild as possible unless
the client asks me to increase its potency.” She gestured for him to sit, which Izuku did after a moment longer of staring. God, he was embarrassingly obvious sometimes. He should work on that. “It’s called ’Dreamcaster’. With a touch, and with my presence, I can show a person either a dream of mine, or a dream of theirs. With touch and prolonged exposure, it’s more likely to take on the shape of my client's mental state.” She gestured at the flowers, beautiful and sweet but certainly not from one of Izuku’s dreams. As she did, roses unfolded out from under her fingernails, entwining themselves around her wrist. “This one often brings people comfort even when we’ve just met, so I’ll use it for the time being as a grounding space. It’s a dream from my childhood.” She then folded said rose-covered hands together in front of herself on her desk. “Other than that, I’m Chinese-Canadian and moved her when I was nineteen to study psychology. I specialise in PTSD cases in adults and teens, as well as dealing with abuse and trauma.”

Despite his earlier grouchiness, Izuku felt better and better as the nature of her Quirk settled over him. Ordinarily, he knew he’d be fidgeting, bursting with nerves. In the bubble Mrs. Nara’s presence Izuku didn’t feel well, entirely normal, but he didn’t feel drugged either. Just… refreshed, a little less restless. He exhaled a breath he hadn’t even know he’d been holding, a knot working itself loose in his chest.

“I-I’m. Izuku Midoriya. Um. My Quirk is an analysis one, doesn’t have a name. I’m uh, Japanese. I’m uh, an ex-villain I guess is what you’d call me? Still working on labels, kinda.” He chuckled a little, the edge of it somewhat self-deprecating. “But I was told you were given a file on me, so I guess you knew all of that.”

“I was made aware of it yes, but I do like to have my clients tell me in person if they’re comfortable. Hearing things first person often lends me a new perspective that a file can’t.” Izuku noted the red polish on her fingernails, and the pen calluses on her forefingers. She spent a lot of time writing, which made sense he supposed. Sure enough, Mrs. Nara rifled through a drawer in her desk, soon producing a small packet which she slid towards Izuku. She didn’t hand him a pen, however. Instead, she leaned forward, her dark eyes peering out from the mess of flowers intently.

“That was a bit of a loaded question. Izuku wasn’t sure what the right answer was, which in itself made some of his nerves flare up. It was quickly soothed by the air of calm swaddling him, there but no longer screaming at him. Mrs. Nara tilted her head, and Izuku knew that she could to an extent, read his feelings. He wasn’t sure if that made it better, or worse.

“You don’t have to have anything specific, that’s alright too.”

“N-no it’s. More I’m.” The words felt choked in Izuku’s throat, like wadded paper towel. He kept
trying to swallow past it, to no real avail. “I guess... I’m just not used to talking about it. Anything, really. Is that weird?”

“Many of my clients don’t know where to start, it’s not that weird I promise. Would making a timeline maybe help? An overview from when you first were with the League of Villains to your time here? Nothing personal if you don’t want to share it, but an idea of your life so far.”

It was as good a start as any, Izuku supposed. He nodded, and Mrs. Nara turned to the table at her side to collect a notebook and pen. She clicked it, offering Izuku a non-judgemental glance.

“Start anywhere you’d like. You can stop if you need to, whenever you want to.” Anywhere he wanted? He didn’t even know what was important and what wasn’t. The words clamored behind his teeth, feeling as if he could talk and talk forever if only the wall they were behind would crumble.

So, Izuku did. His mouth dry, mind far off and distant, he began to recount his time with the League of Villains.

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“You’re quiet today.”

Katsuki turned away from the side window of Mr. Kyokan’s office, where he’d been staring until his eyes burned directly into the white light of the afternoon sun. His therapist had directed the statement at him after the second ten-minute-long pause between their conversation in the past half-hour. The silence had only been perforated by small talk, grunts of confirmation or refusal, or the quiet scratching of Kyokan’s pen on paper.

In truth, katsuki didn’t really know what he wanted to say. He’d booked this appointment because he knew he should, in theory. His long-term childhood trauma had come waltzing back into his life, into his class and since then his father had been walking on eggshells in the house, while Katsuki and his mother took turns screaming at each other and blowing up parts of the house.

It hadn’t been this bad for a while, not since Katsuki had been fighting with his mom over letting him start taking hormones (which had been another blow up that’d been largely rooted in both of them being absolutely terrible at communicating in any way other than shouting).

Kirishima, who wasn’t really privy to the worst of it, had felt the unstable air in the house and offered to buy Katsuki coffee if they hung out outside. He’d just made the mistake of doing this while wearing crocs and board shorts in Katsuki’s home. Mitsuki looked at Katsuki as if it was his fault
that his friend was fashion blind, whilst Masaru look at Kirishima in silent parental affection and pity. All of this had made Katsuki’s already short temper worse, and he’d yanked Kirishima out of the house with one hand, his mouth running about how even if his parents weren’t hero costume designers, he’d know better than to pair avocado board shorts with crocs.

In summary it’d been… A rough week. His wrists had been aching in a dangerous sort of way for the past day and a half, and his mom had caught him tearing apart the forest behind their home past midnight one too many times.

So here he was. In Fucking Therapy. Again.

Katsuki hadn’t even had the balls to tell Kirishima why he couldn’t hang out today like usual. He felt pathetic, angry, and wanted to hit something. He felt like he was twelve all over again, sitting in a chair too big for him and blindingly furious at the world and himself. Why had it gone downhill so quickly, and why so close to an event like the Sports Festival?

Mr. kyokan sighed, setting down his pen. He’d had a lot of practice with Katsuki’s moods, but this black cloud that’d settled over him was especially bad. It’d been a long time since the man had seen Katsuki be truly at risk of getting worse, instead of a plane of mostly-better-but-still-prickly-and-rude. He adjusted his glasses, giving his patient a level look. Katsuki returned it. If spite could cause lethal damage, his therapist would be bleeding out on the floor.

“You told me that Izuku Midoriya was found alive, and has been placed under a protection program at UA. I would’ve expected you to at least be happy, but you’re acting like you’ve been forced to sit through his funeral. If I may be blunt, I’m sensing a lot of conflict. I’d like to help you through this, but you know as well as I do that the grunt work of therapy is talking.”

Katsuki’s mouth twisted into a sneer, a wordless growl leaving his lips. He scrubbed restless hands through his blonde hair in frustration. Damn talking, and damn therapy.

“I don’t know what to say to him.” He managed to spit, nose wrinkling at the inadequacy of the statement. “Every time he looks at me it’s like he’s fucking. Five years old and expecting me to be ‘Kacchan’ this and ‘Kacchan’ that. ‘Kacchan’ fucking let him get kidnapped. I let him get kidnapped, and I sat back and did nothing to fix it! I can’t just put that on him. He seems so fucking happy in the class so why shit on that?”

“You were a child-”

“So was he! And now he’s. Fuck, I keep expecting his Quirk to just read me and see-” Katsuki cut himself off, unable to articulate but able to let out a string of curse words that would’ve made his dad wince. “He’s probably more fucked up than I am, so it’s not like I can just. Fucking dump all of this on him. I barely even know him at this point.”

Not to mention that considering Izuku should be more fucked up than Katsuki, he was handling all of this fairly well. In class, Izuku seemed like a slightly stressed, normal citizen. How did he just…
do that, slip into the role of a student and excel at it without so much as a bump in the road? Katsuki kept waiting for it, the inevitable fall apart. He looked and looked when those eyes were turned away from him, searching for a crack in the mask, a crevice. He found nothing, and the sight infuriated and depressed him at once.

It was absolutely unfair, and Katsuki hated how jealous it made him. He was magnesium set to light itself on fire every time he saw how easily Izuku fit himself into the classroom dynamic. Round-Face already loved him, so did Frog-Girl and Shitty-Hair. Yesterday, he’d seen Izuku trying to fucking understand memes with Tape-For-Brains and Pikachu. So why did Katsuki have to feel like he was made of broken glass every time he so much as breathed in Deku’s fucking direction?

“Well, I’m glad at least that working on your consideration for others is paying off, but I wouldn’t necessarily just assume that Midoriya wants you to avoid him at all costs, either.” Though Mr. Kyokan’s eyes were colourless, there was a dry edge to his voice. It softened into understanding, the longer Katsuki avoided his gaze. “Everyone copes differently with struggle. Midoriya might not wear his heart on his sleeve as readily as you do.”

Katsuki frowned. He wanted nothing more than to not show his emotions all the time, that much he knew. There wasn’t a lot he could do about the fact that his anger seemed hardwired to his heart. He hated when his therapist was actually, well, right about something. Damn him to hell.

“Think about it, Katsuki. You’ve already acknowledged that Midoriya is probably dealing with his own past, and probably has a lot on his plate. You know that you’re feeling guilty, but that might not translate over well to Midoriya’s perceptions. Not if you don’t tell him.”

How was he supposed to just do that? Half the time, Katsuki felt as if he was flying blind in conversations. There was no map that could direct him, no person grabbing his hand and directing him through conversations so he didn’t cut people with how he said things. An image of Kirishima popped into his head, tugging his blazer-sleeve as he guided him through a joke Ashido had told. The memory threatened to turn Katsuki’s ears red, and he hastily discarded it.

Mr. Kyokan handed Katsuki a pad of paper suddenly, shortly followed by a pen. Katsuki took the pad automatically, wary. His therapist was smiling, shaking his head a little ruefully.

“If you can’t speak it, write it out to yourself, for now. I can only offer suggestions, but getting it out in some way is better than letting it get bottled up inside of you. Also,” He caught Katsuki’s gaze with his own, stern but earnest. “I want you to address the letters to someone you feel safe talking to. Doesn’t have to be me, and I won’t be reading these letters unless you ask me to, alright?”

The exercise seemed easy enough. That didn’t mean Katsuki had to think it was smart. He stared hard down at the blank notepad, his brows drawing together sullenly.
“Whatever.” He muttered, which was as good as an agreement as Mr. Kyokan would likely get. Katsuki ignored the man’s good humour, content to wallow a little longer in his own storm cloud.

Write to someone he trusted, huh? Who the hell did he trust enough that he felt comfortable addressing them in a fake letter to talk about his ex-dead childhood friend?

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Dear Kirishima,

Dear Eijirou,

Fuck.

Dear Shitty-Hair,

Katsuki ran a hand raggedly through his hair, resisting the urge to beat his head against his bedroom desk. A flush was running up the back of his neck, and towards his ears. Which was ridiculous really, because it wasn’t like anyone was going to see these letters.

The idea of anyone, Kirishima especially, getting a hold of the countless lines of crossed-out papers before him made Katsuki want to erupt with mortification and outrage. He clenched his teeth, hard enough that they came together with an audible ‘click’.

This was going to take a while. He tried again. It was easier if he didn’t picture Kirishima’s face while writing, he found.

Dear Shitty-Hair,

Deku

My therapist thinks I should write to someone I trust so I can vent. Or something. I don’t know. He’s fucking crazier than I am I think. But I’m trying this because it’s better than exploding trees outside and my mom really will kill me if I take down the oak by our house so. Here we are.

I know you keep wanting to ask me how I know Izuku. I can see it in your stupid, confused face. You keep looking at me in class. But you’re too nice to actually just go ahead and ask so I’m gonna write it out in this letter so I can at least pretend to ignore you.
Izuku Midoriya was a childhood friend of mine. You know he was taken by villains, but you don’t know the part I had to play in that. It was my fault.

My shitty Therapist tells me it’s common to feel guilt when someone survives in a traumatic situation. I don’t know what to do with that though, so it just sits with me and I feel like sometimes it’s put under pressure until I blow up and break something. This letter’s supposed to help that guilt, apparently. Something about getting my feelings out on paper constructively.

I don’t know why I picked you, but picturing my mom or dad or anyone from our friend group while writing this just made me embarrassed really fucking angry. What else is fucking new I guess.

I’m always so fucking angry and I don’t know why you put up with me

Katsuki set down his pen, scrubbing at his eyelids. He threw the pen across the room, and the satisfying noise of it skittering across his carpet soothed him. He crumpled up the letter in one hand, and with a controlled detonation, set it ablaze before tossing it in the trash.

This was fucking stupid, and he didn’t need to fucking put up with it any more tonight. His gaze slid to the corner of the room, where his running shoes were sprawled as if waiting for him. Katsuki’s eyes then slid to his alarm clock, which announced to him that it was Four AM. He had school tomorrow, and they’d be getting ready for the Sports Festival. He should get some rest, and not go on an early morning insomnia-driven jog. He’d been sitting up in his binder for too long, and the ache in his ribs was starting to become noticeable. Turning in his swivel chair, his legs restlessly jiggled, but only for a moment’s stretch. Katsuki had in truth, already made up his mind.

Lifting up his shirt, he stripped from his daytime shirt and binder. The layers, now peeled free from his sweating skin lay pooled in a heap on the floor. Katsuki groped for his sports bra with one hand, the other reaching blindly for headphones. He found himself determined to rid himself of Izuku, of Kirishima and his own self-doubt behind with the clothes on the floor, if only for an hour.

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Rain was falling down in white sheets outside of the teacher’s lounge window. It seemed to wrap itself around UA, too late in the evening for students to get caught in it. The drumming silence it gave was reminding Shouta vaguely of that fateful night when ‘Ghost’ had started to become a name in the villain community. It felt somehow ominous, though there was in theory nothing for him to feel ominous over. His gut instincts were picking up on something subtle, and from past experience he felt the urge to listen to them.

This meeting had been called between only five people: Himself, Nedzu, Detective Tsukauchi, Toshinori and Hizashi. The latter had come mostly for Shouta’s sake, as he still couldn’t see or move
very well in the bandages. Hizashi had taken to playing nursemaid with an almost frightening zeal, and Shouta as a result was beginning to remember why he did his best not to get injured whenever possible.

“Don’t pout at me.” Hizashi huffed as he poured a glass of water and slid it towards Shouta’s general direction, complete with a straw to sip from. “You wouldn’t be in this position if you hadn’t gotten both of your arms and your face broken by a monster. Hydrate yo’self.”

Shouta normally didn’t drink more than a glass of water a day. He felt overly hydrated. He constantly had to pee. None of this seemed to matter to his boyfriend. He shot a pleading glance towards Toshinori, who was studiously looking at his phone and trying not to laugh at the interaction. Traitor.

Shouta was alone in this cruel world, it seemed.

“We’re reviewing the case as it stands, in light of the recent revelations in regards to Izuku Midoriya.” Tsukauchi brought them to business. He pulled out two files, one that was thin and one that was fat with reports and photographs. Setting them both on the table, he began. “Though Izuku Midoriya is still working through recovery, and hasn’t given much details into his direct involvement, we can start building a timeline.”

“Has he given any new information?” Hizashi asked, eyebrows drawing together. He knew how key Midoriya could end up being to this case. Tsukauchi heaved a sigh, shaking his head. He shot a glance towards Toshinori, who had taken on a grim expression.

“I’m afraid not, and I’m reluctant to push. Toshinori’s been housing the boy as you know, and he’s reported that Izuku struggles deeply with trusting adults or authority figures.”

“His mother so far is the only adult I’d say he trusts, and even in that I fear there’s a wall.” Toshi confirmed. His dark eyes betrayed his worry, always one to care for others instinctively.

It’d likely be a while before the boy felt ready to help them. From Aizawa’s first impression, he was a hard kid to read. Midoriya had been quiet in his classes so far, and in truth a little closed off. At least, he was closed off when around adults. Shouta more than once felt eyes on the back of his neck as he taught, sparing him glances when he thought he wasn’t looking. Analysing him. Reading.

Yet whenever he turned, Midoriya’s head would be back to his desk, eyes averted or even sometimes closed. The only indication that he wasn’t spacing out was the concentrated frown on his face, as his brain silently worked away at a puzzle that he evidently didn’t feel safe enough to share with him or any of 1-A.

That was to be expected, though. From what little anyone knew of Midoriya’s past, it was clear he’d been brought up not to trust easily. Shouta could sympathize, even if it made his job harder. This case had stretched out for nearly ten years, but it could wait a few more months. He’d rather not shove Midoriya further back into his shell, and get nothing from him as a result.
“Let’s recap where this started, hm?” Principal Nedzu turned dark eyes towards Shouta, who reached obligingly for the thicker case file. He flipped its cover, revealing a profile of a middle-aged man with a shocking mullet of blue hair.

“April thirtieth, 21XX. Kenji Aburame goes missing. He is found two weeks later burned alive in his home office. His entire family is dead in their beds, including his wife and three daughters. He’s an upcoming hero, his Quirk unique: The ability to temporarily shove someone out of their own body so he might take it over.” Shouta frowned as he spoke, his mind drifting to when he’d first arrived at the scene of the crime. He could remember the ash that’d burned in the back of his throat, the heat of the blaze that had lit up the night sky. “There are no leads as to who might have committed the crime, or why. There is no logical reason why his wife didn’t report him as found. It’s labelled as a murder/assisted suicide, and forgotten eventually by the media.”

Shouta leaned forward, grabbing the next sheet. It reveals a woman this time, pale hair and eyes that glowed with unnatural green light.

“Except it happens again in nearly the exact same manner three months later with a well-established hero named Fyrefly.” A grim edge crept into Shouta's tone, his dark eyes narrowing. “So began a serial killing spree, by a killer that left no footprints, no DNA, and no discernable motive: A Ghost. All of this comes to a head in a final battle at UA in which the League Of Villains manages to catch us off-guard not once, but two times. They know more than they should- security protocols, timing, and room numbers. They target one of my students specifically, in order to target the rest of 1-A.” Kaminari's panicked expression on that day drifted into Aizawa's mind. "My question is how?”

Nedzu hummed quietly. His normally cheery disposition had fallen into solemnity. He set his tea cup onto a coaster, whiskers twitching.

"You believe they have an informant. Someone on the inside."

The idea had been brewing in the back of Shouta's mind for a while. It was Hizashi who spoke, surprising everyone. He had an uncertain expression in his green eyes. He'd always wanted to believe the best in people.

"I think what Shouta's saying... is he believes that there's not just an informant, someone faceless. He believes there's a traitor in the school. A villain."

"A student?" Nedzu asked, surprise evident in his mild-mannered tone. Shouta hummed.

"Possibly. But I wouldn't negate the idea of it being someone who's higher up. A teacher, someone who has our trust."

The silence in the wake of said statement sat with everyone. Toshi's hands clutched at his knees, Hizashi's shoulders were curled inwards. Nedzu's mouselike expression was sober.

His voice was quiet, even as lightning struck outside.

"If that is the case... then UA may be in more trouble than we'd originally anticipated."

Shouta couldn't help but agree. He'd always been one to look at things logically, a step-by-step
puzzle. Puzzles were easy, word problems always had one answer, a path he could follow. People were harder. The thought of one of his colleagues being a traitor sat in his stomach like a lead weight, the motive unclear. The bandages about his face felt smothering, in the ensuing quiet. People weren’t puzzles. People were so often much worse, in Shouta’s mind. By their very nature, nothing was based in logic or reason. Someone somewhere hated UA, hated everything it stood for. Someone, had gone out of their way to see it fall in the most vicious way possible.

Someone had a grudge, and despite being logical, Shouta didn’t have the first clue out of his colleagues or students who would be angry enough to set children up to die for revenge.

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“Don’t think about it.”

The whisper came from the darkness, a child’s voice by Izuku’s ear. It breathed across the back of his neck, making his hair stand on end. He recognised it as his own, from years before. It was breathy, frightened, like it was afraid of being overheard.

Izuku turned, peering into inky blackness and finding nothing. How did he get here? Where was here? His bare feet curled and uncurled against hard stone, grey walls surrounding him. He knew the smell, the slightly sour stench of beer that the bar always held, mixed with something sterile and medical. He breathed it in, feeling his stomach twist and flip.

“Don’t think about it.” The voice came again, echoing strangely along the scattered cells surrounding him. Eyes peered out from the darkness, huge and lantern-like. Izuku didn’t know who they were, or what they were.

Don’t think about what?

He turned, and found himself staring down the end of a long hallway. A younger version of himself was suddenly a breath away, glaring at him in wordless terror. He flinched back, shutting his eyes instinctively because looking at himself hurt his head. He could hear the figure move, the brush of small fingers at his cheek. He had the sudden, jolting knowledge that he wasn’t looking at himself at all. It was something else, someone else wearing his skin-

His own voice hissed in his ear.

“Don’t Think About It!”
Izuku jolted awake just as a crack of lightning illuminated his bedroom. His throat felt tight in an aborted shout. He narrowly avoided rolling off of the bed, his heart jack rabbiting in his chest.

Asleep. He’d accidentally fallen asleep.

For a moment he lay there, cold sweat sticking to the back of his neck as he gulped in shuddering breaths. He pressed shaking hands to his face, covering his eyes and pressing down until bright spots appeared behind his eyelids. It’d been a nightmare. A dream? A memory, maybe.

Except Izuku wasn’t so sure it’d ever happened at all.

Eventually, he talked himself into getting up. Only after his legs had stopped shaking, did the remnants of the dream begin to slip through his fingers like sand.

The rain always reminded Izuku of long evenings outside, usually on a mission of some kind. It lent towards anonymity, and he’d grown used to the sensation of cold, wet clothes sticking to his skin. The bone-deep chill rain provided exhilarated him, leaving hard gooseflesh running up along his arms as he sat curled up like a cat by the window, breathing through his panic. He’d pushed the glass open, so he could take in the smell of wet grass and pavement. The silence of the house stretched around him, soothing.

His therapist had drained Izuku, getting him to talk of what he could manage of his past. It’d been a lot like lancing a wound, poisonous sludge weeping from it both painful and toxic to look at for too long. He’d barely gotten through his kidnapping before he’d asked if they could stop. Mrs. Nara had let it be, but he still felt raw by the end of the appointment. Izuku had expected nightmares to hit him, he just hadn’t expected them to be nonsensical and vaguely existential.

No more power naps for him, apparently.

His mom had gone out to get some personal items (living with all boys didn’t lend to much in the way of feminine needs), and Mr. Yagi was still working. Izuku got the impression he often worked late, given that so far he and his mother had been the only ones making a dent in the real food in the fridge. The instant meals however, had been slowly declining.

So Izuku was alone in the house, a fact that made him thank his few lucky stars. The last thing he needed was to have to explain to someone why he was getting up to turn on every light in his bedroom like a five-year-old. He pretended it wasn’t embarrassing, how he bunched the blankets on his bed together in a makeshift nest. He curled himself into a corner of his bed, facing the door so he could see who came and went in the hallway. Not that there was anyone around to do so.

In truth, he’d been sleeping to avoid the pile of homework currently lying before him on the desk. Depressingly, the workbooks and assignments hadn’t magically disappeared while he was napping. Izuku supposed the idea had been a little childish, but he’d held out vague hope. He’d read through
them all before he’d given up, growing increasingly frustrated as time went on. Everything had involved writing in some capacity, and it was clear as he went on that his reading also probably wasn’t to par. He’d done what he could to educate himself as a child, reading snippets of newspapers and the files Shigaraki had given him whenever he could. Yet there were still characters that he inevitably just didn’t know, or that he wasn’t confident about context-wise. Even the education placement package he’d been given was only half-finished, and those questions were in theory supposed to be easy.

Izuku thought about Aizawa-Sensei’s deadpan expression and felt a knot tighten in his gut. His brain kept giving him images of the man’s cold anger during the USJ incident. He was caught between his own hesitation to ask for help and the complete impossibility of the task. He was helpless, and the feeling rose in the back of his throat, threatening to choke him. Izuku pressed his face to his knees, shaking hands coming up to nest in his overgrown green curls.

*Don’t think about it. If you don’t think about it, you’ll be fine.*

Like a dark sea, the memories swallowed him whole. Izuku could only just hang on for the ride and hope desperately that shore was somewhere in sight.

That was, until an idea came to mind. A loophole, nudging Izuku’s chin up as his eyes burned in sudden determination born from desperation.

He couldn’t write. His reading wasn’t good enough.

But maybe, just maybe, he could listen.
Chapter Summary

Izuku: Hey can y'all maybe chill?

The Entire World: How about maybe YOU chill?

Chapter Notes

White Flag by Bishop Briggs is a helluva song to listen to for this chapter, if y'all are looking for a song to set the mood.

So the Sports Festival arc begins~ All I can say is I wish y'all luck cause I have access to the chapters for the next three weeks or so and y'all are in for a time.

Thank you as always for reading, I continue to collect and read the comments on this fic on rough days (Seriously I love them all).

The Sports Festival came like a lead bowling ball, inevitable and pressing down on the class. Izuku could feel it like a physical pull, driving everyone around him into a restless frenzy. It was in many ways, a perfect opportunity for him to change his learning habits. No one noticed that he’d taken to leaving his knapsack open in class, perched under his desk.

The audio recording device was small; he’d used pocket money to pay for it at a small tech shop. At a glance, it looked sort of like some sort of remote, dark black and inconspicuous. Izuku simply turned it on at the start of each class, and let it do its job of recording everything Aizawa-Sensei or Present Mic or whoever was teaching said. Well, most of the teachers at least. The downside was that All Might had finally recovered it seemed, and so would be quickly becoming a fixture in Izuku’s lessons. He’d yet to meet the hero officially, but the thought made his stomach curl and a sour feeling settle in the back of his throat. He wasn’t sure what he’d do if he actually had to meet the man in person, and that thought was a constant anxiety.

He told himself that he signed up for the Sports Festival if only because if he didn’t he ran the risk of sitting in the auditorium somewhere with the Number One Hero himself. It definitely wasn’t because Izuku was itching to do something physically like his old work, even if it was only through a competition. Training exercises didn’t give him an adrenaline rush, and he was used to getting that regular sort of stimulation.
He wasn’t the only one feeling restless. The entire class seemed to have a new drive, and Izuku knew somehow that he wasn’t the only one who’d been staying up late to train a little harder, push themselves a little more. For the first time, Izuku experienced the sensation of being caught up in something exciting, bigger than himself. He was part of class 1-A, and class 1-A was expected to do great things this year. No one wanted to fade into the background.

It was this drive, the desire to be seen as one of the class that made Izuku realize that he needed someone to train him. Not that Aizawa-Sensei wasn’t a good teacher, but he could only dedicate part of the overall lessons towards combat, and had more than one student to teach. Most of Izuku’s Quirk relied on being able to move quickly, and catch the enemy by surprise. If he could be stronger, he could also learn how to physically overpower them. His weakness was strength training.

Asking Mr. Yagi as it turned out was a good choice- the gaunt man all but lit up like a child at Christmas at the hesitant request. Izuku had thought of the old pictures of the man, and concluded that at one point at least, he’d had to keep himself physically fit.

“I’d be honoured, young Midoriya! But please, you can call me Toshinori.”

“O-okay, Toshinori.” Izuku smiled, a little shy but willing. The look on Toshinori’s face made his embarrassment worth it.

Toshinori took Izuku to a beach to train in the evening, a space that was close enough to Izuku’s old home that he vaguely recognized it. His mom had once or twice taken him there as a toddler, and the memories were hazy sensations of cold water and hot sand between his toes and hands. Over the years, the space had become overrun with litter. There was something sad about the sight, broken bottles, needles, and trash bags left to slowly be eaten by the ocean. Nothing gave any indication as to why Toshinori decided to bring him here, though.

Izuku’s confusion must have shown, because the man was quick to explain.

“When I was a boy, my teacher brought me here to train. This place periodically becomes overrun with garbage, largely due to people dumping and running. The city tries to stop it, but it’s hard to monitor. My teacher wanted me to become physically stronger, so that my body might withstand the nature of my Quirk better.” Izuku’s eyes narrowed, catching the deliberate skirting around just what Toshinori’s Quirk was. However, Toshinori deliberately avoided his glance as he gestured at a rusted out hub of a car that was half-submerged by sand. It looked heavy. “If you want to be a hero, young Midoriya, then you must do everything in your life from the perspective of a hero’s heart.”

Izuku suddenly had a feeling that he knew where this was going. It made sense, in a heart-sinking sort of way.

“You’re going to have me collect and move trash in order to build my physical strength and have me do community service.” Izuku levelled Toshinori with his best ‘are-you-serious’ expression. The man grinned, and Izuku could’ve sworn there was an impish glint in his eyes. He extended his arms, like a scarecrow outlined in the sun. Toshinori’s voice dipped lower, achieving a gravity that despite
his doubts made the hair on the back of Izuku’s neck stand up. In that instant, lined by fading sunshine, there was an echo of the man that must’ve once been a hero to the world.

“You won’t have time to clear the entire beach, but let’s set a goal! If you can clear the section of that rock over there-” Toshinori pointed to a large boulder, sitting nestled amidst the sand and pop cans. “-and this truck, I think you’ll be physically strong enough to have an edge at the Sports Festival.”

A little under a month to get stronger. It was a tight crunch, and Izuku felt the itch of anticipation begin to settle into his bones. Okay, so maybe Toshinori *was* actually sort of good at making him excited. The man honestly, *truly* believed that Izuku could be a hero. It was flattering, if daunting at once. Izuku had never had someone so openly, *unflinchingly* believe in him like that before.

So, together they got to work. Or rather, Toshinori watched as *Izuku* got to work. He sat himself atop of an old, broken down refrigerator, and made sure that Izuku realised that even though he was frail, his voice most definitely still worked. He took up the role of cheerleader, and avoided eye contact when he occasionally spat blood into a handkerchief.

“Start with the lighter things- Tires, scrap metal, old mattresses! And when the Sports Festival arrives, I want you to tell the world: That Izuku Midoriya is here!”

The work quickly became hard and tedious. Even though they started at sundown, the sweat that began to accumulate under Izuku’s clothes clung to the back of his neck and knees. A persistent ache began up his arms, soon followed by a burn in his legs and thighs. It hadn’t seemed like a huge task at a glance, but every inch of clear sand Izuku uncovered felt like a small victory that he could cheer for.

While he worked, Toshinori didn’t stay quiet. Instead, the man seemed content to chatter away about this and that, simply letting Izuku listen and offer an obligatory response here and there. The noise was soothing, and the man reminded Izuku a little of Magne in the sense that he too loved stories. Toshinori’s stories were of course, about heroes, and so long as they both skirted around a certain number one, Izuku found himself as interested as he had been learning about Stain. Toshinori clearly had a lot of respect, and love, for his colleagues and teachers.

Yet there was a silence, an awkward lilt around his words that seemed tinged with sadness. Izuku didn’t know how to fill it, not without accidentally treading on the man’s own secrets. The unwritten rule between them was more of a wall, a silent request and mutual agreement to only ask about what was given. If Izuku broke that silence, then there was nothing stopping Toshinori from asking him why he flinched when the man moved his arms too quickly, too close.

They both went back to the apartment exhausted and sore, but for Izuku the ache was welcome. For the first time in a while, he’d felt like he’d accomplished something. Hope was unfurling itself in his chest, and he was quickly getting addicted to the feeling. The sensation sharpened into resolve after dinner, as he washed his plate and went to his room to listen to the recordings he made.
His window was open, a cool breeze filtering inside and stirring the curtains. Sitting on the pile of workbooks, Izuku found a piece of paper. The note was written in spidery, purple ink.

*Meet me in two weeks’ time; our usual spot. Good luck in the competition.*

She knew, then. Izuku wasn’t really surprised, she had eyes and ears in most places. Instead of a signature, a purple star had been traced in the bottom left corner. The knot he kept close to his heart, the one that worried over Eri, twisted itself tighter.

He folded the letter carefully, tearing it apart in neat little chunks before tossing it into the trash under his desk. This was one secret Izuku didn’t want Toshinori (or his mom) finding out.

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“*Gather round, mass media! It’s U.A’s Sports Festival! Are you ready?!”*  

Present Mic’s voice carried, even when he wasn’t given an audience to entertain. It rang, even muffled in the classroom where everyone sat or stretched or waited for the go ahead to enter the stadium room. It’d be a few hours before they were even told to change into their gym clothes, but the competition may as well have started.

General Studies had decided to take a peek into 1-A’s classroom, and Izuku felt the prickle of dozens of eyes on him in particular. He should’ve seen it coming: by now, word had gotten around about the new transfer student that had made his way into the top class at UA.

“You’d think they’d want to spend their last few hours like, training or something than spying on us.” That was Hagakure muttering under her breath. She’d seated herself on the top of Izuku’s desk, her invisible legs kicking back and forth absently. Perhaps due to her Quirk in part, Izuku found she often snuck up on him, even when she was wearing her clothes. He jumped, broken from his staring at the huddle of children blocking their view of the hall. He heard her laugh a little at his reaction.

“Sorry, Midoriya. I should get a bell on me.”

“They’re scouting out the competition.”

If Hagakure’s voice had startled him, then Kacchan’s threatened to send Izuku flying back from his desk. Kacchan hadn’t bothered to utter a *word* towards him since he’d enrolled, yet now he stood by Hagakure, a pissed off look on his face as he glared at the crowd before them. If looks could kill, Kacchan would’ve sent most of the general studies kids to their grave. “We’re the students that survived the villain attack.” His words, despite their barbed edge, put some of Izuku’s anxiety at
ease. So the General Studies kids weren’t just staring at him, then.

That feeling soon dissipated however as Kacchan shoved his way forward, teeth bared and shoulders thrown back. He snarled at the crowd, and Izuku’s heart sank into his knees. Of course. He’d forgotten that Kacchan was Kacchan. “Now move aside cannon fodder or I’ll mow you down.”

Izuku winced in sympathy as Iida made ineffectual chopping motions in outrage at Kacchan’s audacity. So much for trying to maintain healthy interclass relations. The blonde ignored Iida in favour of glaring bullets into the crowd. The General Studies students parted to make way, and a voice came from the crowd. In its mild-mannered tone was a hatred that made Izuku’s bad feeling go from uneasy to downright dread.

“Wow, so it’s true. Class 1-A really is the height of modesty, the pride of UA. Or is it just you that’s like this?” A student pushed their way to the front. Izuku stiffened as he took in the plume of purple hair and gaunt, tired eyes. Despite the fact that it was Kacchan that was being talked to, the student’s gaze unerringly met Izuku’s. Violet eyes with unsettling, deep circles underneath them narrowed before widening in mock-surprise. “I gotta say, if this is the best your class can give, I’m a little disillusioned.” His smile, a curling cat, stretched across his face. His stare wouldn’t leave Izuku, boring into his skull. “If you’re not careful, we’ll knock you down from your pedestals. And we’ll do it fairly.”

There was… a lot to unpack there. Izuku’s Quirk hummed in the back of his mind, taking in the student’s resentment, the staring, the strange eyes and melodic voice that probably both played a part in his Quirk.

The student turned back towards his own class, ignoring Katsuki’s snarling and fist-shaking. His parting words carried over his shoulder, throwing the gauntlet. “Consider this a declaration of war.”

This was how Izuku Midoriya first met Shinsou Hitoshi. It was also how he discovered that the Sports Festival was, at its core, a beacon of hope. The opportunity to prove oneself, to be boosted into the hero class, it was a game for 1-A but a genuine prize for others. This was perhaps why Aizawa-Sensei even up to the last day had asked him if he was sure he wanted to participate. To hang onto his spot, Izuku had to win something. He didn’t have entrance test scores to fall back on.

His heart pounding in his chest, Izuku reached for his secret weapon, tucked in the front pocket of his bag. A simple pair of wire headphones, he tucked one in his ear. The sound of his own voice muttering looped itself in his ear, drowning out the panic of the rest of his class. He let his eyes slip closed, curling up with his head on his desk. He was going to have the biggest headache after all of this, but if he didn’t give it his all, he had the feeling that someone wouldn’t hesitate to take his place here out from under him.
All too soon, they all ended up in the prep room. This room had the door closed, no chance for the other classes to scope out the competition. They were also dressed in their gym clothes, creating a feeling of uniformity.

Izuku had worried that his bo staff wouldn’t be allowed in the competition, but discovered to his surprise that it’d been made by a support student. As they were also testing in this competition, Aizawa-Sensei had given it the go-ahead. He sat with it balanced in his palm now, occasionally twirling it back and forth as the muttering continued in his headphones. It was becoming a mantra, his voice less words and more like a soothing river running over rocks. There was a base thud in the back of his skull, the promise of a migraine in a few hours.

If he didn’t think about it, he couldn’t feel bad for all the students he’d unintentionally screwed over in General Studies. So he didn’t, instead listening to his voice go over again how Mina kicked with her right foot, how her acid would start to eat into her clothes and the softer parts of her skin if she overused it. He faked a smile and a thumbs up at Ochako as she stretched her legs against a chair, and hoped it didn’t come out too wobbly.


His recording helpfully introduced the next student he’d made an analysis of. He subconsciously lifted his head, searching for Shouto as he listened to the strengths, weaknesses, and character study he’d been able to make so far. There wasn’t much in the later part, save for the student’s cold demeanour and his focus.

Izuku found mismatched eyes staring at him, hard enough that the restless twirling of his staff slowed to a stop.

Shouto Todoroki wasn’t just staring, he was glaring. It was a hard, unblinking gaze that made Izuku wonder if he’d accidentally spilled something down his front during lunch.

He discreetly checked and: Nope, nothing.

Izuku’s mood dropped further when Shouto got out of his seat, making his way towards him. Oh no. Oh, please no. That unblinking glare continued to be unbroken, until Izuku found it a little rude to keep his headphones in. He couldn’t pretend to have not seen at this point, he’d been staring for too long. He needed to get better at passive glancing, rather than spacing out and unintentionally starting a staring match.

His Quirk took in the clench to Shouto’s jaw, something simmering under the blank and icy exterior
he tended to put off. Usually, there was nothing to read on his face when Izuku looked. Today however, there was a chink in that armour. Anger? Not exactly… Then his Quirk took in something that made Izuku frown, a nettle of discomfort budding in the back of his mind. Shouto was favouring his right leg. Only a little, and only very slightly. Pain.

He didn’t have a moment to comment on it, and wouldn’t have to begin with. He and Shouto weren’t friends, they barely talked in class. Shouto didn’t talk much to anyone. Even his first words towards Izuku were cold, driving home Izuku’s suspicions. They weren’t friends.

“Objectively speaking, I think I’m stronger than you.”

Well. Okay. That might’ve been true, but because Shouto said this in front of the entire class, Izuku couldn’t just. Agree? Not without seeming like a literal doormat. He was beginning to realise that the amount of people making a declaration of war towards him specifically or otherwise was increasing rapidly. Izuku wasn’t really comfortable with that knowledge. He kept trying to blend in, and somehow he still ended up being the one people approached to declare undying hatred towards.

“Oh…” He managed, which was about as elegant as he expected of himself.

“You’ve been in the eye of all the teachers, right? People have been saying you were recommended in by All Might himself.”

…What? What?

Like a broken record, Izuku’s brain seemed to threaten to shut down complete with cartoon-like scratching noises. Who had been saying he’d been recommended by All Might? Where did that rumour even come from? What-

“I’m going to beat you.” Shouto declared flatly, his hands clenched at his sides.

And oh, if everyone wasn’t riled up before, they were now. Denki made a comment as to the strongest of the class picking a fight, but it was drowned out by Kacchan’s inarticulate growl about not being challenged to an in-class fight. Kirishima tried to quell this by getting Todoroki to apologize.

Ochako and Iida were trying to get the class to calm down, Yaoyozuru waving her hands and trying to call order back to the class.

The noise was deafening, and Izuku’s brain was already filled with observations, clamoring to stay in his thoughts so that he had a chance in the Sports Festival. Too much, it was too much. He winced, resisting the urge to clutch at his aching head. The confusion at Todoroki’s claim that he was connected to All Might somehow, and worry over Shinsou’s dead-eyed glare just added to the overwhelmed feeling.

When he’d been younger, Spinner had once told Izuku that a real life fight was quick and dirty most
of the time. There were few real rules, and often whoever had the most will to win came out of the fight alive. This festival was meant to be a game, but Izuku felt suddenly that it’d become something closer to a violent fist fight behind a building. And Todoroki wasn’t even trying, didn’t try in his fights. His will was at most, tepid disinterest. Izuku had seen it, he pulled his punches and held back, his ice the only part of his Quirk ever used. How was it fair, that he could claim to be the strongest while still holding back, not giving his all? He wasn’t one for jealousy, but it sat like rusted nails in his throat that someone could just assume victory, with no fear of being challenged like that. Izuku’s hand tightened around his bo staff, determination and irritation blooming inside his chest. The pain in his head sharpened, focusing into a single point somewhere behind his eyelids.

His voice cut over the noise, his teeth bared in a tense smile. Class 1-A fell silent, unused to the level, unfriendly tone in Izuku’s voice.

“Objectively speaking, you’re probably right. Your Quirk is stronger than mine.”

“D-Dude, there’s no need to diss yourself like that—” Kirishima looked over at him in worry, having overheard him while still trying to cool Kacchan’s rage. His hands were lifted as if he intended to touch Izuku’s shoulder, but stopped at the look on his face.

Izuku cut him off, knowing that if he didn’t finish what he meant to say that he never would.

“But. Everyone here is aiming for the top, even the kids who’ve already failed the initial test first. And I’m not going to just throw away my chance to someone who won’t even use their whole Quirk. Who do you think you are, to even expect that?” Izuku tilted his chin up, refusing to cower under Todoroki. Shouto’s face had gotten pinched, and though there still wasn’t a lot of expression to read Izuku got the sense that he was quietly thrown at being so blatantly called out. “I’m here whether people like it or not, and I’m not going anywhere. You got that?”

Blending in be dammed. Izuku had dealt with anger that burned much hotter, and villains much scarier than a privileged student trying to bully him out of his one chance. He’d dealt with more than a General Studies student’s jealousy. He’d kept his head down for most of his life, and the taste of finally raising it was addicting and powerful, more than it had any right to be. Izuku almost smiled at the thought.

Todoroki turned away, going back to his seat without another word. The slight limp in his leg caught Izuku’s eye, and he added it silently to the list of weaknesses. If this was going to be a fist fight rather than a game, then Izuku could play dirty. Spite wasn’t a very heroic emotion, but it could be powerful in its own right.
Unhealthy self destructive tendencies? In MY Midoriya? It's more likely than you might think!

so it may never be directly addressed in this fic (tho anything's possible), but I do headcanon Mei Hatsume as autistic. however seeing as I'm not autistic, and would not feel comfortable going into depth writing a fic surrounding autism as a topic, it's probably a very light touch in this story and by no means meant as an example of all autistic people. Just know that if you're autistic or if you find her characterization mirroring that of an autistic person you know, it's intentional and based off of people I know in my own life.

Serious note done and over now~ Onto the shitposting and ass-kicking.

Thank you to everyone who comments or likes this fic. I love you all and I hope you have a good week!

If Present Mic’s voice was loud on its own, it was borderline deafening when attached to an actual sound system. Izuku could feel it vibrating in his chest, announcing the classes to the world as they entered the festival’s stadium. He hoped those near the speakers had ear plugs.

He’d had never seen so many people gathered in one place before in his life. Izuku had known about the Sports Festival and its existence, but experiencing it firsthand was a completely different game. It felt like all of Japan was watching him, and for a moment he was just a nervous boy hoping to god he wasn’t sweating too much in front of thousands of strangers. Izuku forced himself to breathe, keeping his eyes trained ahead of him. One foot in front of the other, step by step. He wasn’t going to vomit on his shoes. Nope.

A woman stood in the centre of the stadium, and Izuku recognised her… unique costume. Leather corset, whip, and a dark mane of hair? Midnight, the R-rated hero. Her signature red mask was a bright pop of colour, the same shade as her lipstick. It wasn’t hard to see why she was the favourite
amongst fans looking for a certain aesthetic. She was an interesting choice for a host, but Izuku guessed that Nedzu was probably hosting the show for the third years.

He was honestly surprised at the turn out this year, but apparently being attacked by villains did wonders for popularity polls. The third years were meant to be the main event, but their stadium was packed. He felt rather than saw where most people’s eyes were trained: On his class. It wasn’t even a competition, in terms of popularity.

“We’re kinda just here to make class A look good, aren’t we?” The mutter came from somewhere behind him. Class B didn’t look nearly as excited as his classmates.

Present Mic announced Midnight’s title to the audience, and she gave a wave of her whip up towards the nosebleed stands. She was unselfconscious in the sort of way someone could only be if they were used to wearing handcuffs in public. Oddly, Izuku sort of liked her. Her confidence was hard not to admire, and something in her face suggested craftiness under the glitz of her costume. Her voice carried over the students, bringing the audience to standstill silence.

“The athletic oath will be recited today by none other than the top UA student- Katsuki Bakugou.”

Kacchan may have placed first in the entrance exam, but a public speaker he was not. Izuku held his breath as he made his way to the front, the silence from his class deafening. Everyone had a feeling how this might go.

Sure enough, in a silence deafening enough that a pin falling could’ve been heard, Kacchan did not fail to deliver. He leaned forward, the microphone letting out a whine of feedback. He didn’t even hesitate, looking Kirishima dead in the eye as he singlehandedly represented class A.

“I vow to win, and destroy all of you.”

The resounding uproar was both warranted, and expected. Izuku had felt the resentment in the air to begin with, but it was now an oppressive wall at all sides. It was a physical wall, suffocating. Izuku was suddenly grateful that this was just a tournament, and not some sort of fight to the death. Beside him, Iida let out an inarticulate hiss of despair, shoving his head in his hands.

“He’s going to have everyone going for our throats!”

“Overconfident jerk!” A General student growled, steel teeth bared in contempt. A chorus of agreement from the rest of his class sounded.

The thing was, Izuku knew Kacchan’s body language pretty well. He’d never forgotten it, even after years. It was too expressive, and he’d thought Kacchan had ruled the world as a kid. Kacchan wasn’t angry, or proud. His shoulders were hunched, his habitual sneer replaced with a concentrated stare. He looked, well… he looked serious, one hundred percent earnest in his intentions.

Izuku’s gaze slid to Kirishima, who was looking at Kacchan not with annoyance, but stress pinching
his brows. Looks like he wasn’t the only one to notice the personality shift.

This wasn’t Kacchan boasting, this was a promise. A reckless, stupid promise that Kacchan would hate himself for if he broke it. Izuku’s gaze traced the line of his childhood friend’s back, down his arms to the sleeves of his gym clothes. Twin sweatbands cuffed either wrist. Kacchan pushed everyone’s buttons, but he pushed himself the most. There was no mercy in his vocabulary, least of all for himself.

“This year’s first test: Is an obstacle course!” Midnight announced, her voice echoing across the stadium. She pointed towards a gate, the light red but likely not for long. “Line up! Because we’re about to begin!”

Abruptly, everyone was scrambling, knowing UA’s policy on dawdling. Izuku was swept up in it, even as the rules were shouted for all to hear: A four kilometre obstacle course around the stadium-hero style. Complete with obstacles that had yet to be announced, the fastest person would be the winner. Staring at the gate, Izuku realised a beat too late what the first of said obstacles would be. He stared in panic at the narrow starting gate, crushed between bodies of other students. A cold sweat broke out on the back of his neck.

Midnight’s voice sounded to him very far away, the crack of her whip sharp in the air.

“On your mark!”

There’s too many of us to make it through all at once. This is going to involve shoving.

“-Get Set!”

I have to get close to the front. Whoever’s in the lead will use their Quirk to try to slow the rest of us down.

“GO!”

Toshinori’s come to see me, my mom is watching. I have to show them all that I am here!

A shrill buzzing noise, and Izuku lunged forward with everyone else. When in doubt, elbows made good weapons in close quarters.

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Toshinori’s hands tightened on his knees, nestled in his seat up in the stadium seats with the other teachers. He couldn’t seem to keep his nerves in check, his fingers running along the seams of his ill-fitting suit pants again and again. If this was how parents felt when they sent their children on their first errand, then he had all the more respect for Inko. Not that he viewed Midoriya as a son-like figure. No. Not in the slightest. Sometimes he resented his soft heart.
In Shouta’s opinion, Toshinori was more than a little screwed. He’d let himself catch feelings, and gone out of his way for the boy. That meant he’d shown favouritism, a dangerous game in the world of teachers. This was all the more ironic for the fact that Shouta hardly acknowledged his own love for his class whilst fussing over Toshinori, in typical Shouta fashion.

Though he claimed that Hizashi had forced him up out of bed to watch the Sports Festival, Toshinori had the feeling that very little persuasion had actually gone down.

He’d been offered a place in the announcing room, but he thought it better to keep a low profile. Most people didn’t know him in this form, save for his colleagues. So Toshinori watched in the Staff seats with his heart in his throat as Midoriya and the rest of his students scrambled to make themselves known.

Was it unfair of him to secretly cheer just a little harder for the underdog? Maybe. Either way, Toshinori couldn’t really help it. Young Midoriya had grown on him, and it seemed that the feeling was mutual. It had been an act of trust for Izuku to come to him for help with training, and though it’d been downplayed Toshinori had recognised it for what it was. Little by little, the boy was starting to trust him. Little by little, Toshinori was realising why. Izuku was in many ways a mirror of his younger self, under the layers of mistrust and secrets. Perhaps too much, because it quickly became apparent that a fire had been lit under the boy at some point.

The first obstacle for the race was the gate itself, a narrow space in which everyone struggled against each other to get ahead. The person who pulled to the front was expected: Shouto Todoroki. The stadium roared as ice encased anyone who was foolish enough to keep on the ground, Endeavour’s son gliding ahead with smoky breath trailing behind him. Yet he wasn’t the only one, and class A as a whole soon proved that the hesitation had been beaten out of them by the recent villain attacks.

Toshinori felt a well of pride as Aoyama burst up and out of the crowd, leaving trails of glitter behind him. Yaoyozuru was close behind, a staff blooming out of her wrist. Explosions ripped through the air like firecrackers, and Bakugou and Kirishima were neck and neck at the forefront. Asui hopped her way in and between other students, a pair of pink gloves showed Hagakure had ducked between someone’s legs to gain an edge.

These were all of his students, and each one that pulled ahead sent a thrill of pride through him. They had survived so much for first years, and though he’d never want to put them deliberately in harm’s way he was glad they could now reap the reward of firsthand experience. Izuku was one of the last to break from class A, but he was still part of class A. Even from where he was seated, Toshinori could see the determined flare in his eyes as he tore his way to the front, staff slung over his back. 

You can do this.
Hizashi’s voice rumbled through the stadium, high with excitement.

“Every obstacle course needs obstacles! Starting with: The first barrier!”

A terrible shrieking filled the air, the cacophonous sound of metal moving on metal. The audience leaned forward, collectively holding their breath as Todoroki skidded to a halt in front of the massive hub of a wakening robot. Toshinori could feel the anticipation in Hizashi’s voice, carrying into his announcement. He could see Todoroki’s eyes widening on the massive screen, his arms splaying outwards to call on his Quirk.

“Ladies and gentlemen; Robo Inferno!”

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Shouto’s breaths were cold, ice blooming somewhere deep in his chest as he stared up at the looming robot obstacle. It towered, blotting out the sun so that all he could make out was its shadow.

So this had been what his classmates had been up against in the UA entrance exam. The support course probably had a field day making these, since he doubted that UA had the budget just to buy a half dozen robots for the express purpose of destroying them. He craned his neck, steadying the unpleasant jolt of surprise. His father had taught him to think on his feet, if nothing else.

Breathing through his nose, he carefully let the cold sensation of his Quirk wash through his body. Shouto had an audience today, and the thought made bringing out his ice easy. It felt like it was blanketing him, creeping along his shoulders and arms. Shouto almost wished that this obstacle would give him more of a show to work with, just so he could see the sour grapes expression on his old man’s face when he flattened them. He could imagine it, the sour and displeased expression, and his Quirk spiked in his chest. Shards of ice began bursting from his skin. A terrible smoky breath left his lips. Ice flowed from him, travelling up the robot’s legs and encasing them solidly. Right on the edge of collapse, perfect. He darted between their legs, uncaring of the other students behind him.

Shouto’s goal was only ahead, and he had to meet it before he got too cold. The throbbing of his right leg served as painful counterpoint, fueling his determination. Coupled with it was Midoriya’s smug image, daring him to use his father’s half of his Quirk. Shouto grit his teeth, the ground shaking behind him as the robots fell.

He was going to win, and it was going to be on his own terms.

****

Izuku ended up testing the ‘Pulse’ setting on the first robot that tried to get in front of him. Until now,
there was very little information training dummies could give him on the adjustments the support course had made to his staff, and he’d avoided using it on his classmates during training because he hadn’t been sure what it’d do.

The result was both cool and well, loud. Izuku had leapt, driving his Bo staff into the joint between a robot’s leg and body. He pressed the ‘Pulse’ button, a sharp humming overtaking his staff. Electrical pulses jolted from it, the robot jerking and thrashing with the onslaught. It fell over, nearly taking him with it. In the dust clearing, Izuku pushed his hair back from his face and cheered.

*Talk about an upgrade!*

A smile broke out over his face. Whoever messed with his staff, he owed them. A chunk had even fallen off of the robot, a metal plate resting in the dirt. It was roughly shield-sized, with rubber straps hanging loosely off of it. Hm.

An idea began to tick in the back of Izuku’s mind. It was impulse to grab it, tying it around his shoulders. He was strong enough now that carrying it wouldn’t slow him down.

*Thanks, Toshinori.*

Izuku saw what Todoroki had done to the robots up ahead, and his Quirk saw the split-second opening between one of the robot’s legs. He also read the instability in their position, the metal beginning to creak as the ice thawed in the atmosphere.

*Quick.*

Leaping forward, Izuku heard the whine of metal becoming horribly unbalanced. He didn’t have time to think his decision through, sliding under and out a moment before the bots came toppling down. The crash rang in his ears, deafening. He saw Kirishima get caught by it, less lucky. Izuku winced, but thought if anyone were to get caught by that it was a blessing to have a Quirk that could prevent full body injury. The dust made it hard to see as the bots landed, but he tucked and rolled and did his best to avoid any falling metal limbs.

Other kids decided to go over instead of under, Kacchan’s explosions ripping through the sky, Dark Shadow and Tokoyami close behind. Izuku would have to run if he wanted to keep up with them, Kacchan’s explosions added propulsion to the mix. He thanked Toshinori for the morning jogs he’d been forced to go through lately. Izuku wasn’t winded yet, but he would’ve been even a month ago. He was keeping up on the ground, though only barely. He’d made it past the first obstacle.

His good mood threatened to be contagious, but it soon stalled as Izuku drew up short at the next obstacle. A gorge yawned before the crowding students, loosely connected to platforms of stone. A network of rope ran between them, towards the other side. It was a tightrope walk.

Izuku’s Quirk began to swing into overtime, trying to guessimate the distance versus his body strength, versus the depth of the drop. His palms felt slick with sweat, clammy and uncertain. Was he
strong enough to carry himself across? How much did he trust that? Would he do better if he hooked his legs and his arms to the rope while negating his visual? Tsuyu was already climbing, Todoroki more than halfway across the first rope. Iida was next, his thrusters propelling him forward in an awkward but efficient path across the rope. What hope did he have in making it? Could he use his staff as a buffer and use some sort of momentum to get across-

Maniacal cackling interrupted his downward spiral into panic. Izuku turned towards the sound. A girl stood beside him, and Izuku first noticed her pink, tight curls and the absolutely overkill amount of tech strapped to her body. She stood with her hands on her hips, her head thrown back without a care in the world. A support course student?

She lifted steampunk-esque goggles back from her face, a blinding smile spreading across her features. Turning to look at Izuku, her gold eyes flicked towards his staff. An intense, bubbly voice spoke to him.

“Yo, New Kid! How’s my baby treating you?”

****

Shouta’s always had a strange sixth sense for the unexpected. Call it an instinct, call it a skill inherited from years of teaching. He often had a feeling in his gut a moment before a student did something dumb, a premonition of the apologies he’d have to make on their behalf. He’d learned to listen to it, even if Hizashi or Toshinori, or even Nemuri sometimes teased him.

Watching the obstacle course below from his seat beside Hizashi, Shouta frowned as the familiar feeling came on. It sat like a lead bowling ball inside him, making Hizashi’s excited commentary fall into the background.

His students were facing ‘The Fall’, an obstacle that he expected his more physically adept students to be able to face with little trouble. It would be harder for those with non-physical Quirks, and Shouta could remember how he’d barely managed to slide past this obstacle in his own Sports Festival in first year. God, and hadn’t that been a long time ago? It felt like ages, back when him and Hizashi and Nemuri and Tensei had all been students. Had they ever been like this? Young and so… eager?

He couldn’t help but feel an echo of that old frustration, that UA didn’t provide more challenges that might suit a variety of Quirks. It was a bone that he still had to pick, though Nedzu had slowly been introducing the idea to some of the more traditional-minded teachers and the public alike. He could remember being that student, the one pushing tooth and nail just to place with the rest of his classmates. Sitting up here, it felt like a lifetime ago. He’d grown, but this stupid test was used because it was popular with the general population for entertainment. His students were doomed to struggle if they couldn’t launch themselves thirty feet in the air.
“And it looks like Tsuyu Asui is already making her way across! Will the rest of the students figure out a way across this treacherous landscape?!”

Hizashi was oblivious to the bad feeling settling in Shouta’s stomach, like he tended to be about anything instinctual. Shouta watched the small screen they were privy to, a zoomed in image of the scene below playing out. There was no sound, but he could see Midoriya’s image halted at the edge of the gorge, his staff in front of him like a barrier. Beside him, was a girl Shouta vaguely recognised but couldn’t name. One of the support kids, outside of his jurisdiction.

Though everyone was scrambling, rushing to either begin their journey across the gorge or despairing because they couldn’t make it, those two were still. There was a bubble between them, their heads close to touching as if they were talking. The pink-haired girl was gesturing excitedly, her hands flapping up and down in an exhilarated motion. Izuku was nodding, a crooked smile beginning to curl up his face. He looked calm, calmer than Shouta frankly expected him to look considering his Quirk.

What am I missing? Why is Midoriya not trying to figure out a way out of this obstacle?

From what Shouta had learned about Midoriya, the boy had a logical brain. Often no sense of his self-preservation, but a logical brain. It wasn’t like his student to give up, in truth Shouta suspected the boy wouldn’t know how to even if the thought occurred to him. He wasn’t about to try to climb his way across either; A month of physical training with Toshinori wasn’t about to make the boy strong enough to clamor his way across five ropes to the other side of the gorge. So what was the plan? The angle?

He knew that girl. Shouta knew that support course student, recognised her face even if he didn’t know her name. His brain was putting the puzzle pieces together, but not quickly enough. Midoriya and the girl were moving, approaching the edge of the gorge with united determination. The other students trapped on their side were oblivious to the pairing.

Wait.

Abruptly, Shouta leaned forward. With one casted arm, he turned off Hizashi’s mic.

“Hey!” His partner blinked at him, an indignant expression crossing his features. “I don’t bully you when you’re going on about hero observations-”

“Who’s the girl by Izuku Midoriya?”

“Wh-” Hizashi blinked, confusion flitting across his features. He looked at the screen, squinting before coming up with the name easily enough. It was his job after all, to know each student so that he could announce them should they win or fail spectacularly.

“Mei Hatsume. Support Course. Shouta, why-”
The name clicked, and Shouta swallowed a groan.

*Of course.*

Hizashi frowned at his reaction, his brows ticking upwards.

“He’s found a loophole.” Shouta growled, half incredulous and half proud.

“What?” Hizashi asked, apparently still lost. Shouta jerked his chin towards the screen.

“Watch Midoriya.”

The Sports Festival technically speaking didn’t have a rule against collaboration. Rather, it relied on the competitiveness of the students at UA to negate the idea from the start. Similarly, it was the nature of human beings to ignore other courses that weren’t in direct competition with each other. It was how support course students were ignored by the hero courses, or how general studies students were often seen as not a threat to the A or B classes.

Shouta should have seen this coming, it was after all that assumption that’d let him bump his own way up out of general studies and into the hero course. No one had expected him to fight so hard, to be *strong enough* to claw his way into the A class. He should’ve also seen that Midoriya wouldn’t make a mistake with such assumptions. There were no preconceived notions for him, he’d grown up cut off from general society. It was his base *nature*, to notice the people and things around him, an innate part of his Quirk.

There was no need for him and Hatsume to compete. They were technically speaking, on the same side. Hatsume wasn’t here to become a hero, she was here to show off her inventions to potential clients. What better way to do that, then to prove how much a potential hero could benefit from the use of one of her upgrades? What better way than to ensure that said potential hero did well in the biggest festival event of their budding career?

That damn staff. Mei had worked on it *herself*, of course she’d want to see it be used to the end of the competition.

Hizashi suddenly leaned forward, his eyes saucers as he pressed the microphone back on. He was all but vibrating from excitement, confusion, one of his legs shaking up and down restlessly. His voice echoed across the stadium, louder than before.

“Ladies and gentlemen, there’s been an unprecedented act of teamwork. I can’t believe what I’m seeing. *This has never happened before in the history of the Sports Festival.*”

Midoriya was climbing onto Hatsume’s back, hooking his legs around her middle like a spider monkey. He had the staff crossed over her chest, gripping it with both hands like a makeshift seatbelt. Hatsume’s grin was visible even from where they were seated. She shifted her goggles over her eyes, laughing in anticipation as she began a slow run towards the edge of the gorge.
The harness around her middle shot forward, thin metal wires digging into rock. Together, she and Midoriya toppled over the edge, twin high-pitched screams devolving into silence amidst a roaring crowd. At some point, Shouta had half-leaned out of his seat, praying to god that the support course kid had accounted for the extra weight of another body. He felt relief and disbelief rise up in him in equal parts as the cord pulled taught but held. The two went swinging forward, catapulting towards the other side of the gorge. There was no account for landing, no account for limbs or personal safety. Shouta knew already who was the culprit for this sudden leap of sudden, stupid, reckless daring from Izuku Midoriya.

“Dammit Toshinori.” Shouta sank back into his seat, his eyes closing as he felt a budding headache begin somewhere at the base of his skull.

*Teenagers.*

This class might just be the death of him.

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Landing was rough, rougher than Izuku could account for in an impulse decision like this. The rush of the wind blasting back his hair, Hatsume’s gleeful laughter, his sweating hands wrapped protectively about his staff, all of this was a split-second sensation. Then they were hitting the ground, Hatsume using shock absorption in her boots whilst Izuku was just dislodged like a sack of potatoes. He tucked and rolled automatically, but his wrists still stung with the force of his impact and his breath was knocked from him. Dust filled his mouth and nose.

He stared up at the blue sky for a moment, his heart thundering in his ears as he registered what he’d just done. There was a bruised, numb feeling blossoming in his wrist, and his blood felt like fizzy soda as it ran through his veins. A laugh threatened to spill from his lips, the sun shining down on his face as the crowd exploded in a deafening roar. It was all so far away, somehow.

The moment didn’t last long. A silhouette blotted out the sun, a hand with fingerless gloves offered towards him. Izuku took it, getting unsteadily to his feet. Hatsume was grinning, a streak of dirt smeared across her cheek. She’d pushed back her goggles, eyes bright and exuberant. Across the gorge, a crowd of students were clustered, staring at them in blunt shock. For a moment, the race was put off in favour of registering what just happened.

“That was… amazing.” Izuku found his voice, his chest heaving as he tried to stop the floating feeling of not enough air filling his lungs. The adrenaline was doing funny things to his rabbit-heart. Hatsume’s other hand held his staff, which she held out to him in offering.

“Use the ‘Flashbang’ setting at some point during this festival and tell me how the shock absorption is, and this’ll all be worth it.” He nodded, and she put the staff in his hand, closing his fingers around its middle. The action felt oddly like a motion of trust.
Izuku nodded, feeling the weight of her expression on his forehead (never his eyes, but she seemed happy). It rested in his hands, perfectly weighted. The smiley faces crudely drawn under each setting made sense, now. Hatsume’s smile was her signature.

“Thank you.” He said, feeling a surge of warmth towards the strange girl who so willingly launched him and herself across a gorge at his prompting. Hatsume still didn’t look at him directly, but maybe that was alright. She brushed back her pink curls over one shoulder, scrubbing at the dirt on her face. Hatsume didn’t return the thanks, but she didn’t have to. Her words echoed his sentiment, the sentiment of everyone in this event.

“You’re testing out my baby. This is my chance.”

****

It wasn’t in Katsuki’s nature to hold back, ordinarily. Not in play, not in competition, not in anything. However; a big explosion required a lot of sweat, and the sweat bands he’d put on in a rare fit of self-consciousness over his scars only served to let it pool between the band and his skin. It was an unintentional bonus, and he could feel the familiar pressure building up under his skin as he crossed the gorge and tore after Todoroki.

He was ready to blow. All he needed was a chance. That came as the looming stretch of touch mines stretched before them. Katsuki might have thought himself lucky, if he believed in such things. As it was, he felt the grin take over his face as he saw Todoroki carefully picking his way along the field. Time to get even with him for assuming that Izuku was the threat to watch out for, as if Katsuki hadn’t placed first in the actual entrance exam or had been in class with the bastard all year.

The explosion Katsuki made propelled him into the air, launching him forward with speed. He didn’t need to touch the ground to win this. Corkscrewing through the air, Katsuki met glare for glare with Todoroki’s mismatched eyes.

There was a moment where moving in mid-air, Katsuki could almost study the kid like a bug under a microscope. The sweat and frost were competing in sticking Todoroki’s hair to his forehead, a streak of dirt had run up his arm, disappearing under the sleeve of his gym uniform. The look on his face was the best part, surprise mixed with startled terror as he realised that Katsuki was pulling ahead. Good. You should have seen me as a threat from the start.

The satisfaction sat in Katsuki’s chest, thrumming with his heartbeat.

Then an explosion broke the spell and shook the air, followed by a cloud of pink smoke that made his eyes water and his nose itch. Both he and Todoroki turned, only to see a comet shooting up from the mass of dazed and confused students behind them. Katsuki realised what or who it was first. He’d know that stupid green mop anywhere, and it was hurtling right towards him, that bastard-

“Kacchan! DUCK!”
Kacchan’s head for better or worse made a great Launchpad to drive Midoriya just a few feet further. His ears were ringing with the blast of the explosion he’d created, and he was falling fast. It felt like his heart was in his mouth, even as he relied on instinct and flipped forward. The shield strapped to his back came down with a metallic ‘BANG’ that reverberated up his arm to his shoulder. He grit his teeth against the pain that bloomed in his shoulder.

Izuku heard rather than saw Kacchan’s snarling face, his shriek sounding very far away.

“Deku!! Get!! The hell back here!!”

Even if he wanted to (and Izuku very much didn’t in that moment) he didn’t think he could. All he could do was bear it and protect his head as he was launched in the air once more, this time truly leaving Shouto and Kacchan behind in his dust. The impact was going to hurt, and he knew it. It didn’t stop the near-hysterical laughter that bubbled up his throat as he hit the ground running, his ankles stinging and metal in the back of his throat. He had one coherent thought in all of this, and it was petty and probably terrible but oh so satisfying in the moment. Maybe he was more like Kacchan than he wanted to admit. Maybe, he was just quieter.

*Bring it, Freezerburn.*

Present Mic’s voice greeted Izuku as he stumbled into the centre of the stadium, and across the finish line.

*“Ladies and gentlemen, who could have predicted that Izuku Midoriya, new shining star of class A would be the one who made it back to the stadium first?!”*

A thousand strangers were cheering, but Izuku’s eyes unerringly looked past them and up towards the teacher’s seats. Toshinori’s grin could only be beaten by his own.
Bring In The Cavalry

Chapter Summary

I can't believe Monoma's dead.
(Alternatively titled: BakuSQUAD UP!)

Chapter Notes

Usual warnings for allusion towards Endeavour's shit parenting. Also allusion towards past self harm but again, nothing new introduced into this fic and nothing graphic.

Things are heating up, and we're gonna start getting some pretty significant pieces of Izuku's past brought to light :)

Enjoy the read! I love all of the comments and kudos and if you wanna yell at me on the tungle I'm available under twistedthicket1!

Ochako wasn’t sure what she expected to come from the Sports Festival, but watching her friend launch himself without fear of life or limb across the length of a football field probably wasn’t it.

The image of Izuku flying over her head, teeth gritted for impact, hair pinned against his skull by the wind, was simultaneously the most badass thing she’d ever witnessed and also the most terrifying. Though this festival was a competition, and she was as desperate to win as anyone, she couldn’t help but feel a thrill of exhilaration as she stumbled into the centre stadium.

Izuku stood in the centre of the ring, staring with stars in his eyes at crowds of people cheering his name. His face was red, his chest filled with pride. He kept waving to the crowd almost shyly, like he’d never won anything before. To get to see that, even if it was brief, filled Ochako with pride. The soft, warm feeling in her chest made up for the disappointment that she didn’t place higher.

That didn’t mean that it didn’t fill her with terror at the fact that Izuku so willingly came up with such an idea, or that he seemed unbothered by a very clear sprain in his wrist. He was clutching it with one hand, flexing and frowning to himself even as Midnight called everyone forward to gather around her. Much like when he’d been forced to attack class A, Izuku seemed to have a high pain tolerance.
Creeping towards him, Ochako waved. Her voice was still a little out of breath, she was more of an endurance runner than one made for speed.

“That was amazing, how did you even think about launching yourself like that?”

Predictably, Izuku erred on modesty. Though so far he’d had a determined glint to his eyes, he stumbled and stuttered his way through a placation. He wasn’t the sort to boast, and given the chance he still elected towards talking himself down.

“I-It wasn’t really anything. I u-um. Weirdly enough watching Kacchan take on the first challenge inspired me? Though he’d probably kill me if he found out I copied him. Also, Mei helped me.”

He jerked a thumb towards a girl with bubble-gum-pink hair. Ochako stared at her in surprise. The idea of helping someone succeed in the Sports Festival seemed about as alien as giving up one’s seat in their class. How’d Izuku even know her? She was a support course kid, from the looks of it.

Mei seemed to be currently absorbed in fiddling with her utility belt, muttering something about counterbalance. Then she took Ochako’s hand, clasping it tightly. It came away smeared with grease.

“Nice to meet you! Your gravity Quirk would work well with a few of my babies!”

“B-Babies?” Ochako asked. Izuku chuckled, scratching the back of his head. He held up his staff.

“Her inventions.”

Mei nodded, tight curls bobbing. She quickly went on a small spiel about the benefit of negating motion sickness while floating, and how to go about doing so through specifically constructed headwear. Ochako listened politely, a little lost but trying her best to keep up with the rapid-fire speech.

“Ask for my name after the Sports Festival, and I’ll have a draft drawn up for you, hm?”

Had a business deal just been made? Either way, Ochako got the feeling she’d just signed something in small print. Mei, satisfied, wandered off to go fidget in her pockets, searching for nuts and screws.

“She seems… nice?” Ochako leaned close to Izuku’s ear, honestly not sure what to say. He giggled, and the sound was unexpected enough that Ochako couldn’t help but join.

“She is. Brilliant, too. She saved my butt out there. Well, that and Kacchan.”

Ochako listened as Izuku explained what’d come into his head while in the competition, how Kacchan’s explosions had given him the idea to launch himself into the sky. “I think he’s gonna kill me if he ever finds out, but it really worked well in a pinch.”

Ochako resisted the urge to say that she suspected Bakugou might kill anyone for any slight if given half the chance. She was a little afraid of him, if she was being honest. He was a landmine both physically and emotionally, and she often didn’t have the patience to deal with his mood swings.
Instinctively, she searched for his face in the crowd of students, trying to see if Bakugou was as upset at Izuku feared. Sure enough, Ochako found him. Bakugou was panting at the edge of the crowd of students, the sound conspicuously loud even over the noise of the other students. His arms were trembling in rage, the sweat bands that’d been wrapped around his wrists charred and falling away. She’d never noticed the marks there, shiny and ugly in the afternoon sun. A low, continuous growl rumbled from his chest that Ochako could hear even from where she was standing. She didn’t get to see Bakugou’s blow-up, the crowd of students shifting until he was out of view. Ochako shivered. Yeah, best to avoid him until he cooled down a little.

Midnight was explaining the next task: A cavalry battle. The layout of it seemed simple enough, sort of like a real cavalry battle at a normal sports festival. Except people would have headbands that placed themselves at a value, depending on how they ranked in the last event.

Ochako’s smile disappeared like a lightbulb as she suddenly realised just what that meant for Izuku. He seemed to recognise what that meant for him as well, his joy fading into blank-faced terror as heads turned towards him.

“Our first place participant is worth Ten Million Points!” Midnight announced, an impish grin curling over her face.

Oh.

Oh dear.

Ochako’s gaze slid to Izuku who had frozen like a dear in the headlights. The smile had vanished from his face, turned into a rictus grin that melted into horror. If stares could inflict physical damage, he would have died instantly on the spot.

Ten million points.

UA really didn’t let anyone have a break, did they?

****

Okay, so Bakugou’s memory for things less important to him was concerning to say the least. He could admit that, if only to himself. He was at his best times hyper-focused, and at his worse completely oblivious. Anger made it worse, and he was usually angry, especially now. This was to say that he could admit that maybe, just a little, he’d fucked up.

He was surrounded by his classmates, all eagerly requesting to be paired with him for the cavalry battle. He didn’t know a single one of their Quirks. Well, none except for one person. Katsuki desperately craned his head for Kirishima, feeling a rising panic the longer he went without responding to anyone’s request. He didn’t want to seem incompetent, but Mina’s face was already
registering his confusion. She wasn’t stupid, she knew when he looked lost.

Ashido groaned, dark eyes blinking up towards the sky as she pieced together what Katsuki wouldn’t admit. Embarrassment threatened to flush up his neck as she threw her hands up in the air, exasperated.

“He doesn’t remember any of our Quirks. Idiot.”

“Watch it.” Katsuki growled, though more automatically than anything else. She was right, even though he didn’t want to admit it. He didn’t know jack shit about anyone, even his own class.

He caught sight of bright red hair.

*Oh thank fuck.*

Kirishima was better at talking to people, and he’d make a good front horse for this next challenge. He could take Katsuki’s explosions, and knew Ashido. Katsuki’s relief was a tidal wave as Kirishima made his way unerringly towards him, rescuing him from Ashido’s indignation.

Luckily, it seemed he and Katsuki were operating on the same wavelength.

“You wanna take Midoriya and Todoroki down, right? I’ll be a horse that’ll never waver.” Katsuki couldn’t help the sneer of satisfaction, and maybe a little flattery, that appeared on his face. He hoped it wasn’t too obvious how much Kirishima’s willingness to team with him made something warm burn in his chest.

“You’re so whipped. What does this blockhead even see in you?” Mina muttered critically, apparently astounded. Her stare was directed at Kirishima, who turned an interesting shade of red. Katsuki didn’t have a chance to ask her what she meant before she clapped her hands together, her expression taking on a look of focus.

“Alright, I’ll forgive you for ignoring us until now. Have no choice, if I want to win anything in this competition. We’ll need Sero, too. His Quirk is tape if you don’t know. He’ll be able to launch you close enough to use your explosions on the competition.” Her grin became impish, gold-ringed eyes flicking towards Katsuki. “Bakusquad’s gonna win this one, I can feel it.”

*Bakusquad?!*

“When the hell did I say we’re friends!?” Katsuki growled. Mina shrugged, already turning to hunt down Sero. She waved away Katsuki’s rage unflinchingly, a swivel in her shoulders belaying her excitement.

“You didn’t, I did. Deal with it, you overdramatic baby.”
Kirishima shook his head, scratching at the side of his neck. He shot a glance at Katsuki’s irritated expression.

“She’s not the worse friend to have, bro. I’d just go with it.” He defended, shrugging a little.

Katsuki huffed, the sound a tightly controlled explosive. Whatever. Having friends, he guessed, meant his cavalry team was sorted easily enough.

She hadn’t been so stupid as to comment on the scars on his arms either, which he knew she’d seen. Black-Eyes was tolerable. So was Soy Sauce, even if he smiled too much.

“Bakusquad’s a dumb as hell name.”

Kirishima grinned, shark-toothed smile stretching widely across his face. He clapped Katsuki on the shoulder, and Katsuki pretended the action didn’t make him feel warm inside.

“Let’s do this, bro.”

Yeah.

“Let’s do this.” Katsuki grinned, sweat pooling in his palms.

****

*Those at the top, are doomed to suffer.*

UA had never shied away from the harsh reality of this fact. Their motto, their tests, everything about the school was the very definition of ‘Plus Ultra’. It didn’t stop the anxious knot in Toshinori’s chest from tightening as he watched the scene below. He’d known what was coming, and still somehow felt it was a little unfair.

Izuku’s expression was one of someone who for the first time was experiencing what it was like to feel the pressure of being at the top. The expectation to win, the drive to dethrone those who had achieved greatness, all of it was something that Toshinori had been living with for his entire adult career. He hadn’t been allowed the luxury of failure, not for a long time. It was something most heroes didn’t even truly understand, how that could wear on someone.

Lucky for Izuku, he hadn’t made the mistake of stepping on others on his way to this first place. Toshinori smiled a little as Ochako stepped towards the boy, the Hatsume girl taking up his other side. Izuku looked like he might’ve cried, if he was the sort to allow himself to cry in public. A cavalry battle required teamwork, and the choice to so willingly work with others was a skill that many of class A had still to learn. Izuku had learned it on his own, and it was rewarded.

“He’s done well for himself, huh?”

A voice at the edge of the teacher’s seats drew Toshinori’s attention away from the stadium centre. It
took him a minute to recognize the girl before him. She was around Izuku’s age, and held a small child in her arms. The two of them shared aquatic scales on their skin around their eyes and neck, with the younger sporting sharp teeth. The younger was wearing an ‘All Might’ T-shirt, a sight that made never failed to make Toshinori both flattered and self-conscious. It clicked as the girl held out a hand to shake across the barrier.

“Aiko Nanase. Midoriya rescued my little sister from that villain at the mall. You’re his guardian, right?”

“Toshinori Yagi. Guardian and teacher, yes.” He introduced himself, taking her offered hand. Technically, civilians weren’t meant to sit in the teacher’s chairs, but Hizashi and Shouta were in the announcer’s booth. He was pleased to see the girl, knowing how much it would mean to Izuku. Toshinori gestured to the vacant seats beside him.

“Would you like to join me to watch the show?”

Aiko smiled, taking the seat offered. She was built sort of gazelle-like, mostly legs which she struggled to fold behind the seat in front of her. Toshinori could relate. She bounced her younger sister up and down in her lap, trying to divert Sayuri’s attention away from her current interest: Toshinori himself. Toshinori noticed that Aiko’s wave of dark hair had been tied back, a Red Riot themed clip holding her bangs back from her face.

“I heard Midoriya won the first match, I had to get Sayuri from daycare first before I could make it. Did he make a good first impression?”

“More than good.” He replied confidently “From what the business students have been saying, his only downfall is the lack of flashiness in his Quirk.” Toshinori gazed down upon the scene below, taking in Izuku’s choice of team. Tokoyami, Ochako, and Mei Hatsume.

It was not a team he would’ve thought of, but that was perhaps the goal. Dark Shadow was a Quirk that had many potential uses, and defence was often overlooked.

“He’s a thinker, isn’t he?” Aiko murmured, echoing Toshinori’s thoughts. She was leaning around Sayuri, blue eyes narrowed as she peered at dot of green where Izuku stood. “He’s got a long range Quirk user, a mid-range and a close-range to round out his group.”

She was right, Toshinori realized. As the siren wailed its start and the teams began to move, Izuku’s choices started to make sense. He knew he’d be targeted, so using Dark Shadow allowed him the chance to get close to the other teams without risking his own headband. Smart. Everyone aimed for Izuku’s team, the true goal of the competition clear: Someone had to knock the number one from their pedestal. This was going to be a brutal show.

Sayuri, who’d been busying herself with staring up at Toshi and squeezing a soft rabbit plushie up until this point, spoke up. She pointed at Bakugou unerringly, watching with wide eyes as the boy launched himself for Izuku’s headband with a roar honestly more fitting for a supervillain.

“Is Midoriya gonna die?”

“Sayuri-”
“He won’t die.” Toshinori assured, chuckling a little nervously. He supposed Bakugou did seem a little threatening to small children. “He might get a little singed.”

Sayuri peered at Toshinori more closely, her hand halfway in her mouth. She moved her fingers away from her face, this time her question more direct.

“You have bunny ears like Usa. Do you have a Bunny-Quirk?” She held up her plushie, and Toshinori couldn’t help the flush that ran up his face (somewhere behind him, Thirteen had overhead. They were trying to smother their laughter with coughing).

“Er, no. I’m afraid I’m Quirkless.” A white lie, but a necessary one.

Sayuri considered this with the ponderous nature of a very serious small child, her eyes roving over his thin and sickly form. It was with utter care that she placed her bunny plushie in the man’s lap, wiggling until she was better seated in her sister’s lap.

“Usa will protect you then, since Midoriya’s not around.”

This time, Thirteen couldn’t control their cackling. Toshinori held the rabbit, trying in vain to make Aiko’s embarrassed flush return to normal. Children truly didn’t have any filters, how frightening.

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Iida at first hadn’t known what to make of Midoriya. He’d grown up in a household where rules and order were held to the highest esteem, honour not far behind. To let a villain into the hero course, at its core, was a moral issue that he still wrestled with. Perhaps because against all odds, he liked Midoriya.

Liking someone made it difficult to see their flaws, or the threat they posed to you as a competitor. The Midoriya that just as soon stuttered his way through answering questions in class, who gushed over analyzations of vigilantes and villains alike, was ultimately the person that had broken the engines of his leg. He was the one who had put Iida’s training on the backburner, and though Iida understood that Midoriya had little choice he couldn’t help the small fear in his chest that he wouldn’t place well in this competition. Iida wanted so badly to make his family proud, to make his brother proud. He couldn’t do that if he couldn’t use his leg engines to the best of their ability.

Tensei was definitely watching this competition. Iida hadn’t been able to talk with his brother much about the whole villain attack. Due to UA’s request to secrecy, he’d only been able to hedge around Midoriya’s presence in their class. Iida suspected that if Tensei had known that the villain that’d broken his little brother’s leg was now a member of class, he wouldn’t have been pleased. He’d gone to school with about half of UA’s current teachers, and probably would’ve wanted to have words with them. If the Iida family was honourable, then Tensei personified those values. To allow a villain into the school was at face value, tainting those morals.
Tensei never underestimated a villain, and never made stupid mistakes. He was noble, and to Iida the personification of a hero. He couldn’t help but feel like in comparison, he’d underestimated Midoriya time and time again. First with the villain battle, then in class. Iida at every turn had made stupid mistakes, and he worried now that it’d negatively affect his results in this competition.

It’d led to Midoriya being comparable to Bakugou, or Todoroki in strength. All the while, Iida had moved nowhere, remaining stagnant but friendly. How was that fair? What picture did that paint on his own growth?

This all boiled down to the fact that Iida had felt compelled to compete against Midoriya, not just befriend him. Because someone had to acknowledge that Midoriya was strong, stronger than many of the students that had begun the year at UA. Iida didn’t know if Midoriya was stronger than him, but he felt like it was his duty to find out. Otherwise, his encounter with Midoriya meant that he’d learned nothing. He needed to stay on his toes, and the best way to do that was to shake things up.

So he’d paired up with Todoroki, Kaminari and Yaoyozuru, hoping against hope that it’d be enough to prove himself.

Todoroki was a strong leader, naturally cool and calm in the face of adversity. It made going into this battle a little like becoming part of a well-oiled machine. Iida knew what was coming, and didn’t flinch as the insulating blanket draped itself over his shoulders. He knew what being electrocuted felt like thanks to Midoriya, and felt bad for the competition. He heard rather than saw the electrical onslaught, hearing the clicking noise of jaws locking and people groaning through gritted teeth.

_Ouch._

Todoroki’s ice was next, sticking people in place. Iida moved, carrying the others so that headbands could be collected. It all happened in a blur, class B unable to keep up with his speed.

_He could do this._

Dark Shadow was the real problem with Midoriya’s team, creating a defence hard to break. Yaoyozuru created a huge fly swatter from her side, and it forced the shadow creature back from stealing their headbands. Yet there wasn’t much to be done to actually _stop_ Dark Shadow, not without more light than they could create. They were also running out of time. The cavalry battle was a short, dirty match, and they’d spend their last minutes trying to dodge around Dark Shadow at this point. It was a goose chase that Iida could keep up with, but not win.

They wouldn’t make it, as things stood.

Iida knew that they’d have to be faster than Tokoyami, and right now there was only one thing he
could think of that might make it. He wasn’t the planner, but he could feel Todoroki’s growing frustration, and Yaoyozuru’s doubt, and Kaminari’s exhaustion. They needed to act.

“Everyone. We only have a few minutes left, so I’m going to use a trick that’ll render me useless. I need you to grab the headband the minute after I use my Quirk.”

“Iida?” Todoroki’s surprise didn’t faze him. Iida’s focus was on Midoriya. His eyes were glued to Todoroki, trying to figure out his next move. He wasn’t looking at Iida, having determined him legs and nothing more. It was a blind spot. Iida remembered Midoriya’s words when they’d first met, about how a person’s eyes indicated their target. He fought down a smile.

He’s underestimated me. Good.

Iida revved his engines, hoping that Todoroki knew enough to hang on tightly. He hadn’t perfected this move, but there wasn’t time for perfect. ‘Recipro Burst’ launched them forward, so that the wind blasted back Iida’s hair and he felt Todoroki jolt on top of him. He felt the collision of their two teams, a brief scuffle leading to Midoriya crying out and clutching feebly at the air. Between Todoroki’s clenched fists was his headband, the ends flying in the breeze.

Iida felt a smile threaten to take over his face, even as his engines stalled and they shuddered to a stop. Even the sound of Kaminari retching from the motion sickness couldn’t bring down his mood. He’d done it. He’d done it! He hoped Tensei had seen that, because Iida was all but vibrating from the sudden rush of adrenaline and thrill. He almost threw Todoroki, his hands itching to make chopping motions of triumph.

Stay calm. Stay calm. No celebrating just yet.

“We’re not done yet.” Even Yaoyozuru’s words of caution felt like barely a dent in his mood. Iida turned with his team, seeing that Midoriya’s expression of disbelief had quickly melted into determination. The familiar expression of hyper-focus had entered his expression as he rallied his teammates.

“They’re coming back for us!” Kaminari yelped, sweat and exhaustion clear on his face.

Iida grit his teeth, his legs stinging and his engines too hot to use.

Above him Todoroki’s left side had started to steam, his right cold to the touch.

“I’ve got this.” He muttered, tone cold and certain.

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“You want to know what I think? I think all of you in class A underestimated us and it kicked you in the teeth.”
This was how Katsuki found his headband gone.

One moment, he’d felt pretty fucking confident. On top of the fucking world. He was destroying shit and honestly having a good time and he had a plan in mind for getting back at fucking flame-face for daring to ignore him as a threat.

Then he was blinking in surprise, his headband snatched by a plain-looking Class B reject with a damn smirk on his face.

Monoma was going to die. Katsuki was going to personally make sure of it. He was going to die so he’d never make the mistake of underestimating the bastard again.

All of this was decided of course in a haze of red, with Kirishima’s voice sounding like a gnat in the distance and Katsuki’s anger pulsating under his skin. Deep breath exercises were shit. Blowing shit up was so much more cathartic, and this was the perfect opportunity to be mad. More cathartic at least, than acknowledging that they were now without points, and time was slipping rapidly away.

Then the bastard had the nerve to gloat, like he hadn’t just been underhanded as hell and earned his victory through sneakiness than actual talent.

“We’re in second place, huh? Seems to be a comfy place. Let’s focus on keeping what we’ve got, eh?” Monoma’s voice drawled, had a lazy cant to it that itched under Katsuki’s skin. He spoke just loudly enough that it was obvious he wanted Katsuki to hear. His words sat in Katsuki like an acid bomb, fuelling his rage to new heights. The bastard didn’t even want first place, wasn’t even willing to work for it. Losing to Half-n’-Half would’ve been insulting, but this. This was mortifying in a way that was quickly becoming intolerable. Katsuki growled, the noise an inarticulate stream of cursing and wordless rage.

“Dude, calm down.” Kirishima begged beneath him. His face was also flushed in disappointment, glaring at Monoma. “We need to come up with a strategy and we can’t do that when you’re angry.”

Monoma’s blue eyes were mocking as they flicked towards him. Proud as a cat, he laughed. His voice took on a sadistic edge, cold eyes picking apart Katsuki’s weaknesses and laying them out to bear. His gaze slipped down, towards Katsuki’s wrists. The smile became cruel.

“Aw, is the big bad class A student afraid? What’re you gonna do, cry? Is that why you’ve got those scars? Ugly, aren’t they? Just like your personali-”

Katsuki was launching himself into the air before the sentence was complete, his heart thundering in his ears and his teeth bared. He landed on the solid air shield, but it might have been made of tissue paper for all it was worth. His sweat was fire, coating down his arms and erupting into a ball of sound and light that shattered the wall and singed Monoma’s hair. The class B student flinched, crying out. Katsuki’s hands lunged for his throat, but grabbed onto the headbands.
Angry or not, he’d never sacrifice the chance to annihilate someone in competition.

“Choke and die!” He spat, falling away from Monoma’s stunned face. Two headbands were clutched between his fingers, slick with sweat and nitroglycerine.

Present Mic’s voice echoed over the stadium.

“A late shake-up in the rankings, folks! That’s the spirit of youth for ya!”

Katsuki felt Sero’s tape latch itself around his middle, dragging him back to his cavalry. His voice was plaintive, though his aim hadn’t faltered.

“Some warning would be nice next time!”

Kirishima’s voice was breathless, half chiding and half impressed. He’d heard what Monoma had said, they all had. His Quirk was half-ridged across his face, sweat pooling down his spine.

“We’re guaranteed to move on now, but that kid is a prick-”

“I AIN’T DONE YET!” Katsuki roared, his palms burning and something in his chest tightening into a coil fit to burst. He wanted to hit something, his anger sharpening into a diamond fit to tear someone apart into shreds. He didn’t want to look at anyone, could feel his team under him like a living unit.

Somehow, in some way, Class A had become protective of one another. Somewhere between fighting for their lives, competing and fighting and constantly trying to outdo one another, they’d entered an unspoken pact. Did it include even Bakugou, the most volatile of their ranks? The guy who couldn’t even remember the names of his own classmates?

“What’s your plan, then?” Ashido spoke up, her voice steady. She’d cut off Bakugou’s tirade, so that he looked down at her in surprise. Her grip on his foot had changed, tightening so that her feet could plant them steady on the arena. Her dark eyes had taken on a dangerous glint. She’d heard.

Beside her, Sero’s grin had become knife-pointed at its edges. He still had his tape strapped to Katsuki’s middle, a steady line back to their team.

Kirishima’s shoulders were strong and unyielding at his front. His red spikes were turning hard and jagged with his Quirk.

All of them were looking towards Katsuki, awaiting his command. His rage, before uncultivated, had a sudden and pointed outlet. His voice was rock-steady.

“We’re taking our points back, and the ten million. Soy-Sauce: Tape, now!”
“It’s Sero, you bastard!”

As one, they charged. Monoma had gone white as a sheet at the sudden onslaught.

Sero’s tape landed on the ground by Monoma, at a glance missing the target. Katsuki didn’t hesitate.

“Raccoon-Face, melt a path with your acid!”

“It’s Mina Ashido!” Mina thrust her hand forward, spilling acid along the ground and turning it into a slick slip n’ slide.

The sound of Sero’s tape whirred in all of their ears as he pulled them forward, hard. Katsuki rode the sudden momentum, his focus on Monoma’s forehead where the headband sat. His anger, his fear, all of it pushed itself into his fist until all Katsuki could think about was how satisfying this punch was going to feel. Nothing flashy, no big explosions or fireworks. Those who didn’t constantly put in one hundred percent, weren’t even worth blasting with his Quirk.

He decked Monoma, fast and dirty. The satisfying ‘crack’ rang through Katsuki’s arm up to his elbow, to his shoulder. The boy fell off his team’s ‘horse’ with a grunt, landing on the ground face-first. He lay there unmoving, his teammates looking on in stunned fear.

In Katsuki’s hand, the final headband came free.

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Twenty Seconds.

Todoroki felt as if the time was stretching before him, a path he couldn’t speed or slow even if he wanted to. He was locked eye to eye with Midoriya, his hand half up as the crazy bastard launched himself forward towards his face. There was no regard for safety in those eyes, only a desperate, unbridled focus to win.

Why does he keep looking at me like that?

The thought came to Shouto slowly, like molasses between his ears. Why did Midoriya seem so determined to win, what was driving him? No father, certainly. As far as Todoroki knew, the boy only had a mother watching him from home.

Doesn’t he see that I have to win? That there’s no choice?

He’d even flipped the headbands inwards to hide values, reshuffled them to confuse Midoriya’s Quirk. All of this in an effort to make winning impossible. It should be impossible. He’d never lost
before, not to anyone his age. Not to anyone who didn’t matter.

Shouto had never let him consider what would happen should he lose. The thought was an endless void, a maw opening up to his panic and anger. In it, was fire. The ice on his right side, the ache in his joints… all of it started to thaw as his left began to warm. Steam hovered on his breath, dangerously close to the surface. His hair began to smoke.

Todoroki looked away from his arm, and for a moment saw his mother’s face in Midoriya’s.

His leg burned, the bruises that his father had given him that morning flaring up in agony. Shouto fell back, a wordless noise leaving his lips.

He shoved the fire down, freezing it over even as Midoriya’s hand closed around one of the headbands. It was too late anyway, Shouto hadn’t been able to smooth down his expression, hadn’t been able to block in time.

In the last moments before the alarm bell wailed and the event ended, Shouto saw a shift in Midoriya’s expression. It was a face slack with confusion, occupied with putting sudden puzzle pieces together. Shouto had broken his own promise to himself, but he was far more frightened of the look Midoriya gave him as they both fell back to their own cavalry team.

It was over.

He hadn’t lost, but he didn’t feel like he’d won at all.

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_He’s a bad dad. He hits his son. His son keeps flinching when he lifts his arm too quickly. He’s badbadbad-

The memory came to Izuku, a sharp stabbing pain in the back of his head. One of the first times Shigaraki had made him look at video footage in order to glean information on someone. He’d forgotten about it, locked away those early days somewhere deep in his own mind so that he didn’t have to break down over it. Everything from those days hurt to think about, like a rotting tooth he kept accidentally touching with his tongue.

The child in the video footage hadn’t been Todoroki, but that didn’t mean anything. Izuku knew that Endeavour had lots of children. He knew more about Endeavour really than he ever wanted to know. He’d never really considered the fact that he might run into one of the man’s kids, even
knowing Todoroki’s Quirk.

If Izuku were being honest with himself, maybe he hadn’t wanted to see the similarities. He hadn’t wanted to think about the fact that his Quirk told him that Japan’s top heroes had a monster amongst their ranks.

In the end, his team had won fourth place. It was more than Izuku expected, given the odds stacked against them from the get-go. He had a hard time feeling proud of it, a sour feeling settling in his stomach that had nothing to do with sore losing. He was going to vomit, it was just a question of when and if he could find a private place to do it. His memories were floating to the surface, because now he couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Because now that he could see clearly, Todoroki wasn’t behaving the way he should for someone who for all of his life had been raised to be the best he could be. His head was down, his breathing laboured as he clutched at the scarred half of his face. A panic attack, tightly controlled and trained to appear like normal exhaustion.

Todoroki wasn’t looking at him. Really, he wasn’t looking at anyone. Since the match ended, he’d taken to staring at the ground sightlessly as Midnight announced the victories and losses of the event. He was quiet, but the other students wouldn’t take notice of that. Todoroki had always been quiet, had never been one to thaw the layer of ice that seemed perpetually wrapped around him. His hands kept clenching and unclenching at his sides, as if he were trying to regain sensation in them. The longer Izuku looked, the more and more he wanted to be sick. Sometimes, his Quirk saw too much for its own good.

Class A collectively gathered towards the exit, chattering amongst themselves about the results. Izuku was swept up in it, Ochako and Iida on either side talking excitedly about the matches. He could barely listen in, his Quirk working on overdrive. His head had been hurting the entire competition, but it was growing sharper. His wrist ached, but Izuku hardly cared.

Todoroki passed them, and there was nothing he could come up with that didn’t sound too knowing or patronizing. Not here, not in front of everyone. No one would appreciate that sort of help, if it could even be defined as help. What could he say? What words could he try to unlock the frozen feeling at the back of his throat. Izuku wanted to scream, because what he’d seen in Todoroki’s stare in that battle was a mirror image of his own face.

Todoroki spoke for him. Izuku would later wonder if he’d gather up the courage to do so otherwise.

Endeavour’s son had a soft voice, when it was frightened. Izuku’s eyes slipped shut, knowing that no one else was listening. The sick feeling in the back of his throat lingered.

“Meet me in the east alcove in ten minutes.”

Then Todoroki was gone, and Izuku was left staring at the limp in the boy’s leg as he pushed his way through the crowd, and vanished.
Gengar used "cursed body", it was super effective!

Me, Yelling: "I heard you wanted some plot development with a side of angst?"

The first time Izuku heard of the name ‘Todoroki’, he’d been six years old. Endeavour had been a test run in many ways for All Might, and Shigaraki had gotten all he could on the man for an anonymous client. Izuku shuddered at the memory of that time, an echo of Shigaraki’s demands.

“We need to show them that working with us is worth the price tag. Our investor has a very strong Quirk, and a vendetta against Endeavour. That’s where you come in, Ghost.”

What made a hero?

If Endeavour was considered to be one of the best out there, Izuku had decided long ago that fundamentally the definition of the term was broken. He was a hero by being powerful, instead of actually having a moral compass. The accounts of damage, physical or emotional that Endeavour had caused probably exceeded that of the average villain in Japan, but his name stretched far.

Ten accounts of arson and destruction of personal property. That’s how many charges that’d likely stick against me. He thought, trying to keep himself calm. The investor had wanted Izuku to glean information on Endeavour’s investments, and had used them to commit acts of arson. There’d been more, but Izuku had only been involved with ten of them personally.

Here he was talking to the man’s son, who had no idea that Izuku was anything more than a particularly annoying transfer student.

Todoroki stood in the half-shaded east alcove across from Izuku, saying nothing but staring hard. He seemed to have calmed down at some point, the ice wall back up so Izuku struggled to read his face. Nothing could hide the fear in the boy’s mismatched eyes, though.

“You wanted to talk?”
The silence stretched between them, awkward and heavy. Izuku’s stomach was still churning, he’d gone to the bathroom to vomit in the hopes that he wouldn’t do so now. He felt both hungry and sick at the same time.

“The dining hall’s gonna be packed if we don’t hurry.” Izuku tried for a smile, but it faded as Todoroki failed to return or acknowledge it.

_Geez, talk about an icy reception._

He sighed, his shoulders heaving with the motion. He cast a glance at Todoroki’s leg, which he was still favouring.

“Okay, I’ll cut the crap then. You’re limping and I want to know why.”

“Why are there rumours that All Might is interested in you?” Todoroki countered, his hands crossed over his chest. Izuku would have liked to know that one himself, personally.

“Look. You know what my Quirk is: Analysis, right? I don’t know how much you were listening on my first day of class but…sometimes I see things that people don’t want me to know.”

Izuku glanced at Todoroki from under his eyelashes, seeing his classmate shuffle and shift away the statement: _uncomfortable with the topic_. He wasn’t sure how much he should give away that he knew, or could at least guess given the information he already had. He also didn’t know how to address it without revealing himself to be not your average citizen. How did you discuss past criminal charges?

Thankfully, Todoroki seemed to have called Izuku to this meeting for a reason. He took a deep breath, apparently grounding himself before he shoved both hands deep in his pockets and ploughing ahead.

“Secrets in my family are second nature. My father is the second most powerful man arguably in all of Japan. It’s bought him enemies, and his personality is in constant eye of the press. Yet my father doesn’t care about that. He’s only surpassed by one person, and that person is a pillar in the community that’s impossible to defeat. At least in my father’s eyes, All Might is a roadblock and an eyesore that he’s never been able to surpass. Not in his generation at least.”

Todoroki began to tell Izuku what his Quirk had already suspected a long time ago. Quirk marriages rarely ended happily, and Endeavour was rich and powerful even before he’d met Todoroki’s mother. The childhood Todoroki described was a painful and tense one.

“My father raised me to surpass All Might, as the perfect combination of his and my mother’s Quirk. Do you understand what that means? I’m a tool for his ambition.” A hand lifted towards his eye, the burn ugly and vivid across his pale skin. He touched it gently, his gaze flicking upwards to glare at Izuku. “My mother… his treatment of her eventually drove her crazy. She hated my left side. He turned the most gentle person I knew against me because she was also trapped.”
Izuku’s throat felt tight, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. The sick feeling in his stomach grew stronger.

“She did that to you?” He asked, even as he knew the answer. Todoroki smiled, but it wasn’t a happy thing. His shoulders raised and lowered, nevery denying or confirming anything.

“I vowed never to use fire in a fight against an opponent. You pushed me far enough today that I nearly used his part of my Quirk.”

His Quirk. Izuku’s arms came to wrap themselves around his middle, a sour taste at the back of his mouth. It was an echo of his own feelings towards his Quirk not too long ago. It wasn’t hard to feel like his Quirk was eating him alive, a force to control and subdue. Izuku struggled because he couldn’t turn it off, and for Todoroki to have two incredibly visible halves of his Quirk show through his features seemed like a cruel twist of fate.

He hadn’t told anybody about what he’d known about Endeavour, or what he’d known about a lot of different heroes. Until now, Izuku had convinced himself that it’d been safer that way. Airing out dirty laundry without evidence would cause mistrust, he couldn’t really do anything, it was his word against someone better than he was. All of these reasons had been swimming around in the back of his mind until now. He’d given what he could, kept to himself, and promised that he’d find a way to get Eri out from under the League’s thumb on his own. That way, he’d never have to face the responsibility of what he’d done. He’d never have to think about what his Quirk could do, if left unchecked and uncontrolled.

Don’t think about it.

He’d told himself he was tired of being used as a tool for someone else’s benefit, and in the process let Todoroki be used as one for this father. His Quirk had ended lives, but this was somehow worse. Izuku could look and pinpoint just how much Todoroki had suffered this close, now that he let himself look.

His Quirk pointed out the signs, a mirror to his own upbringing. Dozens of colourless nicks, marks that could be from roughhousing but now screamed a punch too hard or a kick aimed too forcefully. The scar on Todoroki’s face, the closed off expression, all of it screamed Help Me and Leave Me Alone in a combination that was frighteningly familiar.

Izuku’s teeth found their way to his lower lip, finding a home there and sinking in deep. His fingertips dug into the jagged texture of the overlapping scars on his arms.

“I’d appreciate if you kept your observations to yourself, in the future.” Todoroki broke the silence, gazing at him flatly. “I wanted you to know, because I know minds jump to conclusions without information. I still intend to beat you in this competition, but I’ll do it under my own power.”

“Todoroki,” Izuku struggled to keep his voice even. Todoroki’s expression was blank, whatever he was feeling was trapped under a thick sheet of ice. Unknowable, unnameable. Izuku felt so far away
from him, a yawning gap ever widening in between. “Todoroki. What did he do to your leg?”

Mismatched eyes flickered. Todoroki frowned, consciously straightening his leg so that he rested on it again. If he was in pain, he didn’t show it. He seemed miles away, and Izuku wanted to shout in frustration because Todoroki wasn’t listening and was out of his reach despite being right in front of him somehow.

“I look forward to competing with you Midoriya, even if you won’t tell me how you’re connected to All Might. Sorry for wasting your time.”

No.

“Todoroki!”

He paused, Izuku’s voice ragged and far too emotional. Izuku pressed on, forcing past the screaming at the back of his mind that warned him not to reveal too much, not to trust. What would he have wanted to hear when he’d been trapped still? When everything had seemed hopeless and he’d been hanging onto his own sanity by a thread?

Your eyes looked like they needed help.

Ochako’s words had been the first to reach him. It’d been an admission that she had seen him, that he wasn’t alone.

“Everything I am… I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for the people that helped me.”

Todoroki’s eyes narrowed in confusion, his hands slipping out of his pockets. His mouth opened, probably to argue or deny it. Izuku didn’t give him the chance. “My mother… it’s really, really hard to explain, but I grew up without her. I only got the chance to be with her, to have friends, when I came to UA. My childhood… What I’m saying is I can understand why you keep people at arm’s length.”

Izuku looked at his hand, where a jagged scar ran from thumb to palm in a perfect crescent. Magne had given him it during training once, a matching one soon after made on her own. It was the one mark he wasn’t afraid of. He curled a fist around it, feeling stronger for it.

“I’m not All Might. I’m still working on what I think a hero is, but… I think I want to be the sort of hero that lets others know that they’re not alone. And if I need to beat you to do that then I will, but… I want you to know that I’ll win if you don’t give it all you’ve got. It’s the only way I can repay the people who’ve helped me this far.”

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In the shadow of an alcove, Katsuki sat with the knowledge that he’d listened in on something he probably wasn’t meant to hear. His curiosity had gotten the better of him when his two main
competitors had disappeared. He hadn’t put it past Deku after his first scheme with that support student not to try and collaborate somehow.

He hadn’t expected to stumble upon Half-n’-Half’s ‘Tragic Backstory™’. He knew a thing or two about dysfunctional families, but he had the uncomfortable feeling that Todoroki’s took the cake. The implied in the silences of this conversation made Katsuki uncomfortable, and angry in a way he didn’t often feel. He wasn’t protective by nature, and this felt misplaced given the fact that he didn’t even know Todoroki that well.

Katsuki unconsciously wrapped himself further in the coat Ashido had given him after the last match, a bright green monstrosity with a fur hood. It gave him a feeling of safety, his sweatbands gone and his hand shown in regards to how he felt about people mocking him for his own scars. He told himself it wasn’t an act of weakness, that he’d pretended to be cold, so it was alright. Ashido barely knew him either, but had given him it with steady confidence. As if they were already fast friends, she hadn’t had to think about the act of kindness. Katsuki envied that.

His mind flitted to his own mom, how despite their own unstable relationship he’d never looked at her the way Todoroki had looked when he spoke of his old man. Katsuki’s mouth twisted itself into an expression of distaste, torn between a rising feeling of pity and a complete hatred of such emotions. In Todoroki’s position he wouldn’t want to be fucking pitied.

But… he’d never been in Todoroki’s position, either. He’d never really encountered anything like this, except for maybe Izuku’s situation, and he’d dealt with it with pretending Izuku didn’t exist most of the time. Which was also considered ‘problematic’ if his therapist’s judging silences were anything to go by.

Shit.

He really should have just stayed put in the class locker room. Katsuki Bakugou was not equipped to deal with the fact that class 1-A was slowly knitting itself together into something connective and organically protective of each other. He could only watch as he was swept up, unable to be left behind by the very nature of the dynamic.

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Okay, so Toshinori didn’t always have the best working relationship with other pro heroes. He tried, don’t let anyone think he didn’t, but being at the top invited a lot of resentment, and a lot of opportunity for unwanted criticism to be directed his way.

Endeavour was a bit of a special case. The man never even bothered trying to be polite, and Toshinori privately felt that being courteous to him was like trying to be courteous to an angry bee
He’d just meant to give Izuku a little pep talk, and get Aiko and Sayuri some yakitori. The headache of navigating Endeavour’s grudge and cryptic behaviour had been an unpleasant surprise that’d made him panic and use his other form. Being All-Might, he couldn’t just go on his way without greeting his coworker. His joints ached and popped from the sudden shift back and forth, resenting him for it.

Izuku was in the holding hall before his match, stress-muttering to himself with a preoccupied expression on his features. He kept spinning his staff, the sound of it periodically striking the dusty ground a steady rhythm. Despite how well he’d done so far, Izuku seemed worried. There were shadows under his eyes, his green hair falling into his face as he kept brushing it back every few minutes in frustration. His expression lightened just a little upon seeing Toshinori, running forward to meet him.

“You’re doing well so far! You’ve made a good impression on the audience!” Toshinori congratulated him, smiling as a pleased flush burned its way up Izuku’s neck. The boy laughed, beaming. He fidgeted a little in place, confidence fading.

“R-really? I feel like I’ve been getting by on the skin of my teeth.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, you’ve even got a few fans who’ve come to see how you’ve done.” Pleased surprise, and then delight, flitted across Izuku’s face as Toshinori told him about Aiko and Sayuri’s appearance. “They want to meet up after the match if it’s alright with you. Aiko said she gave you her number, but didn’t realise you might not have a cell phone. We should fix that, by the way.”

Izuku’s smile faded as he cast a glance back towards the mouth of the stadium, worry creeping back into his face along with something pensive. He didn’t seem wholly focused on the match, though he should have been. Toshinori kept his silence, unsure if his advice would be welcome by the boy. Izuku often needed to approach someone first in order to feel comfortable asking questions. It was something he’d found out during their training together.

Sure enough, the quiet eventually drew the boy out of his shell.

“Hey, Toshinori… Do you know Endeavour?”

The mention of the man Toshinori had just spent the last ten minutes navigating around gave him pause. His brows knit themselves together, confused. How did the boy know Endeavour besides by name? What did he matter to Izuku?

“I have a professional working relationship with the man, yes. Why do you ask?”
Izuku bit his lip, his gaze shuttered. Instead of answering, he asked another question. This one made Toshinori a little uneasy of the boy’s analytical stare.

“Do you know what All Might… or other heroes tend to think of him? Like, as a person?”

This was delicate territory, Toshinori felt. He hummed, trying to keep his voice affable and unbothered as possible.

“Professionally he’s very good at his job. Personally… I’ve met heroes with more tact if I’m being honest. I’d suspect that All Might would feel similarly, perhaps more so given how often he works with the man.”

“You shouldn’t trust him.” Izuku blurted, not quite meeting Toshinori’s gaze. The vehemence in his voice sent the beginning of warning bells in the back of Toshinori’s mind. He frowned, trying to catch Izuku’s eye. The boy’s sudden change in emotion was abrupt and worrying. To elicit such a response made Toshinori’s suspicion grow.

“My boy, what…? What do you mean? Has the man said something to you or another student?”

Huffing, Izuku shrugged and looked away in seeming frustration. For the first time in his life, Toshinori got the unsettling feeling that Izuku was struggling to lie to him, something the boy did as naturally as breathing.

“I just. Get a bad vibe from him. That’s all. It’s not… if I told you, I’m worried… That’s why I wanted to know about All Might and what he thought of Endeavour. He might be able to do something. If he knew.”

Toshinori didn’t even really have time to feel a little offended that Izuku felt as if he couldn’t defend himself from Endeavour’s anger if he directed it towards him. He was too busy being confused and more than a little worried. Izuku clammed up given even the slightest whiff of disapproval from someone. The fact that he was forcing himself to speak through clear discomfort, this close to a match, didn’t bode well. Especially if the boy was willing to go so far as to try and get into contact with All Might.

Not that Toshinori could just shift form, go full on “I am Here!” and risk Izuku having a small breakdown over the breach of trust that’d been steadily building between them. That would end badly for all.

“I suspect that if All Might heard from a reliable source that there was reason to be distrustful of Endeavour, then he would do all in his power to resolve the issue. However, if you’re worried about something that might gravely affect another person’s quality of life or your own… Aizawa-Sensei would also be a good person to talk to.”

Izuku startled, looking up at Toshinori in confusion. Toshinori elaborated.

“He is your homeroom teacher, and official guardian while in the walls of UA. I do not know what it is that you’re so reluctant to reveal about Endeavour, but Aizawa-sensei is required to do his utmost to ensure all his students are safe, including you or anyone else. No matter who it might be, he would do his best to uphold that. He might also be easier for you to talk to.”

Which was a bitter pill doused in irony given their current discussion, but Toshinori could swallow
his pride for the boy’s peace of mind.

Toshinori watched as the boy seemed to consider the option, releasing a breath he’d been holding throughout the conversation. He was relieved to see a bit of the tension melt from Izuku’s shoulders. He didn’t seem completely done with questions, however. His voice was quiet, as if he wasn’t sure if Toshinori wanted to actually listen or just act as a sounding board.

“Have you ever been ashamed of something. As in like, so ashamed that it seems almost better if you don’t even think or talk about it? People say it wasn’t your fault what happened… but you can’t help but feel g-guilty.”

Oh.

Don’t forget your smile, Toshinori!

Nana’s voice came over Toshinori unexpectedly. He allowed himself a moment to remember her, the billow of her cape as she stood in falling snow twisting a knife into his chest. It was an old injury though, no blood left to bleed from it. His eyes drifted shut briefly, pained.

“Yes. When I was just starting out as a hero.” He admitted.

“How’d you cope with it?” Izuku asked, a desperate edge to his voice. “Because I feel like all I’m doing is hurting people by not talking, but every time I try I j-just-” His breathing hitched, and the boy clutched at his chest, fingers twisting the fabric of his gym uniform.

Toshinori thought about those first few months, after Nana’s death. When everything had tasted like ash and getting out of bed had felt like a chore if he wasn’t doing it for the sole purpose of hunting that person down. Vengeance was poisonous, but he’d been too young and too angry to care. Gran Torino had only been able to try and steer him through the worst of it, to catch him when he’d inevitably ended up nearly killing himself to get some sort of feeling of closure. He thought about how it’d felt like bleeding himself dry to talk about her, how he still couldn’t say her damn name.

“You talk about it. Even if it hurts.” He murmured, forcing himself to look Izuku in the eye. “You keep talking, until it stops hurting so much, and you try your best to be honest about when you need help. And you smile, because it helps you remember that you can.”

The stadium rang, a piercing wail that signalled the beginning of the one on one matches. Izuku startled like a rabbit, his head jerking towards the source of the noise with wide eyes. When he looked back, Toshinori was grinning, the smile forced but warm. He gave the boy a thumbs up, clapping him on the shoulder with one bony hand.

“Never forget that I’m expecting great things from you, that there are people who believe in you.”

Izu’s wobbly, uncertain smile wasn’t perfect, but it was enough. The boy clutched his staff between his hands, green eyes glassy. He reached up to scrub at them, a congested laugh bubbling
up from his chest.

“N-no wonder you’re friends with All Might,” The boy stuttered. “You’re both good at smiling under pressure. Better than I am.”

“I’d hope I’m handsomer.” Toshinori jibed. Izuku snorted, the sound wet but amused.

When he went to face Hitoshi Shinsou, his eyes were dry and his smile was firm.

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“Whatever you do Midoriya, don’t respond to his questions.”

That’d been the only hint that Izuku had been given about Hitoshi Shinsou. Ojiro had given it to him after he resigned, claiming to have no memory of the cavalry event. It was the cherry on top of the list of things weighing on Izuku’s mind. He hadn’t noticed Shinsou throughout the entire tournament, and it was clear immediately that this had been intentional. The general course student had deliberately gone under the radar, because he had a mental Quirk like Izuku’s.

On the one hand if he lost this match, he had the comfort of knowing it’d be his own fault. It was pretty clear that whatever the kid’s Quirk was, it was voice-activated. He’d likely try trash-talking Izuku, to get a rise out of him. All he had to do was not respond if he wanted to remain unaffected. However, if he did end up winning this, he was in the ring with Todoroki. Izuku frankly wasn’t sure if that was better. A physical Quirk versus a mental Quirk made slim odds to begin with in a head-on match. The added factor that Todoroki might hate him just a little didn’t help.

At least Toshinori’s little pep talk had encouraged him. Izuku was starting to feel like the world had a vendetta out to make him the most anxious human being on the planet. Now all he had to do was not completely blow this, somehow defeat Todoroki despite having a Quirk that matched incredibly poorly against him, and not die so that he could find Aizawa-sensei and tell him somehow that Endeavour was an abusive piece of shit without revealing just how Izuku had come across said information.

Easy.

The stadium was excited for this match, if only because he was one half of the whole. Toshinori hadn’t lied when he’d said that people hadn’t expected him to come out on top, and the clear favouritism for an underdog was pretty clear. His approach to the ring was accompanied by a roar of approval on all sides.

Across from him, Shinsou stood apparently cool as a cucumber. This close, Izuku was able to get a
better look at the kid that’d declared war upon his entire class at the beginning of the festival.

His first thought was that Shinsou had a face that looked permanently exhausted. In Izuku’s automatic scan for physical weaknesses, the most he came up with was the boy was thin and not very sturdy looking as a whole. A bit like Aizawa, he looked one last breath away from a corpse. A plume of smoke-purple hair sprouted from his head, pushed back from his face. His expression was placid, his hands in his pockets, no sort of fighting stance.

*Cocky.*

Okay. Izuku could handle cocky. Cocky meant he’d underestimate.

“For this match, do what you can within reason. No kill shots, heroes are honourable first and foremost.” Cementoss instructed, building himself a chair in the shade by the edge of the arena.

Izuku swallowed, gripping his staff more tightly. He would do best to end this quickly, stun Shinsou with a quick pulse of electricity then drag him out of the ring. The faster he ended this, the less chance the kid could get him to accidentally say something. Plan in mind, Izuku put himself in a fighting stance. He met Shinsou’s steady gaze as the starting bell sounded, drowning out the applause around them.

A drawling voice spoke over the rallying of the crowd, immediately antagonizing and cruel.

“I suppose that *monkey* told you about my Quirk, huh? Too bad he was too stupid to defend against it himself.”

*Don’t react.*

Izuku dove forward, staff spinning outwards to aim a jab towards Shinsou’s head. The boy ducked, tall but surprisingly flexible. His mouth kept moving, unfazed by the strike. He hadn’t even blinked.

“You’re fast. Knew you would be of course. Lucky me, I know a thing or two about dodging. Having a Quirk that makes people wanna punch you makes you real good at that.”

Izuku pivoted on his heel, aiming this time for the boy’s side. Shinsou skirted out of the way by a breath, stumbling backwards. Despite the loss of ground, his eyes were burning a hole in Izuku’s skull.

“Tell me, *Midoriya.* Is that even your real name? Or is that a name that UA gave you when they decided to harbour a wanted criminal?”

The next strike Izuku stumbled, the swing not hard or fast enough.

*What?*

Shinsou dodged it easily, his grin widening across his face as he drank in the struck dumb expression on Izuku’s face.
“Oh, did I hit a nerve? Am I not supposed to talk about the elephant in this arena? Don’t tell me your classmates don’t know?”

*Shut up.*

The words hovered on Izuku’s lips, barely held back. He grit his teeth, afraid to even growl a curse word. He kicked out at Shinsou’s legs, tripping the boy up. He fell to the ground, but rolled out of the way a moment before Izuku could bring his staff down on his shoulder.

The roar of the crowd thundered in Izuku’s ears. The grip on his staff was slick with sweat. He flexed his grip on handle, his brain screaming for some kind of opening.

*He knows. How does he know? How much does he know please don’t let him know—*

“You know, I was pretty angry when I found out that a villain could earn a place in the hero course with no kind of examination or proof of their values. Colour me optimistic, but I’d hoped UA had more common sense. After all, their practical exam wasn’t exactly made for less flashy Quirks. I thought it was a joke, at first.” The smile slipped off the boy’s face as he rolled to his feet, wiping away a smudge of dirt on his chin. A tinge of bitterness crept into Shinsou’s voice. “But then, what kind of transfer student carries a pocket knife in the waistband of their uniform? Huh? Don’t think I don’t know what that looks like.”

He knew, and suddenly Shinsou’s jealous edge made perfect sense. Izuku might have kicked himself if he wasn’t terrified out of his mind. He could ruin *everything.*

Izuku launched himself forward, an inarticulate cry trapped in the back of his throat. This time, Shinsou wasn’t quite quick enough. The staff connected with his side, knocking the breath from his lungs. Izuku didn’t have a chance to shock him, the boy gripping the front of his gym shirt, forcing him to go down with him. Together they rolled, locked in a tousle with Izuku only just managing to keep a one-handed grip on his staff. Not close enough to the button to press it and stun Shinsou.

Izuku bit back a string of swearing, scrabbling for purchase.

Pressed into the ground, Shinsou’s voice hissed by his ear. It was vindictive and vicious.

“Tell me, *Ghost.* Do your little friends know just what kind of monster they let into their classroom? Do they know about the blood on your hands?”

A copper taste was rising in the back of Izuku’s throat, hot and metal. He grunted, shaking his head to dispel the face behind his eyelids.

*Don’t think about it. Don’t think about—*

“What happened to Fyrefly, *Ghost?* What happened to Metalgrind or Bonedigger or Starchild-”

“*SHUT UP!*”
Izuku screamed, headbutting Shinsou as hard as he could. The motion flung Shinsou off of him, sending him sprawling across the ring. He landed with a sickening thud.

Then Izuku knew nothing at all, his mind melted into white, fizzy and effervescent and empty. He felt his limbs go slack, lying on the stadium ring floor. His staff was slack between his fingers. His lungs locked in his chest, forced to breathe at a slow and deliberate rate that didn’t fit with the adrenaline coursing through his system. He might have choked, but choking was no longer a bodily function for him. Izuku couldn’t even blink, his eyes opening and closing on someone else’s accord.

*Shit.*

*Shit, Fuck, Shit-*

Shinsou got to his feet, breathing heavily. Blood gushed from his eyebrow, trickling down his face. His teeth were bared, legs shaking as he got to his feet.

Izuku heard his voice as if from far, far away.

“Gotcha.”
Accidents

Chapter Summary

*off-tune kazoo*
"It's the mental breakdown~"

Chapter Notes

warnings in this chapter for a character death (not a main), flashbacks, PTSD and well, violence. This is a villain fic technically, after all.

As some people were concerned that this fic had vanished on them, don't worry! AO3's been having struggles today apparently, and the website for a while wasn't up as a direct result.

Thank you all for your kind kudos and comments, I read them all and I love them all.

“Dammit, Midoriya…” Ojiro put his head in his hands, unable to look at the mess of the stadium before him. Despite best efforts, Midoriya had gone slack and docile, staring blankly in front of him as he got to his feet. “I warned him and he still didn’t… arghh.” His tail thrashed in annoyance, threatening to nearly unseat him.

“Welp, at least it’s for the best.” Kaminari said a little glumly, trying to console his friend. “If he’d won this, he would’ve had to go against Todoroki, and let’s face it he’d be toast.”

Ochako grimaced, looking on in dismay. She thought this match was horrible from the start, pitting two people together that would almost inevitably have to physically fight without Quirks. What a terrible power to go against: Brainwashing. She watched anxiously, her fingers winding and unwinding together into a nervous twist in her lap.

Izuku was blank as a slate, his earlier fight bled out of him like a popped balloon. He stared vacantly ahead, his staff held limply in one hand. It was a bit like he’d become a doll, only held up by an invisible stand along his spine.

Shinsou had gotten to his feet, a self-satisfied expression alighting his features. Though it couldn’t be heard what was being said, his gloating face said it all: This had been his plan from the start.

"Midoriya's been caught by Shinsou's Quirk! Folks this match may be over barely before it's begun! Truly, what a frightening ability!"

Present-Mic's voice was high with excitement, humming with the thrill of an unexpected plot twist.
Aizawa-Sensei's voice by contrast was even heel, as if he were reading a file before him.

"I've always said that the initial test for UA doesn't account for mental Quirks. Shinsou's Quirk on a base level is incredibly powerful, but it doesn't have any effect in a physical fight. This is what happens when you don't account for other types of abilities. Both he and Midoriya have Quirks that best work with the element of surprise."

Ochako watched in dismay as Izuku began to turn around, shuffling his way placidly towards his own defeat. The roar of the crowd was deafening as they realized just what was about to happen, outraged and excited at once. There was nothing to do but watch as her friend's dreams went tumbling down the drain.

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Izuku felt as if he were floating, drifting through a dream. He had an idea of where he was, what he was doing, but all of it felt as intangible as air. His legs worked independently of himself, swiveling his body around so that he began to stumble his way towards the edge of the ring. It all felt as detached from him as looking at his actions through a fish bowl.

In the shadow of the alcove, Toshinori stood. A panicked look marked his face, but Izuku couldn't hear what he was saying. The only voice that permeated the thick cotton in his ears was the one controlling him.

"Walk towards the finish line, now."

The terrifying knowledge that he'd lost all control of his body would've ordinarily sent Izuku tumbling into a panic attack, or blindingly angry. Under Shinsou's Quirk, he was unnaturally relaxed and calm. All in a dream. Izuku knew he had to escape, but it was hard to visualize when every time he blinked he came closer to defeat.

This is bad. This is so very, very bad.

Toshinori was gesturing at him, as if he could physically shoo the boy away if he only tried hard enough. The look on his face made Izuku's panic levels skyrocket. He'd promised he'd do his best to do well, to make the man proud, and in a moment he was going to fail spectacularly in front of him. Then, Shinsou was going to take all the information he knew, and make it public. Izuku was going to go to jail, Eri would be forever out of his reach, and Toshinori and all of UA would know that Izuku was a monster. Abort. Abort. He'd be sending smoke signals to his legs if he could at this point.

Worse, there were memories rising to the surface, memories that he'd tried to bury deep within himself. An echo of hands tugging at him, forcing him to run when he’d wanted to stay. He couldn’t breathe, even if someone else at the moment was breathing for him.

What could he do? How could he stop this?

Ojirou hadn't given him much in way of weaknesses once caught in Shinsou's trap. His Quirk was
apparently ironclad, very difficult to break out of. Any other time, it would’ve been fascinating to test its limits, see where the line between control and breaking said control broke. Izuku felt like he was straining every muscle in his body, but nothing was changing. He was drawing closer and closer to the edge of the ring with every step.

The effect for Ojiro had only worn off towards the end of the cavalry battle when he’d been bumped, and Izuku didn't have anything on hand that he could bump himself with. He couldn’t even lift his hand to smack himself, or try to trip so that he fell. Every step he took was measured, his hands limp at his side save for the one curled around his staff.

Well...

Oh.

Oh no. As soon as he thought of the idea, it seemed terrible. The staff in Izuku's hand was dead weight, but his thumb was inches away from the 'Pulse' setting. If he could move it even an inch, he could electrocute himself. The shock might hopefully be enough to break him out of Shinsou's hold. Yet the cost might be that Izuku would end up on the ground himself, electrocuted. Plus, it would hurt. Like. A lot. The concept alone made him slightly queasy, and it seemed like the sort of scheme that Aizawa-Sensei or Toshinori would look on disapprovingly.

What other choice do I have?

Izuku was rapidly running out of options, the white line a hair's breadth away. It was now or never, and he knew better than to give himself time to think about it. He focused all of his effort towards his hand, wishing he could at least grit his teeth.

I really hope I don't bite my tongue.

His thumb twitched in response, only the barest of motions. Sweat trickling down his spine, Izuku tried again. If he focused all his energy into the one limb, it felt like a blinding headache. That wasn’t abnormal for him, however. He pushed through it.

Once more there was the slightest movement, but nothing that got the job done. All the while Izuku's feet kept moving, leading him inevitably towards his loss. Izuku's thumb brushed closer, and finally pressed down.

The pain was immediate, and indescribable. Izuku's entire body locked in place, cramping in one agonizing motion as tingling energy coursed through him. He screamed, but the noise was stuck in his throat as he fell to the ground.

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Don't think about it.

Izuku's ears strained to hear anything around him, lost in wet darkness. All he could make out was his breathing, rabbit-quick and fast. It was shockingly loud in the silence.

He'd come down here to hide. There were many tunnels under the bar, twists and curves and dead ends that didn't make sense. If you weren't afraid of getting lost then you could explore them, and Izuku wasn't afraid of the dark. At least, he was less afraid of it than what he'd been running from: Shigaraki's anger.

"You'll be meeting Sensei, today. He's been ill for a very long time, and until now hasn't been able to have a proper look at you. I want you to meet me at the bar tonight, and then I'll take you
Those who went to go see Shigaraki's teacher, never came back. Izuku had watched it happen again and again, each person he'd been sent off to find eventually dragged drugged and helpless towards the back door. Izuku didn't know what happened to them, but he knew they were dead.

So he'd ran, his heart in his mouth and his lungs squeezing tighter and tighter as he wandered into oppressive darkness. He kept pausing to listen, wary of footsteps behind or in front of him. Eventually, Izuku took one too many wrong turns, and was forced to admit that he was lost. His running slowed, shoes making wet splashes in the puddles of water that shone faint silver from some unseen light source.

It was here, catching his breath in shallow gasps, that Izuku heard it.

The faint noise of someone crying echoed ahead of him. It was a faint cry, the sound of a kid like him. It was out of place in this darkness, and disconcerting. Izuku's throat bobbed as he swallowed tightly. He'd learned to be afraid of noises that he couldn't see the source of. Not everything that seemed childlike in the League was safe. A part of him thought about running away, turning back the way he'd come and doing his best to find his way to the surface. Yet he knew what was behind him, knew that doing so would force him back into Shigaraki's grip where he'd be taken to meet Sensei.

At least ahead, whoever was crying had a chance of being lost like him. Curiosity piqued, and Izuku began to pick his way carefully forward, his feet avoiding the puddles so that he was as noiseless as possible.

He got the vague idea that on either side down this hallway were cells. There were lots of them under the bar, so this didn't particularly frighten him. Occasionally, the League had to kidnap someone, or teach them a lesson in a space where outside civilians wouldn't overhear. These ones however seemed mostly left to neglect, pieces of the bars rusted through or water pooling in deep corners from broken pipes. There was a sour taste in the air, one that made Izuku's gag reflex complain. He pushed it down, drawn in by the persistent, quiet crying. It got louder the further in he went.

What happened next, he could never remember. Only his own reflection staring up at him, telling him to not think about it, and come back the way he'd come.

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"And Izuku Midoriya's on the ground, folks! He seems to have shocked himself to break out of Hitoshi Shinsou's hold!"

Hizashi leaned half out of his seat, his expression confused as he tried to get a closer look at what was happening on the field below. There hadn't been anything flashy so far, and Shouta could tell his partner was getting a little frustrated at the lack of material he could present. This wasn't a battle that involved big shows of physical power, and the audience was rapidly getting confused as Izuku ranged wildly from viciously expressive, to blank, to pained.
The shock from his own staff had put Midoriya on the ground, his entire body jolting as if it'd gone through a bug zapper. It was an appropriate comparison, to Shouta's mind. He'd half suspected the boy would be unable to get up from the shock, but Izuku had managed to drive his staff into the ground to prop himself against. It proved to be his saving grace. He now stood trembling, staring sightlessly in front of him as Shinsou scowled in frustration and surprise.

Shouta stifled a sigh. Problem Child. That self-destructive streak was a mile wide, and he worried over the day it would bite Midoriya in the ass. He'd already caught glimpses of it, but this move truly brought it to light. Izuku quite frankly looked like shit, spittle leaving his lips as he panted and tried vainly to force his legs to hold his weight, trembling with aftershocks. He looked down at the papers he had of both contestants.

If he wasn't covered in bandages, his frown would have been obvious. This fight was going to be ugly, no flashy Quirks needed. Shouta didn't know what Shinsou had found to worm his way under Izuku's skin, but it was enough to make the boy mad. His expression had taken on a sharp desperation that had yet to be seen in any training class. This was closer to how he'd first met Izuku, back during the villain invasion. The boy was going to be unpredictable, and perhaps more ruthless than a boy his age should know how to be.

"Midoriya's on his feet, but only barely! And it looks like Shinsou's dropped his Quirk in favour of brute force! He's coming in to shove Midoriya out of the ring while he's still weak on his feet!"

Shouta leaned forward, once again cutting off Hizashi’s mic. He pressed one casted hand onto the radio button, getting ahold of Cementoss.

“Be prepared to end this fight prematurely.” Was all he said, an uneasy feeling growing in his stomach. He wanted to give Izuku a chance, like he wanted to give all his students. That didn’t mean he wasn’t aware that the boy had been trained to kill, and instincts like that didn’t die. They were just buried deep.

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The truth was, the first person Izuku killed had been an accident.

He’d known only two things then: Do as Shigaraki said, and don’t think too hard about what his Quirk told him about the people he was sent to find. When he’d been given the hero’s name, he’d merely done just that. He’d been eleven, and Magne had just finished training him to Shigaraki’s satisfaction.

He’d had his second mission, after he’d captured Metalgrind and proved himself good enough to be valuable. So he read his file and reveled in the small freedom that was going on the train on his own with only a partner, instead of Toga or Kurogiri.

Superhero Firefly: Age twenty-three, One hundred fifty-two centimeters tall, approximately one hundred and twenty-three pounds. Quirk: Solar Energy- able to absorb sunlight during the day
Haruka Shokou.

Her apartment was on the far side of the city, nearly where the trains ended. As a result, Izuku had a long time to sit and think, and watch as his new associate shuffled a deck of cards in silence.

He called himself ‘Dabi’, and he had hair that was dyed an unnatural shade of black and vivid burn scars that he kept hidden in a leather jacket and hoodie when out in public. He had lots of piercings, and his costume was more of a journey into a goth fashion sense. Practical, but still stylish. Izuku thought he sort of looked like some of those people on magazine covers. Or he would, if his face wasn’t disfigured. He didn’t talk much, but that was okay. Izuku didn’t talk much either.

When he did talk, it was to strangely enough ask about Izuku. A rare occurrence, since most people either knew about him or didn’t much care since he was a kid.

“So, you’re Shigaraki’s secret weapon, huh? You don’t look like much for a kid that’s supposed to see everything.” Dabi’s voice broke the silence. Though he didn’t look at Izuku, the boy got the feeling he saw a lot. The boy sat up in his seat, stopping the restless kicking of his legs to answer.

“You don’t look like much for a serial arsonist.” Izuku countered unthinkingly, then immediately flushed and backtracked. Being rude to strangers, especially villains, didn’t go well for him generally. “I mean. Um-”

Dabi snorted, a lazy smirk flitting across his face. He seemed pleased, like getting a funny response out of Izuku had been his goal all along. Maybe it was, maybe he liked people who talked to him without the tense honorifics some of the other villains used.

“No, you’re right I guess. I like to keep as low of a profile as I can. Given my good looks, I mean.” He shrugged “I guess I just meant that you’re awfully young, to be the brains behind these kinds of operations.”

“It’s my Quirk.” Izuku answered honestly. “It makes me good at remembering and collecting information. Analysis, sort of.” Izuku tilted his head, his expression thoughtful. He thought he was pretty grown up, but apparently to most he still seemed like a little kid. He needed to prove himself if he wanted Dabi to treat him like a grown up.

He’d caught the edge of fine writing on the inside of the playing deck, instead of a suit. Seeing the opportunity, Izuku seized it. “Does Mr. Shigaraki know you’re making copies of the information on your playing cards?”

By way of answer, Dabi held a finger to his lips. The end was tipped briefly with bright blue flame, just as quickly. He shuffled the cards a different way, so Izuku couldn’t see what was written on them, only blank backings.

“You keep my secrets, and I can keep you away from whoever gave you that cut you keep picking at under your sleeve when you think I’m not looking.”

Izuku startled, forcing his hands in his lap and away from his arms like he’d been caught touching a curling iron. Dabi waved away his fear with a fresh fanning of the cards. One by one, they were reshuffled until they slipped into and up his sleeve. It was a magic trick, but Izuku could always read the hand movements, so he knew how they worked (It was something that really, really frustrated Mr. Compress). “I’ve had my share of shitty people pushing me around. You learn to know a certain
Izuku sat back in his seat, his arms coming to hug his arms self-consciously. His gaze was drawn to the mottled, blotchy half of Dabi’s face and neck. He’d never met someone who so casually talked about Shigaraki, or compared it to their own experience. He rarely had someone even look past the Kabuki mask tucked into his backpack. He wasn’t sure how it made him feel, other than small.

“You don’t like him.” Izuku murmured, because his Quirk told him as much, and because in truth he was curious. He could only connect pieces if they were presented to him, and Dabi so far was a blank canvas, purposefully cut off of all ties from his past. It was rare that Izuku met someone who seemed to have no beginning, having only been born from the moment at present.

Dabi hummed, the sound purposefully neutral. His gaze slipped towards the station the train was slowing for.

“I don’t like bullies, and that’s as much as you’re getting from me without your Quirk.” Dabi corrected, shouldering his own pack on. “This is the stop. Q and A is over, kid.” He moved, forcing Izuku to focus on making sure he wasn’t left behind.

Though Dabi led at first, Izuku soon knew the layout of this part of the city better. He took the lead as they turned and twisted their way through back streets, keeping his head down. Dabi opted for pulling his hood up around his ears, the wind tugging erratically around them putting off any suspicion. There weren’t many people out this time of night anyway, and it really was chilly.

“She’ll likely be just back from work, if she stays on routine.” Izuku explained easily as they walked, his breath making steaming clouds in front of his face. “She lives in room Two hundred and five. When we get to the apartment, we pose as food delivery. She orders out every Friday, same dish: a bowl of ramen and some chicken wings.”

Dabi held up a bag of fast food, grease marking the cardboard edges. Bait. “When we’re let into the building, we go to the door. Proceed as usual until you can force your way in with your Quirk for muscle and the information we have on her as blackmail. If she tries to run, we light the room up and make her disappear. Don’t touch anything without gloves, don’t get cut or bleed anywhere. Clear?”

“Crystal.” Dabi murmured. His gaze was on the looming apartment building before them. An apprehensive expression took up his face. “You can defend yourself if things get out of hand, right? I don’t gotta babysit you?”

By answer, Izuku’s fingers hitched up the edge of his sweater. His staff, having been collapsed into its smaller size, glinted in the dark.

“Don’t worry about me.”

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Izuku felt as if he’d been run over by a lawn mower. His hands kept shaking, refusing to grip the bar
of his staff right. His knees locked and unlocked out of place, struggling to stay upright.

Shinsou was glaring at him, incredulity and fury warring on his features. His snarl filtered through the pounding in Izuku's ears.

*Well, I've definitely pissed him off if nothing else.*

"You shouldn't have control, what did you do?!"

Izuku didn't answer, his jaw locked tight. He wasn't looking at Shinsou, not really. Blue-white electricity crackled up the length of his staff. He forced himself finally to stand under his own power. His other hand came to press at his mouth, wiping away spit and sweat. He felt at once hyper-aware, and gone. There was a current running through his blood, like he’d bitten into tinfoil.

Shinsou's hands clenched and unclenched by his side. Izuku's lack of response made him grind his teeth in frustration.

"Nothing to say for yourself?" He jibed, hoping to find another edge. "You must be real hardcore to not pass out after shocking yourself like that! A real masochist!"

More silence. Izuku could feel the restlessness on Shinsou, the way his feet kept shifting their weight, the nervous sweat clinging to his forehead. When he took a step forward, Shinsou unconsciously skittered back a half-pace.

*He's afraid of me.*

Izuku realised. Maybe that made sense. He imagined right now he looked frightening. He couldn't imagine what his expression was, but it definitely wasn't friendly. His mouth was twisted into a caricature of a smile, more of a baring of teeth.

"My Quirk wasn't deemed 'right' for the hero course, but looking at your face now I wonder if it was just because UA had an issue with me. After all, they seem to have no problem letting someone who's a murderer in."

Out of the corner of his eye, Izuku saw Cementoss startle. He'd heard that. Izuku ran, forcing Shinsou to duck and dodge as his staff came for him blindingly fast. He only just managed to duck past, his hands bunching in Izuku's shirt collar. Blood smudging across one furious purple eye, he snarled.

"This is why people like me end up being villains. I don't understand! It's like they want people like me to fail again and again, and have all of our hopes crushed. Why do you get a redemption, when I have to work my ass off to even be tolerated despite doing nothing wrong?!" Shinsou’s voice was harsh, grating as he tried to knock Izuku’s grip of his staff free.

Izuku merely locked his ankles together around the boy’s middle, using his body weight to twist them around so that Shinsou’s back hit the ground. On top, Izuku struck. Once, twice, across the face. Blood was coming away in his hands. He barely noticed, pupils pinprick-small and in another universe.
It hadn’t meant to be like this.

Izuku had the thought as the lamp overhead swung back and forth haphazardly, the silence echoing in his ears like they’d been dampened by wet cloth.

He hadn’t meant to. It’d been an accident-

The figure lay slumped in front of him, illuminated only when the lamp passed over his head. Back and forth, shadow and darkness. A mane of red hair, unnaturally still chest, a shattered vase that she’d knocked off the kitchen table on her way down. It lay in scattered pieces at Izuku’s feet.

He looked at the table, where an orange pill bottle sat. Izuku couldn’t read the label, but he didn’t have to. His Quirk was on overdrive, taking into account the faint scar on Fyrefly’s chest, made obvious by the open collar of her pajamas-

“What happened? I thought your damn staff only stunned people?” Dabi’s voice was a growl, the edge of his shoes by her head. He nudged her still chin with the tip of one, and Izuku’s stomach heaved dangerously. He gagged, hand clapping over his masked mouth.

Pacemaker surgery. Weak heart. The strain of the taser sent her into cardiac arrest. My fault. My fault I should’ve known-

“She’d ran. She hadn’t wanted to fight him, had known he was a kid. She’d ran because she had a little brother, his picture was in a frame sitting on the piano in the living room. She’d ran because she hadn’t wanted to hurt him but didn’t want to go with them and he’d pulled out his staff and-

There was a muttered curse, and then Izuku was being tugged and pulled away. He scrambled, a low cry keening from his mouth as one hand lifted towards her still form. He could do CPR, he could try to help her, he could, he could-

The hand that was fisted in the back of his shirt was like Iron. Dabi dragged Izuku away from the figure, towards the fire exit at the edge of the window. Izuku’s hands bit crescent marks into the deadened, scarred arms around him.
Chapter Summary

in which a good eggplant and broccoli become Friends

Chapter Notes

aaaaAAAAAAA THERE’S MORE ART!

I love this piece honestly thank you so much pistachio-chai!

And here is where I give a slightly more serious note: I've gotten lots of mixed feelings on Katsuki being trans in particular, ranging from some people being disappointed that it's not the main focus of his character to others not enjoying that he's trans at all. I'm not gonna respond to comments like that any more, just so all of you know. I'm a trans guy myself, and I wrote him in this largely for myself as I wanted a trans character that wasn't JUST trans as his personality trait. That being said, you are allowed to like what you like! This fic just probably isn't for you if you feel this way. Please understand that this is a labour of love for me, and not something I'm profiting off of. I'm doing this for fun.

whew, okay. Hard part is done! With that enjoy the read, and thank you for all of the kind kudos and comments. I love them and keep them all close to me <3

Shouta stood almost before the match was over, his chair scraping across the radio floor. He was moving, even as Hizashi gave him a look of concern from the corner of his eye.

He got the call as he stepped into the hall, already knowing who would be on the other line. Toshinori’s voice was a tight line of anxiety in his ear.

“Security put Izuku in a detainment room. I called his mother, but no one’s going to see the boy until you get here. He’s refused everyone else.” The last part was said with a touch of hurt in Toshinori’s voice, a fact that Shouta frankly didn’t have time to deal with at that very moment. He scanned the signs that marked the hallway for directions towards empty classrooms that security had loaned for the event.

A feeling had grown in Shouta’s stomach since the beginning of this match, a bad feeling that had refused to settle itself. It’d grown into an ugly vine the longer Izuku had beaten Shinsou’s face in, the
longer the silence had stretched across the audience, still shocked by the event. The plant continued to do it’s best to strangle Shouta now.

Security for the room as it turned out was Ectoplasm and Thirteen, called away from the main event. Thirteen’s expression was usually a little difficult to discern, but if Shouta was pressed he’d read their emotions as concerned.

Ectoplasm’s voice always sounded a little distorted, a facet of his Quirk. As such, it was recognisable. He came forward as Shouta rounded the hall, already guessing who it was. He was an intense hero even when a situation wasn’t serious. Shouta tended to appreciate this about the man, as he quickly cut to the chase.

“The boy’s been sitting in his desk in silence for the past fifteen minutes. My clone is with him, but hasn’t been able to figure out what set him off. What happened, Shouta? I thought the kid was meant to be going through therapy and rehabilitating. From what you told me, he was a reformed citizen rather than a ticking time bomb.”

Until now, Shouta would’ve agreed with that sentiment. On the surface, Midoriya had seemed to be adjusting as well as could be expected, given his ordeal. This kind of break of character, the sudden shift into violence, Shouta could only guess that he’d missed something. Everyone, had missed something.

For someone that prided himself on observation, on knowing his students and their needs, it was an oversight. He’d told himself that Midoriya would be a student that would want their space, that would only shell himself up further if he pressed. He’d seen moments of unhappiness in his student, but deemed it healthy for the boy to work through it with his therapist. This was a mistake, maybe.

Shouta had taken at face value that the boy had been absorbing information well enough, he’d answered every question posed to him promptly. He hadn’t handed in work yet, but Shouta had given him a grace period until his education level test went through. Midoriya had claimed he’d handed it in to the school for processing two days ago.

Upon further thought, Shouta concluded that that was late, too. He frowned to himself.

“There’s another thing you should know, Aizawa.” Thirteen piped up, their hands nervously wringing together. “Cementoss also brought the other boy in. He said he overhead some things that were concerning.”

“Concerning?”

“Incriminating.” Thirteen clarified, clearing their throat delicately. “We don’t know how the boy got the information, but he seems to be aware of things even police reports didn’t cover during the Ghost Murders.”

Aizawa resisted the urge to pinch at the bridge of his nose, his casted hands making the instinct
difficult. *Great,* another fire to mitigate. This might explain the sudden breakdown on Izuku’s part.

“Keep him in holding then, I’ll address it after I deal with Midoriya.”

With a steadying breath, Shouta made his way inside to meet his student.

Working as an underground hero, he’d seen more than his fair share of villains that were put in their positions largely by circumstance. It was a reality that was difficult for the media to capture, a black and white ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ a better story to sell. Everyone talked about the villain that shot up a shopping mall, but no one talked about how he’d lost his job at that mall and couldn’t afford to feed his family. No one talked about the kid whose dad was also a villain, and so took up that family name.

Villains were bad. Child-Villains were worse. Shouta hated looking into another person’s face and feeling helpless, like there was nothing logical that could’ve been done to keep them off such a path.

It reminded him too much of the expectations his own life had thrown at him, the expectations that he’d worked viciously at to overcome. He’d put so much blood, sweat and energy into being something other than the boy with the bad Quirk coming from a poor district of town. Not everyone could apply that kind of work ethic. It was kinder to expel those that couldn’t, than give them that false hope. It was why in many ways Shouta’s teaching methods were seen as unorthodox. It was also probably what made him a good teacher. Most of the time. He wasn’t feeling all that professional at the moment.

Izuku was lying slumped on the desk, his head against his arms. He didn’t stir when Shouta entered, but he knew the boy had heard him. There was a dejectedness in the air that Shouta didn’t like. This wasn’t normal Midoriya behaviour, which so far seemed to follow the mantra of ‘*keep moving forward*’ even in bleak situations. It was a personality trait that Shouta had admired about the boy from the start, and troubling to see vanish.

Shouta took a minute for himself to thank whatever god there was out there that he didn’t have his own teenagers to deal with at home (though 1-A basically *were* his children at this point, as Hizashi and Toshi liked to tease).

Shouta pulled back the chair across from Midoriya, deciding that beating around the bush would earn him no favours.

“You asked for me. What upset you out there?”

Izuku shifted, finally lifting his head to look at his teacher. The boy’s face was exhausted, deep circles prominent under his eyes. A crust of blood had dried under his nose, making Shouta worry that Midoriya had pushed his Quirk too far as he so habitually did.

Midoriya made a token effort to wipe at said mark, scrubbing a hand across his face. It only smudged the blood around, so that it spread to his lip and fingers. A look of silent shame flickered across his
face, but it was smoothed down by false indifference. Shouta resisted the impulse to dig around in his pocket for a tissue: Fifteen year olds tended to resent that sort of thing. He decided to opt for a slightly different tactic, given Izuku’s silence.

“If you don’t talk, I’m only going to get your mother in here. You know I’m a person that believes in logic. I’m not going to blame you for something without hearing all the facts first.”

The mention of his mom made Izuku flinch, but some of the coldness faded from his eyes. He rested his hands against the table, knuckles ugly, mottled and bruised. For the first time, Shouta could see just how truly miserable Izuku could look.

“You should’ve just put me in jail.” He blurted harshly.

“What makes you think that?” Shouta asked carefully, dark eyes narrowed.

“I suck at this!” The boy exclaimed. He gestured to his face, as if the injuries there were proof.

“Suck at what?”

“Being a hero!” Izuku threw up his hands, uncharacteristically loud. He glared up at his teacher.

“Being a student! Being not a villain!” He sucked in a frustrated breath, lips curled into a snarl. “I’m trying but I keep fucking up!” His hands balled into fists, slamming down against the table a moment later.

Shouta leaned back in his chair, regarding Izuku evenly. There was the somewhat unsettling notion that Midoriya as he was right now reminded him a little bit of Bakugou in his anger. There were definitely teeth under Izuku’s normally kind manner, but this was the first time Shout had to deal with it firsthand. Where Bakugou’s stemmed from pride, Izuku’s stemmed from fear. He kept his tone even, refusing to feed into the sudden agitation.

“Why do you think you should go to jail?”

“Because I-” Izuku’s voice caught, and Shouta heard the shaking edge of his next breath as he pushed forward. “Because I’ve killed people. And hurt people. And I’m still hurting people.”

“Did you want to kill people?” Shouta asked.

“No.” Izuku’s hands tore through his hair, pulling it back from his face. The corner of his eyes were wet with unshed tears. “No I didn’t want to. I-I’ve never wanted t-to-”

“Then you were a victim yourself, yes?”

Shouta leaned a little closer, his voice low and gentle but no less intent.

“It’s important that you acknowledge that these two statements can co-exist. You’ve killed people, and you were a child. A victim. They aren’t mutually exclusive, and trying to shy away from either is
lying to yourself as well as the people around you.” Izuku looked away, his gaze trailing to his lap. His voice was laced with the weight of frustration.

“But that’s not what a hero is. Or not what it’s supposed to be. Heroes are… they’re like All Might. Noble. Disgustingly honest, strong and kind. I’m… I’m not even strong!”

Shouta thought back to his own first days being a pro hero, or even a student at UA. The image of himself, smaller and disheveled and so willing to fight the world for just a chance to prove himself. All the while his own mind had often told him he didn’t have a chance. What had Hizashi told him, when he’d first made his way into class 1-A? What had Nemuri coached him about as an adult, when those insecurities had dogged him?

“Heroes are human, Midoriya. They make mistakes, and have flaws, and ideals and ambitions. You of all people have experienced the worst side of that nature for most of your life, much to the regret of the staff here. We make mistakes, or at least I have.”

Izuku snorted, the sound wet and disbelieving. Shouta scowled, reaching over to lightly rap at the top of the boy’s head. He startled, finally looking at his teacher with incredulity.

“Listen to me, Problem Child. Why do you think I’m an underground hero? I can’t be in the public eye, and not just because of my Quirk. I handle cases heroes like All Might can’t, because it’d ruin their image and symbol for the community.”

The first inkling of understanding seemed to finally appear on Midoriya’s face. Shouta confirmed his suspicions with a nod. “I’ve had to hurt people, and kill people, to get a job done. Sometimes the villain doesn’t come quietly. Sometimes, the villains aren’t actually the problem in the first place. Sometimes, they’re like you- forced into that life. Once in a long while, the person I’m told to track is in the public eye- a hero.”

That seemed to shut Izuku up a little. He huffed, uncertain but quieter.

“That doesn’t mean it was right. What I did… W-what I was forced to do… None of that’s the same.” His green eyes misted over. “A-and if 1-A finds out… i-if Uraraka or Iida or Asui f-found out they’d never f-forgive me.”

“Midoriya,” Shouta murmured. “Do you really think so little of the students I’m teaching alongside you?”

Izuku’s silence spoke for him. Shouta sighed, a heavy weight falling onto his shoulders the longer he looked at the boy. He thought to himself that he’d figured out the angle Shinsou had decided to take with the information he’d somehow gathered. Apparently being liked was still important to teenagers, even teenagers that’d had Izuku’s sort of life.

“The students I’ve picked for your class are some of the most empathetic, strong, and capable people I’ve had the honour of teaching in a long time. I say all of this because I know for a fact they’ll never believe you if you told them I said it. On average, my expulsion rate for first years borders on the seventy percent range. I had the choice to add you to my class. Do you get where I’m going with
“But that brings me to your biggest weakness, Midoriya. Denki asks me for help when he doesn’t understand the course material, or when he’s struggling.”

The smile slipped from Izuku’s face. He looked a little guilty about having been caught.

“I know the material.” He tried, a half-hearted protest. Shouta merely stared at him hard, until the boy crumpled like a house of cards. “I just… I can’t read.”

“I’m sorry, what-”

“Or write. Or um… sometimes I get restless, sitting in a desk. Like my Quirk gets bored and I’ve been trying to work around it but sometimes it just makes me focus on someone else in class and then I miss things. But I’ve been doing pretty well! I got a recording device and-”

“Izuku, back up.” Shouta held up one bandaged arm, effectively silencing the muttering. Izuku clamped his mouth shut, rocking a little back in his seat. His face was flushed pink.

“Let me get this straight. You’ve gone nearly a semester in my class… answering questions promptly, doing oral assignments when given a choice… not handing in any written homework. It’s all because you can’t write?”

“Or read.” Izuku confirmed, apparently rather unbothered by the whole mess. “I mean; I can read a little? But that book Present Mic gave us in Japanese and English to write a report on…? I’ve been listening to audio recordings of it and just learning the English with the rest of the class. Did… did I do something wrong?”

Shouta had to look up from his casted arm, which was currently pressed to his forehead and by proxy the desk. Izuku was looking at him, an almost pitying expression on his face.

“Sorry, I know I’m a lot more stupid than anyone guesses. My Quirk makes me sound smart but uh. Yeah.” He laughed, the sound self-deprecating.

Suddenly, Shouta wanted nothing more than to hunt down the man that had taken Izuku as a child, and strangle the life out of him. No wonder the kid was constantly throwing himself into Quirk-induced migraines! Information Quirks relied on the ability to store the information they gleaned somewhere, be it through audio recording, writings, or even something as primitive as telling another
person. The boy had been raised to be secretive, to hoard what he knew like valued treasures, and wasn’t even given the gift of reading so he could stimulate his Quirk when it was bothering him.

Shouta didn’t get angry often, but cold fury sat in the pit of his gut at how deeply the villains that had captured Izuku had crippled him out of a desire to keep him dependent. He kept his breath even, his hands twitching inside the casts.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Shouta said, because reassurance was needed in this sort of situation. He kept his face patient under the bandages, hoping Izuku would read his body language and feel at ease. “I would appreciate in the future you tell me these sorts of things, so that I might be able to help you outside of school keep up with your peers. But I understand why you didn’t.” A look of relief crossed Izuku’s face. He’d honestly been expecting that he’d get into trouble over this. Shouta continued. “However, I’ll say that if you want to pass first year, learning to read and write are essential. You’re definitely getting extracurricular lessons after this festival.”

Izuku looked a little put out by this, but resigned. He’d seen it coming, Shouta guessed.

“In regards to Hitoshi Shinsou, I’ve been told by our referee that he referred to some things about your past that quite frankly, only you or a hero who had been working your case file should know.”

Behind the shadow of his hair, Izuku confirmed.

“He knew… about Fyrefly. Not that she died in a fire…The truth.”

Shouta had worked this case for nearly fifteen years. He’d been involved with Naomasa from the start, and knew about the serial arsons. He’d also suspected them to be a cover up, as had most of the police.

“UA’s suspected for a while now that there’s an informant, hiding amongst the staff or possibly the students.” Izuku shook his head, sudden and violent. His brow creased.

“I-It doesn’t make sense. Shinsou… he was mean, but he was mad.” Green eyes flicked up to Shouta, hesitant, but he kept speaking. “The… Sh-Shigaraki always said the informant was level-headed… a good liar. Shinsou didn’t hide how he felt.”

This wasn’t surprising to Shouta, in fact it made a piece slide into place that he hadn’t noticed before. A frown crossed his face. He’d read Shinsou’s profile, had a brief idea of his life and home life by proxy.

Izuku’s face was bone-white, the freckles on his cheeks standing out starkly. He’d curled himself further into his chair. A look of devastation crossed his features.

“He’s being set up for being framed, isn’t he?”

Shouta rose to his feet, exhalting slowly. This knot was getting tangled, and he didn’t like who might
take the fall if this was going to be public.

“Come with me. We’re going to go find out.”

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Hitoshi had learned that from a young age, routine added regularity to his life. This was important, because life as it stood for him was rarely routine. There was always something happening in his home, something to be cleaned or cared for or taken care of. His foster parents were kind enough, but they had five other children, all younger than him and all with bigger behavioural problems. Things got missed, and he was never one to complain too loudly about it in the first place.

So dishes were done every other day by him, and his siblings had to have dinner on the table on Tuesdays because his parents worked later then, and he had to get his homework done and help the others when they struggled with theirs. Hitoshi had to be there for meltdowns, for clean-up, for his jobs because he was working two of them so his parents didn’t have to pay for his uniform (the guilt would have eaten him alive). He worked, and worked, and worked all the while with the lead weight in his gut of this knowledge: There wasn’t an out for someone like him. An older kid, with a problematic Quirk? This life (despite what his foster parents claimed) was all he could expect. Getting into UA had been his miracle, and now he had to grit his teeth and work himself to the bone just to ensure it wasn’t ripped away.

All the while, his classmates in middle school bullied him for his used clothes, his Quirk, the permanent circles under his eyes. How was he supposed to be a hero, when he scared others just by existing?

UA was better, his classmates weren’t mean, but class A was the rich of the rich and the best of the best. It was a bitter pill to swallow to look at them all and see his own inadequacy.

All of this Hitoshi might have endured, had he not gotten that email. He’d nearly trashed it, the address unknown and clearly a throwaway. Yet his curiosity had gotten the best of him when he’d read the subject title: THE TRUTH ABOUT THE CLASS 1-A’S TRANSFER STUDENT. He’d heard that UA had let a kid bypass the exams, and though he tried not to feel jealous the temptation to click on the link had been too much for him. In the dark of his bedroom, the computer screen illuminating his pale face, Hitoshi had downloaded a file that was filled with information not available to the public.

Then, he’d been furious.

He was still furious, seated as he was in an empty classroom. The blood that’d been gushing from his nose had trickled to a slow stop, thanks to the tissues given. The anger kept simmering just beneath his skin, despite his best attempts to soothe it when he could. He’d never been this angry before, and Hitoshi was torn between riding the high of it and tipping over the knife’s edge into despair. If he
stayed angry, he didn’t have to feel heartbroken over this kind of betrayal.

The doorknob turning startled him out of his morbid contemplation. Hitoshi lifted his head from the crook of one elbow, and stared. If you’d asked him what would be his number one most embarrassing experience that he could imagine during his time at UA, meeting Eraserhead would rank up there. Meeting him while beaten to hell was worse. Hitoshi had posters of the man on his bedroom wall for crying out loud!

To make matters worse, a familiar nest of messy green curls was half-tucked behind the pro hero: Izuku Midoriya himself. Hitoshi resisted the urge to glower, a bloody and wadded up bunch of tissues still clenched tightly in his fist.

“I don’t want to talk to you while he’s in here.”

Eraserhead (Aizawa, Hitoshi’s more star-struck brain supplied) was difficult to read, given that he was covered in bandages. Still, Hitoshi got the distinct feeling that an eyebrow was raised towards his tone.

“Well, considering the subject matter is about Midoriya, I think it’s fair that he’s included in this conversation.”

Hitoshi snorted, the sound derisive. This close, he could see that Midoriya had also scraped up his face at some point during the match. It sent a small thrill of satisfaction through him.

“I don’t want to talk to a villain.”

Eraserhead pulled up a chair for himself, while Midoriya seemed to fuss and eventually choose to stand beside him like a nervous bodyguard.

“It’s not like I said anything that wasn’t the truth. That’s why I’m here, right? Ectoplasm said I knew something I shouldn’t but I found the information on my own and put the pieces together.” A white lie, but one that Hitoshi thought made him sound more credible.

Eraserhead hummed, the sound neutral. It was Midoriya who spoke, his voice loud in the confines of the small room.

“It’s not a good idea to lie like that. You’re really… really not supposed to have that information. It’s confidential and you knowing it puts you in a bad light.” He tacked on as an afterthought. “Your mouth tightens when you lie.”

Hitoshi growled, ears burning dull red. He really didn’t like this guy’s Quirk. Eraserhead interjected before he could argue.

“Hitoshi Shinsou, what I’m about to tell you is an act of trust and can’t leave this room. The truth of the matter is that someone’s trying to frame you as an informant for the League of Villains. You
could go to jail if this isn’t handled honestly, and considering what you’ve likely given up to get here, it would truly be a loss on UA’s part to allow it to happen.” Dark eyes found Hitoshi’s. If it’d been any other circumstance, this would’ve been a weirdly specific fantasy that he’d only indulge in secrecy. Being trusted by Eraserhead with a secret? Helping him with an investigation? Honestly how did he get into these kinds of warped situations?

“I want to know why is UA hiding a wanted criminal.” Hitoshi felt the first inkling of uncertainty. He pushed it down by directing his glare towards Midoriya. “I want to know why he made the cut.” *And I didn’t.* The silent addition to the question could probably be heard. Hitoshi wasn’t sure he cared in that moment.

“Midoriya has no obligation to tell you-” Eraserhead began, but was interrupted by Midoriya raising his hand. The pro hero fell silent.

Midoriya stepped forward then. The expression on his face could only be described as regretful. Hitoshi wasn’t sure he’d ever seen someone who was supposed to be a villain look so introspective. He wasn’t sure how it made him feel that it was directed towards him. When he spoke, it was very soft. As if he were talking to himself. The only indication that his was for Hitoshi was that Midoriya’s eyes caught and held his own.

“UA took me in because I needed help. I know it doesn’t change what I’ve done, but I became a member of the League when I was five years old. I was taken from my mom, my friends… I didn’t know anything but Shigaraki and the villains that raised me.” The admission made Hitoshi’s brows quirk upwards in surprise. Izuku took a deep breath and pushed forward. “The alternative to taking me in was to put me on trial with limited evidence that the League were the real controllers behind the crimes I’ve committed. I’d likely be tried as an adult, if public outcry were loud enough. I’m working towards being able to confess, and help the pros bring Shigaraki and the League to justice. But I’m. Bad at talking. R-real bad.”

Hitoshi glanced towards Eraserhead, trying to read the situation. He wasn’t inclined to trust Midoriya, but he couldn’t help but feel as if his idol would be honest with this situation. There was no hint of a lie on Eraserhead’s face or body language. Some of Hiroshi’s anger started to putter out, replaced with a dull throb around his nose. The adrenaline had begun to finally dissipate.

“I’m just supposed to trust that?” He still wanted to be angry, still wanted to be right. Hitoshi grit his teeth when Izuku merely looked at him with a sort of melancholy resignation.

“No, but we *are* trying to stop you from getting mixed up in this. You don’t have to like me, Shinsou. I just don’t want anyone else getting blamed for *my* mistakes.”

A compassionate villain. Hitoshi wanted to ask if this was some sort of joke. More and more, he read the stark honesty in the way Midoriya stood by Eraserhead, comfortable. Like a pair of horror movie twins, they were unsettling in their contradictions. For someone that’d nearly died at USJ, Aizawa
didn’t seem particularly frightened of Midoriya. For someone that’d killed people, Midoriya didn’t seem particularly frightening. Yet this had been the same boy that only a half hour ago had nearly beaten his nose into his brain without a hint of expression on his face.

Hitoshi ran his hands through his hair roughly, thumbnail eventually coming to rest between his teeth. He thought about how hard he’d worked to come here, and how even then good and bad luck played so much of a part in life. He thought about how much bad luck Midoriya had likely lived with, and kept pushing through. He thought about his own misfortune. It was one thing to be called a villain for just your Quirk, it was another to be forced in that role. Hitoshi reluctantly thought he could relate to both. In a way, they were both desperately trying to fit molds that their Quirks struggled to sit comfortably in.

Damn it.

He sympathised with the bastard.

Damn it.

Hitoshi exhaled sharply, once through his teeth before inhaling through his nose. He was aware he looked like he was chewing glass, and didn’t care. Being a hero meant doing the right thing. It didn’t mean he couldn’t be a little bitter about it.

“About two weeks ago, I got an email from a throwaway address claiming that they had info on Izuku Midoriya. I opened it out of curiosity, but it was a big enough file that I realised it wasn’t just a news article or something.”

Hitoshi dug around for his phone then, soon opening up his email to find said file. His screen illuminated his face briefly, before he handed it across the desk to Eraserhead.

The image was on the surface, a news article. However, looking at it more closely, Hitoshi now had the suspicion it’d merely been designed to look that way for credibility’s sake. He’d be the first to admit he hadn’t looked up the sources too thoroughly.

“It’s a fake news article, but the information is accurate enough.” Eraserhead confirmed, scanning the document. He made to hand it to Midoriya, but seemed to think better of it in the last minute. He summarized out loud. “The document, and the other papers with it, detail your villain identity’s tie to the serial arsons and murders of nearly seven different pro heroes and their families in some cases.”

Midoriya’s face became shuttered, but he didn’t look surprised. A haunted feeling had entered his expression.

“That… clocks.” Was about all he would admit.

“Chances are, the informant was hoping you’d be angry enough to try and make this information public to mass media.” Eraserhead explained, his mouth a grim line. “It’d take focus off of them,
and also force UA to acknowledge Midoriya’s involvement with these crimes in a public light. Which is the last thing this school needs, given the recent villain attacks.”

The weight of what he’d almost done sat with Hitoshi like a lead ball in his stomach. He was suddenly white as a sheet, his hands tightening in his lap. When he swallowed, his adam’s apple bobbed with the motion.

“I didn’t… I didn’t think about that.”

“Not many people would, given the circumstances.” Eraserhead admitted. “It was a trap where the person knew your personality, and your reason for joining UA in the first place. Someone researched you thoroughly, and deemed you to be vulnerable enough to take advantage of. I’m sorry.”

The apology surprised Hitoshi. He blinked up at Eraserhead, a little put off and strangely flattered at once. Why was he apologising?

“You didn’t do anything.”

“No, but maybe that’s the point.” The man sighed. “The teachers at UA often prioritize the hero courses, both class A and B. We rarely interact with the general studies kids, save for those who teach core subjects. When I read your file at a glance, I could tell you’d likely be someone who’d hold a lot of resentment at the idea of a student bypassing our standard testing. It wasn’t hard to see because it was there in your profile, black and white. Frankly, an amateur could pick up on it.”

Hitoshi didn’t argue. He merely cast his gaze to the floor, hearing the unspoken. His life was a villain’s origin story; he’d always known that. It didn’t make it any harder not to hear.

Eraserhead kept speaking, breaking the boy from his negative thoughts.

“however; you’ve shown incredible character today. To go out of your way to help someone who is your direct competition, to empathise with their situation… all of this marks you as a student of great character.” Hitoshi felt his breath freeze in his chest, his heartbeat stutter. His face burned with the unexpected praise. “You’re a student that UA is lucky to have.”

The last of Hitoshi’s anger left him. He was left only with bewilderment, pleased. For the first time, some of the gauntness of his expression lifted.

“You can become a hero, both of you. But in order for students like both of you to succeed, you can’t pummel each other’s faces in given half a chance.”

Izuku cracked a small rueful smile.

“To be fair, I landed a good punch, Sensei.”

“You couldn’t even keep your mouth shut when you knew what my Quirk’s trick was.” Hitoshi countered. He was fighting a small grin of his own. Izuku cackled, his shoulders heaving with the
struggle of keeping in his laughter.

“Both of you could work on your hand to hand combat.” Shouta interjected. He tilted his head at the sudden thought, the sort of idea that Toshinori would probably be proud of simmering at the back of his mind. “Considering I have to give Midoriya supplementary lessons after this anyway… Shinsou, I could arrange with your teacher to set up sparring lessons with you two. If either of you want to stay or enter the hero course, I’d say it’s a necessity.”

Hitoshi’s eyes went wide, an uncharacteristic look of shock on his face.

“Y-you’re kidding.” He stammered, suddenly self-conscious. “People… they don’t like to spar with me. You really think I have a chance of making class 1-A?”

“If you’re not afraid of me, I’m not afraid of you. Aizawa-sensei’s the teacher of class 1-A, he probably wouldn’t offer if he didn’t think you could make it.” Izuku countered. It was a challenge and reassurance at once, and probably the only thing that could’ve made Hitoshi do something other than half-heartedly refuse the offer.

His face was complimentary to his hair when after a moment of thought, he nodded.
Chapter Summary

"Hey is your Quirk Zero gravity? because you're out of this world!"

Chapter Notes

beep boop I nearly didn't get this chapter out tonight. Sorry guys for the late post- I've had a very busy week! Let me know if I missed anything major grammatically!

"You’re being a disgrace."

Shouto froze in the hallway, not expecting to find his father of all people while trying to clear his head. It was an unfortunate meeting, Shouto had left looking for a quiet place to think. He had a lot on his mind, given the state of the latest fight.

Izuku Midoriya had been all but dragged from the stage, and though it was a technical win, the cheer in the audience had deflated a bit. There was a fine line between a wholesome fight and a bloodbath, and the line seemed to be Shinsou’s broken nose. The silence afterwards had been an oppressive weight that not even Present Mic’s wise-cracking over the intercom could really defrost.

It’d been a few minutes later that Shouto had been brought aside and told the news. Midnight’s normally cheery disposition had a note of solemnity as she’d explained.

“Midoriya will be expected to resign his place in the tournament, due to unsportsmanlike-like behaviour. However; as you’re a candidate to be his next match, the choice ultimately lies with you or Sero. You can claim an easy win, or if you choose you can compete against him. Should you beat Sero, your decision will be the deciding factor in his participation.”

It was an offer that was a bit much to take in at once. Shouto didn’t especially like Midoriya as it stood, but he’d been thrown by the sudden change of character he’d seen in the arena. Midoriya hadn’t really seemed like a student in a competition when beating Shinsou’s face in. He’d seemed more like one of the thugs his father so liked to put behind bars. It was disconcerting, and Shouto more and more felt that he didn’t really know Midoriya, despite having been in the same class as him for months.

Taking away Midoriya’s chance at winning the Sports Festival was on paper the most logical decision. Even if Shouto was relatively certain he could beat him, taking out the competition without having to even fight them was better. It rankled him, though on a level he couldn’t quite pinpoint.
Like a thorn just under his skin, the kid that had so looked up to heroes like All Might wasn’t happy with winning an unfair fight. It was an unexpected trait, the sort that was dangerous around his father. His mother had suffered for such traits, once upon a time. Shouto was doing his best to stuff that kid back into their designated box.

So of course, Shouto had to run into the worst person he could possibly run into when he was trying to control his temper. Sometimes, he thought his father’s attitude was contagious. Shouto thought that the parts of himself that he hated the most came out to play when he heard his dad’s voice. He grit his teeth and held down his temper.

He tried to school his face into some form of neutrality as he passed him. People forgot how intimidating a figure Endeavour could be. Shouto’s father stood at a massive one hundred and ninety-five centimeters, and was built like a flaming wall. As a child, Shouto had felt impossibly small next to the man, dwarfed into nothing by mere proximity. Reporters had been known to stop in their tracks from one well-placed glower or threatening step forward.

Shouto kept this face impassive, his jaw clenched. He refused to stop and chat, knowing what would be the topic. His father didn’t seem to care.

“You could’ve crushed the competition in both the obstacle course and the cavalry battle if you’d only use your left side. If you stopped acting so childish, you would’ve made a show comparable to All Might’s student debut.”

Keep walking.

Shouto could feel the cold creeping up his arm, the only physical sign of his mood. For a moment, he dared to imagine what it might look like if he froze the ground Endeavour stood on and made him fall on his ass. The imagery was comforting, even if his leg throbbed and reminded him that it’d be a bad idea. Midoriya’s face hovered in the back of his mind, knowing but afraid as he’d asked him what was wrong. That Midoriya, the one that saw too much, would probably realize that Shouto was an inch away from turning this entire hallway to ice. Shouto tried to reign in that anger, tucking it close to him until things felt sharp and frozen.

“You’re different than you siblings, do you hear? You’re my greatest creation, and I’m tired seeing you waste your damn potential just because you want to be pissed off at me. You have a chance to claim an easy win with this fight and you’d be stupid to pass it up.”

Of course, his father assumed he’d win the next match. There wasn’t any doubt, because if Shouto lost he’d pay for it. He couldn’t afford to lose, because it wasn’t a game for his father. It never had been. Something acerbic was snarling in the back of Shouto’s mind, that his father had the audacity to expect him to win without even knowing anything about Sero at all.

He was going to take the match, and demand Midoriya resign. Of course he was. He had more pride in himself than to pit himself against some sad kid that saw too much and couldn’t even punch properly. Midoriya would be fucked in a match against him anyway, and Shouto didn’t think he
honestly deserved that kind of brutal defeat. Yet he had defied odds again and again, in ways that were increasingly becoming frustrating to track or predict. In a weird way, Shouto almost wanted Midoriya to continue, if only because he was unpredictable in a way that none of his other classmates were.

Shouto wanted Midoriya to fight him, so he could show him that he was wrong about what he saw. Shouto didn’t want help, he just wanted to prove that he could be a hero without his father’s name ever being a part of it. He wanted to prove that half of him wasn’t the man that had driven his mom to burning her son (because in the end, his father had made her like that. And what did someone have to do to make their wife do that to one of her children?). He was going to prove that Midoriya was wrong, that he was strong enough to do what no one else in his family ever did: cut out the rotten, burning part of him that made people look at his face and see Enji Todoroki.

Like that he stopped, his sneakers squeaking against the linoleum. Shouto’s breath leaked from his mouth, soft clouds. He cut his father off in the middle of whatever he was going to say, an ice pick striking home.

“I’m going to beat Midoriya because I can. With mom’s power, not yours. And when I do, I’m going to prove that I can be a hero without you.”

For the first time, Endeavour had nothing else to say.

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Kacchan’s tough.

Kacchan’s the best at sports in preschool. She can run the fastest, and throw a baseball really far! Sometimes when she gets excited, she yells.

Kacchan thinks she’s a boy.

Kacchan’s crazy, and angry, and she does all the things that girls shouldn’t do like spit, and punch, and yell. She pushes and pushes, and if you tell her she can’t do something she’ll do it better than you by the end of the month.

…If Kacchan’s a boy, then he’s a scary one. If kacchan’s a boy, then he’s the kind that won’t even take it easy on girls.

Kacchan’s a monster. He’s worse than a villain, because no one will ever put him in his place.

“That Bakugou kid’s gonna break that chubby gravity girl, huh?”
Katsuki knew what people thought about him. He knew when his name came up next to Uraraka’s, what people would think of him. It didn’t stop his hands from tightening at his sides as two strangers passed by. He’d gone to get a can of orange juice, his body buzzing in a way that meant he was high on adrenaline and low on sugar. The vending machine often ate money instead of giving up its actual contents, so it’d ended in Katsuki swearing and kicking the damn thing until feebly spat the drink up in surrender.

This was when he heard the two people passing by, in the midst of a righteous take down of a disgusting capitalist machine. Katsuki stilled, his anger redirecting itself into something sour and hot at the back of his mouth. His drink for a moment was forgotten.

Here was the thing: Objectively speaking, Katsuki considered Round-Face to be a strong opponent. He thought that if Uraraka only had a little more teeth, was a little less prone to playing the ‘Best Friend’ trope to its fullest, she’d be on top amongst the girls at least. He’d taken note of her Quirk before he’d bothered to learn her name, and that was how Katsuki knew someone was strong. She’d made an impression with the ball toss that first class, and kept working and getting stronger. Some of his classmates tended to plateau, but Uraraka was a slow and steady incline to the top with very little sign of stopping. She wasn’t mind-blowing, but hard work paid off. Katsuki knew that more than anyone, his own strive to be the best leaving him with very little free time outside of school.

So the question was- why did he have to take it easy on an opponent that never for a second took it easy on anyone else? Why was it heroic to treat girls like they’re weak?

He kicked the vending machine again, this time viciously. The drink rolled out from the bottom, a little dented but cold. Katsuki pressed it to the palm of his hand the entire walk back, using it to ground himself.

He came back just in time to learn about Izuku. He’d stepped out during the match, half-convinced that this would be where his childhood friend would meet his match. All because of a stupid mistake, which was fucking typical. Somehow in the span of twenty minutes though, Izuku’d managed to surprise everyone once again. Kirishima glanced back at Katsuki, his face sheet-white and his expression shocked.

“Dude, you never told me that Midoriya was fucking ruthless.” At Katsuki’s quizzical expression, his friend recapped the match. The more Katsuki heard, the less it sounded like Izuku. By the end of the explanation, Katsuki had forgotten about his match with Uraraka. Against his better judgement, a feeling of unease was battering away at his chest.

“You said they had to drag Izuku out of the match? Where’d the take him?”

Kirishima shrugged apologetically.

“Dunno. They took that Shinsou kid too, though. Word is, Midoriya’s gonna get disqualified for unsportsmanlike behaviour.”

“He won, didn’t he? What’s the big fucking problem?”
“Katsuki, he nearly killed someone.” Kirishima blurted, looking a little uncertain. He scratched at the scar by his eye, glancing towards Kaminari beside him. The look was clear: Kirishima didn’t want to give Midoriya’s past away to those who didn’t know. “I think… Everyone was really thrown by his reaction. It was out of character.”

Katsuki wanted to push, ask more questions like ‘where the fuck did they take him’ or ‘Why did it matter if he didn’t actually kill someone’. He didn’t get a chance.

Overhead, Present Mic’s voice ricocheted across the stadium. His announcement made the questions die in Katsuki’s throat.

“The stadium is now clear to continue: Todoroki Shouto versus Hanta Sero!! Will the contestants for the next five matches please begin to make their way into their designated waiting rooms until called!”

“That’s all of us, then.” Kaminari half-turned in his seat, offering a thumbs up towards Kirishima. His smile was a little weak as he offered the same to Katsuki, like he was almost nervous about wishing him luck. “Try to keep your temper out there, yeah?”

Katsuki frowned, his shoulders rolling away the stress that was building up in his neck. He made a derisive noise, forcing himself to tear his gaze away from the stadium below.

“Whatever.”

Keep his temper. Right. Like that had ever worked out for him. Especially when others demanded it.

****

“Young man, you really need to stop ending up in my office.”

Izuku winced as Recovery Girl placed a kiss on his hand, feeling his split lip begin the slow process of deflating and stitching itself back up. It felt odd, and exhaustion was likely not far behind. He scrubbed at the spot where the injury had been, marvelling not for the first time the remarkable ability of Healers.

“It’s not like I meant to get a split lip.” He pointed out unhelpfully. Recovery Girl made a clicking noise of disapproval. “No really, and the electrocution was a necessary evil.”

“Hm. In my experience ‘necessary evils’ are often entirely avoidable.” She commented dryly. Izuku watched as the elderly woman rifled through a basic first aid kit, eventually selecting bandages and rubbing alcohol and gesturing for Izuku’s hand. He’d suffered an electrical burn, which in retrospect was probably the least that could’ve happened. Recovery Girl peeled the bandage on carefully. Her voice was mild as she spoke. “Still, you’re in better shape than your opponent. I had to re-set his nose with my Quirk, which is never fun.”

Izuku winced in sympathy for Shinsou. His hands fiddled restlessly as he couldn’t help but ask.
“He’s going to be alright?”

“Oh yes, the boy’s healthy enough, though he passed out almost immediately after. Bit of an insomniac normally, I’d bet. His body didn’t have the stamina for a full healing without some rest.”

Thinking about how thin Hitoshi was, Izuku supposed that made sense. Not so long ago himself, he’d been mostly skin and bones.

“What’d I miss while I was talking with Aizawa-Sensei?”

“Todoroki made a quick win against Sero. Denki ended up losing to Shiozaki. Ashido won her match, but that’s no real surprise. That girl’s athleticism puts mine to shame, back in the day.” The old woman smiled, her expression patient. “Kirishima and Testutetsu are duking it out, but between you and me I think those two will tire each other out. They’re an unfortunately even match.”

Izuku quickly did the math, a sinking feeling rapidly squeezing his chest. His hands tightened on his knees, brow furrowing.

“Then, Ochako-”

“-And Bakugou are competitors, yes. But young man, I’d worry more about your place in the festival, if I were you.” Kind grey eyes looked at him, a wrinkled hand patting his own. “Discussions of whether or not you’ll be disqualified for your actions are taking place, and if you classmates choose you might not be allowed to return to the competition this year.”

It was with a grim face that Recovery Girl explained Midnight’s decision. Izuku was forced to admit that he wasn’t surprised. Unhappy, but not surprised. He’d lashed out, and quite frankly, Shinsou had paid the price for it. Unherolike behaviour indeed. It didn’t stop the twinge of guilt from gnawing inside of him. His mom promised to watch all his matches. Izuku would have a lot to explain.

He also couldn’t help but worry about the next match. Izuku liked to think he knew Ochako, and despite all attempts made to avoid him he definitely knew Kacchan. Neither of them were the type to take a fight lying down. Ochako had also admitted to Izuku, quietly of course, that she was a little afraid of Kacchan. Which was fair- Izuku thought that if situations were different he might be afraid of Kacchan as well. He was strong, merciless, and would rather tear his opponent apart at the risk of his own safety if it meant winning. Even as children, he’d been volatile.

Izuku could remember being impressed by that bravery at one point. Izuku wondered at one point did Kacchan start using that fearlessness, that unmerciful side of him as a way to carve his path out in the world?

“In my experience, the ones who have the most to lose are the students that fight the hardest.” Recovery Girl murmured sagely as she rolled up the unused part of the bandage. Izuku in that moment wasn’t sure who she was referring to.
“And now, ladies and gentlemen! Entering the ring with a face that only a mother could love-Katsuki Bakugou! Versus my personal pick- Ochako Uraraka!”

“Hey! You finally made it!” The familiar voice caused Izuku’s head to turn as he made his way down the aisles, trying to find a seat. He was late, and the crowd was already tightly packed: Everyone wanted to see how this match was going to go. A smile lit up his face as he recognised the girl making her way towards him across the student section- Aiko and her sister, Sayuri.

The two were dressed like most people at the Sports Festival, wearing gaudy merchandise of their favourite heroes. Aiko’s voice was warm, and she purposefully seemed to avoid the topic of the bandage across Izuku’s cheek and lip.

“We were beginning to worry your injuries were worse than they looked. I wanted to see this match but was gonna give it up as a lost cause if you didn’t show soon.”

“You’re excited to see Uraraka?” Izuku assumed, because in truth that’s who most people were here to see. Aiko’s blinked in confusion, the hand not cradling Sayuri tucking her hair behind her shoulder. A look of trepidation crossed her face.

“No actually. I know he’s uh, the unpopular choice but I’m here for Katsuki Bakugou. When I told you I knew about UA it was because I have a friend here.” She flushed a little, toying with the edge of a necklace at her throat. Izuku’s Quirk zoned in on the edge of it, the symbol of Venus peeking out, linked with another symbol of Venus. "Truth is, I’m running buddies with him.”

Ochako found that staring down Bakugou was a bit like trying to stare down a cat: Difficult and a little uncomfortable.

The thunder of the crowd thudded in time with her anxious heartbeat, her hands were collecting sweat at a speed that was ironic, given her opponent’s Quirk.

If Bakugou was afraid, he didn’t show it. His face was twisted into a sneer, cracking his knuckles and shaking them loose at his sides. He always seemed to exude a disgusting amount of resilience, and he didn’t seem the slightest bit apprehensive about the match ahead. Ochako hated him for that, somewhere deep down. It was the ugly side of her, that jealousy that whispered under her usual cheery disposition. It was always loudest when she looked at her classmates, because Bakugou was The Best despite being an asshole, or Kirishima was strong, or Momo was smart, or Izuku was hardworking. It always felt like she was just one step behind, a step out of time. She wasn’t sure how much of it was her own mind, and how much of it was the truth.

All Ochako had was her gravity Quirk, and her willpower. Which granted, came straight from her own mother and could move mountains. It’s what pushed her this far, so why did she feel so distant
from it at the same time? What was it about facing down Bakugou that made her feel like she was fighting a losing battle? Even the crowd was cheering harder for her than they should, the sound forced. They just didn’t want to watch a girl get her ass kicked. In their minds, she’d already lost.

“You’re the floaty one, right Round-Face?”

He startled Ochako out of her spiraling thoughts. She flinched, hard. Bakugou didn’t seem to notice, or maybe didn’t care enough to comment. His head was tilted to one side, his gaze unusually focused. “If you’re gonna back down, do it now. I don’t give second chances.” His brow quirked. "Or give it your all. I'm not down to pussy around."

Ochako felt her fear turn to rage, white-hot in the back of her mouth. It was a sharp feeling, mounting into an edge that must've shown on her face. The first glint of interest flitted across Bakugou's face. All of a sudden, Ochako’s doubt crystalized into stillness. Even she knew what that meant, being in UA, if she gave up before she began. What was she doing? Why was she doubting herself?

*I'm here to make my mom and dad proud. I can’t do that if I let the likes of Katsuki Bakugou frighten me.*

The shrieking of the start bell rang through her, and Ochako charged. Her voice was a cry to battle. She was terrified, but she was grit if nothing else.

“Like hell I’m backing down!”
Chapter Summary

Izuku: "I preach love and acceptance a lot for someone whose about 2 seconds away from serious violence at all times."

Chapter Notes

**AND THERE'S MORE ARRRRT!!**

Next week: square up cause the two boys are about to FIGHT (±²)!

*First step, keep him on guard. Kacchan leads with his right side. He’s fast. Too fast! Watch-

Izuku winced as Ochako got blasted back, thrown halfway across the ring with the light and force of Kacchan’s strike. She could only scrabble for purchase, unable to find any and flung towards the edge of the ring. Izuku audibly released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding when she didn’t cross the line, staying in the round by the skin of her teeth.

“She’s not gonna go down easy, is she?” Iida offered the question to Aiko, whom Izuku had introduced. The two were playing at sport commentator, each of them analysing their favourites for the match. Aiko’s eyes narrowed as she took in Kacchan’s stance.

“Bakugou’s not giving her any slack, either. He gets weirdly focused when he’d taking something seriously. Look, he’s barely blinking.”

Izuku; personally, was still trying to process the fact that Aiko apparently knew Kacchan. Her explanation had been that it ‘was complicated’, but that they’d met due to Kacchan being recommended running to cope with his anger. She seemed reluctant to reveal his secrets, and Izuku personally couldn’t really blame her. He had the feeling that there was a vulnerability to Kacchan that most of the world didn’t have access to.

*Not anymore, at least.*

“She’s pretty focused too.” He murmured aloud, seeing the determined tilt to Ochako’s brows on the big screen. She charged forward again, barely giving Kacchan time to anticipate her movements. Ochako wasn’t the fastest, but she made up for it by quick thinking. Izuku saw what she was going to do a moment before it happened- one moment she was hidden by the smoke from Bakugou’s
explosion, the next her jacket was off. From his vantage point, Izuku saw two different shadows moving, the floating jacket and Ochako coming up from below.

Kacchan took the bait, his mouth parted in a roar as his fist closed around the fabric of the jacket. The other shadow moved around him, and Izuku held his breath. It’d all depend on Ochako’s speed now.

*You can do it. You’ve got this. You’re-*

An explosion ripped through the air, the shockwave sending the audience into an outcry about its violence. Ochako was flung backwards, knocked onto her side with bruising force.

Izuku sat back, his eyes closing in resignation. Kacchan’s reaction time had only gotten faster as he’d grown up, and he’d never been slow to begin with. And with a hit like that, Ochako’s speed was only slowing down.

“She’s going in again!” Iida cried, his hands tightening on his knees as he leaned forward in his seat.

“She’s not fast enough.” Aiko murmured. She bounced her sister on her leg, tucking her head to her chest as another blast ripped through the air. Sayuri didn’t seem to like the noise very much, pressing small hands to her fin-like ears. She kept burying her face into her sister’s chest.

*Why are you still charging like that?*

Izuku couldn’t help but ask internally. Ochako wasn’t stupid, she didn’t try the same trick twice if it wasn’t working. Kacchan was smart too, it’s not like he couldn’t pick up a pattern if there was one.

*You can’t just keep charging. You need an alternate plan. You need to come up with a way to get close to him, enough that you can touch him!*

Izuku’s Quirk automatically tried to look for an opening, some sort of weakness to exploit in Kacchan. He knew that Kacchan opened up with a large right hook, that he liked to play offense but could do defence in a pinch. If he was angry he could be reckless, but Kacchan wasn’t angry right now. Behind the force of his strikes, he was coldly calculating, his face set in stone.

“She’s toast,” Aiko murmured, looking crestfallen despite who she came to see in the first place. “He’s too fast, and she’s running out of stamina.”

*Ribbit. Ochako’s baiting him. Watch.*

The thought made sense nearly as soon as Tsuyu piped up from behind them. Until now she’d been unusually quiet, her unblinking gaze zeroed in on Ochako’s movements. She wasn’t one to wear her emotions on her face, but Izuku would’ve called her apprehensive.
He quickly looked back to the fight below, trying to find the proof. Soon enough, he saw it. Hiding in the dust that’d been kicked up, a shadow was hovering right over Katsuki’s head. It was growing with every explosion he made. Izuku’s eyes widened as he took in just how massive the scale of it truly was.

“That’s—”

“Ribbit. A secret plan. She talked with me about it before the Sports Festival. Ochako thought of it when she thought how you always approach things with several plans in place. Ribbit.” Tsuyu smiled, amphibious tongue peeking out. “She calls it: ‘Meteoric Rain’.”

****

What the fuck?

Katsuki had that thought about halfway through the match, noticing Uraraka’s focus. If he didn’t know better, he’d say she was ignoring every time he blasted her back. Surely, she knew by now that charging head-on wasn’t going to win her anything. She wasn’t going to be able to dodge past his time-limit, not with the speed she was at.

Which means she’s trying something.

Yet Katsuki couldn’t see the fucking angle, and the noise from the audience sure as hell wasn’t fucking helping. He’d known he’d be the bad guy in this fight, and sure enough the crowd was getting ugly. He could just make out a few smaller-time heroes and side-kicks openly shouting at him. Their faces were pinched in outrage, only cowed by Aizawa-sensei’s harsh critiquing over the loudspeaker. It fueled Katsuki’s anger and pride in equal parts, taken aback and validated by his teacher’s confidence in him in one.

He could see that pride mirrored in Uraraka’s own face. She didn’t want to be treated like she was made of glass either.

Okay. Then treat her like you would any other opponent. She’s not fucking dead yet, so pay attention.

He braced himself for her next charge, eyes scanning around her to try and see what her next move would be. Uraraka didn’t charge, though. Panting, covered in sweat, she merely grinned tiredly. Katsuki felt a shiver run up his spine at that smile, his fingers curling into fists.

“Almost… ready.” She wheezed, wiping dirt from her cheek. “Thank you, Bakugou. Thank you, for not dropping your guard.”

What?

She pressed her palms together, and looked up. Instinctively, Katsuki followed suit.

High in the air, plummeting towards him, was an avalanche of stone that he hadn’t even seen float its
way into the air. Katsuki flinched away from the sight, his mouth falling open as he scrambled find a solution out from under the sudden attack.

How?! How did she-

“I’M GONNA WIN!” Uraraka shrieked, the wail of stone whistling through the air nearly drowning out her cry. In the haze of the dust and dirt, her hair was a halo about her face. Her eyes blazed, never moving from his own. In that moment, there wasn’t a hint of hesitation on her face.

There’s no other move, huh?

Damn it.

Katsuki lifted his hand in the air, sweat glistening on his fingertips, and fired.

****

In the shadow of a dark room, a computer screen glowed bright on Tomura Shigaraki’s figure. He watched as Katsuki Bakugou destroyed Ochako Ururaka’s hard-won efforts with a simple blast, and the rictus grin that spread across the boy’s face after. Then he narrowed his footage, switching to the camera that covered the crowd. He zoomed in on one face in particular, carefully monitoring Izuku Midoriya’s expression. Midoriya- Ghost, had changed in his time away from the villains. He looked cleaner, bright-eyed, and disgustingly concerned over the events playing out before him. Well, Toga had admitted that he’d harboured attachment for that weak little girl. Perhaps that could be used as an angle, or perhaps Midoriya was more concerned over his childhood best friend?

He considered the entire scene carefully, head tilted as one hand came up absently to scratch grooves into the dry top layer of his skin.

He hummed aloud to the empty room, and waited for his Sensei’s opinion. Sure enough, the voice came over the computer’s speakers. Low, smooth, it was a guide that to Tomura was ever-present. Sensei never let him drift too far out of reach.

“This might prove to be a way to encourage young Midoriya back into our fold… He always was motivated by compassion. Dear Eri has told me much about that, lately.”

The thought made Tomura grimace. Yes, despite his best efforts, Midoriya had never been able to turn a blind eye to those who needed it. The weak spot had grown smaller with time, but it’d never fully gone away. Tomura suspected rather that Izuku had at some point learned to bury it, investing it in that Yakuza boss’ experiment.

Speaking of, that little girl was a necessary thorn in his side, always running away or asking about her ‘big brother’. He’d initially thought to use her as bait to lure Midoriya back to him, but without
Izuku’s presence she’d grown… unpredictable. Unruly. Her Quirk was strong enough that only Chisaki could really hope to instill fear in her.

So another idea had formed, one that required a more delicate touch of manipulation. What could break Midoriya, bend him to a point where Sensei could still hook his fingers into his mind? This was Sensei’s forte after all, and Eri was nursing a feeling of hurt that could prove to be useful. Jealousy in a child was thoughtless, cruel.

Tomura requested she spend time with Sensei, to properly stoke its flames. Chisaki had agreed, provided she have breaks for his own testing of her blood. He was close, he thought, to a breakthrough in his drug. Manipulating him was an even more complicated procedure, one that Tomura ordinarily wouldn’t have bothered with had it not been for Chisaki’s value as a pawn. Sensei saw past his own impatience, and for that Tomura was grateful.

If his weapon dared to follow a hero’s path, then he’d ensnare him in the same foolish morals and values that he so hated about heroes in the first place. Love, betrayal, it was two sides of the same coin. Tomura knew that better than anyone.

He’d turn Eri against Izuku, and she’d destroy this new life he’d built before his eyes with a smile on her face. Then maybe, maybe, he’d have finally killed off that stubborn spark of resistance. After all, they couldn’t afford to lose Midoriya. He held in him the cornerstone to a future without heroes. That he didn’t even know it made Tomura Shigaraki’s lips turn upwards in a grin as he changed tabs to play Galaga, four fingers on his mouse. The colourful ships went up in smoke with Ochako Uraraka’s hopes of winning her sports match.

****

“You did your best.”

It was the wrong thing to say, and uncomfortable, but Izuku had never been very good at offering words of comfort. He thought she was putting on a good face, for someone who had to be carried away in a stretcher.

Kacchan’s definitely only gotten stronger. That last display had been close to his limit, but strong enough that Izuku had gotten a glimpse of what his childhood friend would be if he made it to hero-class. The image was at once intimidating and terrible.

“I got carried away in the end, thought I could actually win.” Ochako waved away Izuku’s praise. She was trying to put on a good attitude, but he could read the false note in her cheer. She scratched at the bandage on her cheek, leftover from Recovery Girl’s healing. “I couldn’t even put a scratch on him, after all of that.” Making a face, she pumped her fist in anger. “I’ve got to get stronger, damn
“You’re already really strong.” Izuku murmured, but knew it didn’t have the effect he wanted. It was unfair, because Kacchan was in many ways the strongest person in the class, but life was unfortunately also unfair. A stronger opponent in the real hero world meant that you could die. The thought made Izuku’s stomach clench weirdly, thinking about how hard Ochako had fought just for a competition. She really wasn’t weak at all.

Ochako smiled, looking a little sad but resigned.

“I’m sorry that you didn’t get to have your match against Todoroki.”

Izuku started a little. Between the match and Shinsou, he hadn’t really given the Todoroki fight much thought. He knew he’d likely be disqualified, and even if it sat badly with him, he could accept it. Maybe it’d even be easier that way, not having to fight Todoroki. Izuku wasn’t sure this whole Sports Festival thing was even healthy if you were doing it with Todoroki’s mindset. Though, he was probably the last person to talk to anyone about healthy coping mechanisms and whatnot. In Aiko’s succinct words: “He looks like he’ll freeze you into a popsicle with no expression. It’s sort of terrifyingly cool.”

No pun intended, of course.

“If you had fought him, I would’ve been rooting for you.” Ochako admitted. She brushed a lock of short brown hair behind one ear. “The underdog winning always makes for a good show.”

As if on cue, a sharp knock turned both of their heads towards the entrance to the locker room. Ochako scrubbed quickly at her face, trying to rid it of some redness. Iida peeked his head in, a slightly panicked expression on his normally ordered face. His eyes landed on Izuku, relief palpable.

“You need to get to the prep room- it’s Todoroki.” Izuku stood, a peculiar twisting of unease settling in his stomach.

“What about him?”

Iida scrubbed his hair back from his face. He looked a little helpless, the way he did when Kaminari did something foolish or Ashido was too loud in class. Which meant someone had done something that wasn’t logical at all.

“He’s chosen to continue the match.”

Izuku felt his heart drop into his stomach. A sour feeling rose in the back of his mouth. In that moment, he wished the floor would swallow him whole.

Ochako brightened, unaware of Izuku’s inner turmoil. She grinned up at him, her own sadness temporarily forgotten. She reached for Izuku’s hands, cupping them in her own. A happy flush
brightened her face.

“This is your chance! Izuku- he wants to fight you fair and square!”

Iida adjusted his glasses, leaning against the doorframe. He looked a little uncertain.

“Perhaps Todoroki is less cold than he lets on.”

No. Izuku had a feeling that he was colder. People forgot that anger could be frigid, and sometimes worse than hot-headedness in terms of damage. He had a feeling that somehow he’d caught Todoroki’s attention, and that it wasn’t a good thing. This was more than throwing down a challenge. This was going out of his way to look for a fight.

So the question was: What was Todoroki so angry over that he’d risk his chance at an easy win just to fight him face to face?

Izuku made an excuse, hoping his face didn’t betray his thoughts. He probably seemed distant, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to care. He stepped out into the hallway, his back pressing against the wall as he closed his eyes and tipped his head up towards the ceiling. Izuku thought about his own anger, the anger he constantly pushed down because it was always coupled with terror. The only one who could make him feel like that, was Tomura Shigaraki. The idea that Todoroki felt even a shred of that, from a man he called father- He had a feeling it was time to try to talk to Endeavour.

Izuku never went after someone without getting all the information he could. Not that he was going after anyone, no. He was just angry that he’d have to face a fire and ice Quirk with nothing but an electrified stick and his own wits in front of a live audience. Like that was fair. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. Izuku felt fury in an instant for him, for Todoroki, for anyone who’d ever felt that sort of terror. It was sharp, and choking, and for the first time Izuku thought he might understand why Dabi had always seemed dangerous. This kind of fear when hardened, became diamond-hard and as sharp as Todoroki’s ice.
Thaw

Chapter Summary

Two bros, chillin' in a training arena, five feet apart 'cause they're not gay-oh.

Chapter Notes

Heyo! First announcement is that this fic is now translated into Italian! Many thanks to EunMi!

With that out of the way, warnings for violence of the usual level. Enjoy the read!

What Izuku knew about Endeavour, was what he’d been given during his time working with the League. He was a hero that Izuku knew more about than most: Being both the number two hero and on Dabi’s personal hit list. From a young age, Izuku knew all of the buildings in Japan that Endeavour had poured assets into, what restaurants he frequented, what corporations he worked with. Izuku knew his height (giant), his weight (built), his general appearance and his attitude (Mean). He even knew the man’s blood-type: AB.

None of this quite prepared him for meeting the man face to face. Enji Todoroki didn’t just control a space, he owned it in size alone. Izuku wasn’t exactly imposing, but he’d only met one other man that towered like Endeavour did. It was little wonder that the man was second only to All Might, with a stature and Quirk like that.

Izuku stumbled onto the man, really. In a way, he thought that it might’ve been a stroke of luck. Good or bad, it put him directly in Endeavour’s path, and so directly in the path of his anger. Izuku froze, his feelings a tight ball at the back of his throat. He was beginning to realize that he really didn’t like bullies, at all.

Endeavour had noticed him too, and by his expression Izuku had the feeling that the man had at least a passing idea of who he was. His eyes were narrowed, the flame encircling his beard and face sparking higher with annoyance. He looked down at Izuku as if his presence directly inconvenienced him.

Izuku had the startling thought that despite all the lip-service about Shouto being the 'perfect' son of
the Todoroki family. He really didn’t share much physically with the man. Some of Endeavour’s
colouring maybe, but the lion’s share of Todoroki’s looks apparently came from his mother. Izuku
wondered if that pissed Endeavour off. He’d imagined that if he’d been in the same situation,
Shigaraki would’ve taken that out on him.

Izuku bared his teeth in an unfriendly smile. He resisted the urge to unfold his staff from his belt.

“You’re the boy my son’s insisting on fighting.” The way Endeavour said ‘My Son’ made Izuku’s
skin crawl. It was too close to the way Shigaraki addressed him in passing to other villains, like
Shouto was a shiny object or toy that wasn’t behaving the way it should.

Endeavour crossed his hands in front of his chest, a hulking figure in the hallway. His flames flared.
“I saw your fight. Your Quirk’s not flashy, but it’s very strong. I can see why there’s rumours of All
Might being interested in you, given how similar it is to Sir Night Eye’s Quirk.”

Izuku really wanted to know who was spreading that rumour. It felt a little rude, considering he’d
made his opinion on the hero known. Hearing from the Number Two hero himself meant that it’d
reached even the adults by this point, and Izuku knew that it’d only snowball out of control with
each mouth it passed to.

“I wouldn’t really know. All Might and I don’t really speak outside of the classroom.” Izuku looked
up at the man from under his lashes, eyes zeroing in on the man’s clenched hands.

Thumb held outside of his fist. Loose. Irritated but not angry.

“Are you looking for Shouto? Because if you are he’s in the waiting room by now.”

“Why does my son want to fight you?” Endeavour probed, his eyes sweeping over Izuku from head
to toe as if looking for a crack in his expression. He wouldn’t find one, Izuku knew how to keep a
mask. He made himself placid, almost-bored as he kept his green eyes level with Endeavour’s stare.

“Why is your son limping?” He asked, voice cold and remote.

Endeavour’s eyes narrowed. His hands tightened at his side.

Ready to fight.

His Quirk took in Endeavour’s stance, relaxed and utterly cocky. Openings lit up like Christmas
lights to Izuku: Neck, eyes, groin.

Endeavour smiled, and it was unkind and menacing at once. He moved past Izuku, unaware of his
thoughts. Izuku stayed still, breathing through his nose.

“Those eyes really do see too much. My son has a duty, and to complete it he needs to make a debut
that will rival All Might’s in his prime. I still think he’s a fool, but this match against you will prove
to be a valuable test.”
The hair on the back of Izuku’s neck stood on end as Endeavour moved out of his line of vision, like knowingly having a snake in his blind spot. The lack of denial on Endeavour’s part made Izuku’s mind seethe the cold grey and red. “At least try to put up a good fight against him. If you can. Sorry to waste your time.”

*I’m a tool for his ambition.*

The resignation in Todoroki’s voice had hurt before, but the memory of it now made Izuku’s anger spike. He whirled about, his mouth moving faster than his common sense.

“Hey! I’m not All Might.”

Endeavour’s face was sour. He looked down his nose at him.

“Of course you’re not.”

“I’m not a hero either, not in the ways that count. I’m still learning, and it’s a steep curve from where I’m from.” Izuku knew he was saying too much, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. There was no one to prove his words anyway.

“But I don’t think that a man that can’t even bother to deny that he hurts his children, deserves the title of ‘hero’.”

“How dare you imply-“

“I’m not implying. Sorry to waste your time.”

Izuku turned, fleeing down the hall before his mouth could run away from his brain. He could feel the burning stare on the back of his neck until he rounded the corner. Heart pounding, Izuku couldn’t help but smile. Endeavour was terrifying, but he’d faced worse.

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“When he tries to use his ice against you, use Flashbang and close your eyes.”

This was all Mei Hatsume said before she’d ducked out of the waiting room, leaving Izuku to gaze contemplating at his staff. He’d trusted her so far, but this left him a little skeptical. Todoroki’s Quirk was overwhelming in short bursts, and there was very little that could stop a ten foot wall of ice hurtling at you at sudden speeds.

His staff sat slick with sweat in his palm as he made his way for the second time into the arena. The reception to his arrival was different from the last time- the audience no longer saw him as the winner of the first competition. The applause was muted, and Izuku couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched as the atmosphere was tenser than before. He hunched inwards, casting a glance across the ring towards Shouto Todoroki.
Izuku thought he probably looked stressed, but Todoroki looked like a stone statue. He stood expressionless and distant, favouring one leg as subtly as he could. Izuku could see frost encroaching the creases of his jacket, his breath trailing in clouds. There wasn’t anything to read on his face, blank neutrality peering back at him. Izuku twirled his staff upright, keeping it loose at his side.

If he wanted even a chance, he’d have to get close to Todoroki. That was going to be easier said than done.

*I hope Mei knows what she’s doing.*

Then Midnight raised her whip, and the match began.

Todoroki’s ice blasted from him, a jagged dragon tearing up the arena. There was no dodging, no chance to breathe. Izuku lifted his staff in a bracing motion, closed his eyes, and pressed *Flashbang.*

A blindingly white light filled the arena, the staff humming in his hands. No electricity, but light and small orbs spilling from either end of the handle. They hit the ground, and exploded.

*Foam.*

Pink, expanding foam with an initial stun light. Izuku opened his eyes, and found that the wall of ice that’d threatened to overtake him had been immobilised and consumed by bubble gum-pink foam.

*Mei, when this is all over I’m going to make sure that everyone knows just what* 

An exhilarated smile on his lips, Izuku let out a shaky breath of relief. It didn’t last long. A beeping noise alerted him to his staff, towards a screen that until this point had remained dark. A bright green counter had begun counting down: *six shots left. 2:00 minutes.*

“Two minutes until what?” Izuku breathed in confusion, but soon connected the pieces.

Todoroki’s eyes were squinted shut, a hand to his face. There was a surprised snarl of surprise on his lips. He’d stumbled back, and as he looked up his eyes were sightless, his legs shaking.

*He can’t see me. Balance is thrown. It’s a countdown to approximate recovery time.*

“Where are you?!” Todoroki shouted, trying to shake the disorientation away.

Izuku charged, his Quirk zeroing in on Todoroki’s weak leg. Shouto seemed to guess where he was coming from though, and lifted his hand. Blindly, he shot pellets of ice, large and fast enough to be dangerous head-on. Izuku dodged, rolling to the side at the last second. Not quite fast enough, an ice pellet grazed past his cheek and ear. Izuku lifted his hand to his face. It came away sticky with blood.

The timer counted down the last few seconds as he got to his feet, and Shouto’s eyes found their
focus. They locked in on him, burning with anger. Izuku dove just as another shot of ice came for him, narrowly missing his leg.

*Six shots left. Six until I can’t use ‘Flashbang’ any more.*

And then… he was left with close-range fighting techniques. That was his limitation. If he could drag this out, get up close, aim for his weak leg… then he might stand a chance.

Unfortunately, Todoroki probably knew that too. Which was why Izuku couldn’t just stand in one place and wait for it to happen. A plan was rapidly forming in his mind, but it was one that relied on something unpredictable: Todoroki’s anger. Izuku had glimpsed it, but it was hidden now under the cold indifference. Which meant he had to bring it out. Izuku cast a look at his own arm, so far uninjured. He grit his teeth, sinking into his bottom lip.

*This is gonna hurt like hell. Sorry, mom.*

In a split decision, he planted his feet as the ice rushed towards him. Izuku pressed the *Flashbang* button, and waited for the recoil to hit.

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“Hey, Kirishima! You’re just in time for the big match! Congrats on making it to the second round, by the way!”

Katsuki lifted his head instinctively, watching Kaminari wave Kirishima over to where they were sitting. He caught sight of him, in a clean uniform after his match against that metal bastard.

Kirishima grinned a toothy grin, clapping hands with Kaminari before taking a seat beside Katsuki. His proximity was a familiar feeling, but it did little to settle the energy that’d settled into Katsuki’s bones since the start of this match. He didn’t have a good feeling, and that was rare. His emotional instincts were usually crap, so for them to go off like this was a blue moon.

“You okay?” Kirishima’s voice was low, low enough that others wouldn’t necessarily be able to hear. Katsuki appreciated that, because he wasn’t even really sure what was wrong. He kept squinting at the match below, trying to pinpoint what exactly was so unsettling about Shouto Todoroki at the moment. The answer came to him, a slow lightbulb burning in the back of his mind.

“Is it just me, or does Half n’ Half look like he’s in Quirk Shock?” Katsuki kept his voice equally low, his hands tightening into fists in his lap. Kirishima squinted too, red eyes taking in the situation thoughtfully before his smile slipped. His voice was confused.

“Wait, hasn’t the match just started? I thought guys like you and Todoroki had loads of stamina.”

The flattering compliment aside, Katsuki snorted.

“Not exactly. A Quirk’s like a muscle. You overuse it, you get backlash.” He held up his own wrist,
still aching from his match with Ochako. The burns stood out a little more vividly on the inside of his arm, though the nerves in that area were hyper-sensitive and deadened at once. “I singed myself by pushing too hard, and Todoroki’s got ice forming on his face. He’s slowing down, too.”

Kirishima cursed quietly, his gaze flicking towards Deku. He wasn’t doing much better. The idiot had decided that somehow sacrificing his left arm was a good plan, because it allowed him to gain a foot of space closer towards Todoroki. In Katsuki’s opinion, talking out a Quirk fight was a fool’s quest. Still, the injury was gruesome. Izuku’s entire lower arm was scraped raw and bleeding. Ice could be sharp, and given enough speed, deadly.

“I knew this match was gonna be intense, but I didn’t know they’d both be so… self-sacrificing.” Kirishima looked vaguely uncomfortable, skirting around the edges of the real problem. Katsuki was blunter, one hand digging into his inner arm gently.

“They’re being self-destructive, stupid too.”

“Coming from you.”

“Yeah. Coming from me.” Katsuki’s eyes narrowed, the unsettled feeling still twisting around into a snare in his chest. “Todoroki’s pissed off. Izuku’s baiting him.”

“Why would he do that?”

Katsuki didn’t answer. He had a fairly good idea. It didn’t stop his frown from deepening, until it settled on his face like it’d made a home.

Deku, you moron. He thought. Saving someone by getting yourself killed is hardly saving someone at all.

****

“Shouto. You’re not your father.”

The words sounded true, but his mother’s expression had always been fragile when she’d said that. Everything about his mother had been just that- delicate, like glass waiting to shatter. She’d been made brittle by being worn down, smoothed like a broken bottle thrown into an ocean to fend for itself. Only the edges of her were sharp. As a child, Shouto wondered how someone could become like that, so afraid of yelling or violence when it was a part of their everyday life.

He understood it a little better now. People like his father didn’t understand that growing up with his type of training did exactly the opposite of what he would’ve liked. It’d all been supposed to make him tough, make him smarten up, make him better.

It made him unable to look away from the devastation of Midoriya’s arm instead. It hung limply at
his side, bruised and bleeding, two of the fingers twisted beyond recognition. It was ugly, and had to
have hurt. Midoriya didn’t seem to really care. His green eyes were blazing, his teeth bared as he
braced himself for the next strike. He wouldn’t last much longer, not like this.

“I’ll admit; your little foam trick threw me for a loop. Defending and dodging isn’t going to last you
forever, though.” He called casually, casting a glance up towards the stadium. Endeavour was
scowling, a bright beacon even amidst other heroes. Shouto relished the look of disapproval he could
just make out on the man’s face. “Though, I appreciate that you’re letting me use my Quirk. It’s
pissing the old man off.”

Izuku didn’t reply, sweat trailing down the side of his face, his teeth grit in frustration. His good hand
trembled, wrapped around his staff so that it could prop him up. Shouto would end this quickly, and
then he’d get the medics. Midoriya had put up a good fight, considering he’d never had a chance.
Shouto lifted his hand, feeling cold deep down in his blood.

“With your hand destroyed like that, you can’t fight any more. I’m ending this.”

“Who says I’m done?”

Shouto startled as Midoriya suddenly twirled his staff, injured hand wrapping painfully end over end.
Shouto braced himself, eyes closing a moment before the Flashbang hit. He couldn’t avoid the foam,
though. A wave of pink foam crunched up against his ice like a wall. The vibration of the impact ran
up Shouto’s arm in a dull hum.

*His arm is broken?! Why-*

“Why are you going this far!” Shouto snarled, his breath leaving his lips in clouds. Behind the
foam, Midoriya was shaking. His eyes were pinpricks of pain as he clutched at his broken arm.

“You’re shivering, Todoroki.” He said. “Quirks are physical abilities, and your reaction time’s
slowing down. But you know that probably better than I do.” Midoriya suddenly charged forward,
and Shouto barely had enough time to block with a thin jet of ice. It struck squarely against
Midoriya’s staff, cracking but not breaking. Electricity crackled in Shouto’s ears. “My question is,
why aren’t you thawing yourself out with your left side?” Midoriya was close, close enough that
Shouto could see the flecks of blood that’d spattered along his cheek. His eyes reflected the
electricity crackling from him staff. “Everyone here is giving it their all. So what gives you the right
to become the top hero with only half of the effort put in?!”

Shouto’s leg throbbed with the bracing of the ice. He grunted as it fell apart, forcing himself back.
Izuku spun away, but not for long. Shouto charged, red washing his vision as ice ran up along his
right arm.

Except Izuku didn’t charge high at all. Instead he ducked low, and Shouto realized too late what he
was planning. Midoriya’s staff ducked low, and his staff connected with Shouto’s leg at the knee.

Then, the pain was indescribable.

****

What motivates you, Midoriya?

Izuku had always felt like he was running. Running towards something, running away, it all depended on the moment. He couldn’t stop, because stopping meant acknowledging why he was running in the first place. Like a shark in water, stopping meant death. Despite everything, he’d never wanted to die, not enough to ever consider it seriously. He’d found motivation in survival, if only because there was always someone who needed him. There’d been Eri, or Magne, or Spinner or his mom or Toshinori- all of them another reason he had to be better, do better.

What motivates you?

He’d been believed in. People had told him that he could be more than just a villain, than just a kidnapping victim. People in his life had proven to him that there were people who could change, who could be trusted. That hope, that fear of disappointment… Izuku selfishly wanted to earn that compassion.

I want to be a hero that people can be proud of. I want to make amends for the things I’ve done.

He’d never consciously thought about this, but the moment he thought of it Izuku knew it was the truth. He wanted to smile and mean it, even though he was afraid. Even though he didn’t deserve it.

He wanted to help people. Wasn’t that reason enough? He wanted to save the Ghosts in this world, the Magnes and Eris and Shinsous. He wanted to show them that they had a chance.

He wanted to be that chance.

Maybe the reason he was so attached to this fight, was because Izuku could see that same motivation in Todoroki’s face.

“To save people even when they don’t think they can be saved… that’s what motivates me.”

Izuku’s words were drowned out by the electrical keening of his staff. Shouto’s leg crumpled at the contact, his face twisting in surprise and hurt. Izuku wasted no time, his broken hand curling into an agonizing fist. He struck Shouto squarely in the stomach, knocking the wind from the boy with an audible huff.
“That’s why I’m giving everything, for everyone! If you don’t give it your all, then you’re saying that a part of you doesn’t deserve to be a hero! How can you expect to become number one without even giving everything you have?!”

Shouto went flying backwards with the force of Izuku’s punch, his leg refusing to support him. He clutched at his knee, his face screwed up into a snarl of pain.

“My father-!”

You’re just one of Shigaraki’s Dogs.

You’re a Ghost, you belong to me.

No one is coming. No one cares about you.

Izuku didn’t let him finish, his voice roaring over him.

“You’re father is not you! It’s your Quirk, isn’t it?!”

He spread his arms, opening himself up deliberately. Shouto struggled to his feet. His expression was raw. Izuku’s Quirk lit up in his mind’s eye, brighter and louder than ever before.

What he saw was Shouto’s tears, evaporating as his skin began to heat up. Shouto’s body began to steam, the frost melting away as his left side began to glow ember-hot and spark. He stood, and though his bad leg trembled, it held. Izuku knew in a moment that his match was lost. It didn’t stop a grin from spreading across his face, answered in kind by Shouto.

His voice was trembling, but Shouto’s declaration filled Izuku with warmth.

“I want to be a hero. I want to be a hero, too!”

Fire and ice swelled from either side of Shouto, and Izuku would’ve cheered if he knew it wasn’t going to be lobbed at him. He was so fucked.

Somehow, he didn’t think he cared.

The last thing Izuku remembered was a bright, hot light, and warm air shoving him up and back. His skull cracked against the far wall, well outside the ring. Then Izuku was left with nothing at all, falling into darkness. The chill that’d been permeating the arena was gone.
Divided

Chapter Summary

"Izuku?"

"Oh no he fuckin' dead"

Chapter Notes

Enjoy the chapter~

“Severe concussion, multiple contusions, second degree burns and a fracture of the upper arm and three fingers. The bone in his arm is in shards, he won’t wake up for a little while. I gave him something for the pain.” Recovery Girl adjusted her glasses, sitting back in her chair. When she looked up at Toshinori, it was with disapproval written into her features. “But I can’t keep putting him back together every time he decides to go up against an opponent with guns blazing. Not when his Quirk can’t protect him from physical attacks. You pushed him too far, Toshinori.”

Toshinori swallowed, bearing the weight of her glare on his shoulders. This time, he felt that it was well-deserved.

Izuku looked impossibly fragile, lying unconscious in a hospital bed while covered head to toe in bandages. It was a sight that brought up bad memories for Toshinori, and a vision he in truth ever wanted to see. A child should never have to have surgery, in his mind.

“I never intended for him to push himself into breaking.” He really hadn’t, either. His intention had always been to encourage Izuku, to convince him that he could hold his own against his classmates despite the disadvantages he was given in life. He hadn’t thought that Izuku would take that to mean that he had to win at any cost, but maybe that was his own fault. The boy never had done anything by halves.

Recovery Girl sighed, seeming to sense the dark direction his thoughts were headed. She reached out to pat his arm, the gesture comforting and familiar from his own time spent in the infirmary as a student.

“I’m not saying he shouldn’t be encouraged to do well, but you’re treating him like he already has
your Quirk. The boy isn’t invincible, Toshi. His Quirk is suited more for undercover work than flashy displays of power. You can’t just tell him to keep punching his way out of things.”

She was right, of course. It still sat uncomfortably with Toshinori. The idea that he might have instigated this result let guilt rest on his shoulders heavily. A traitorous part of him whispered that Izuku would’ve been able to better defend himself if he’d been given One For All by now. If he could just talk to the boy, try to help him see past the persona of All Might, then Toshinori could have helped him more instead of just landing the boy in the hospital. But perhaps that was unfair, because either way there was no guarantee the boy would take such a conversation to heart at all.

“I know you have hopes for the boy. But you need to be honest with him and your intentions, work with his limitations, or he will continue to try to reach an unattainable goal.” Recovery Girl smiled a little teasingly. “Not everyone can burst through a wall unhurt, okay?”

“Understood.”

“Good.” She clapped her hands together, rising to her feet with a nod. “Then I have something else to ask you. Do you or his mother have anything on Izuku’s previous medical history? In particular, I’m wondering if he’d had a concussion before.”

The question startled Toshinori, his dark eyes narrowing in confusion. He shrugged his skeletal shoulders, a hand lifting to scratch the back of his neck.

“I’m afraid not. Any information on the boy was given by himself, and he’s never spoken about a head injury. Why?”

“It’s something I noticed when bandaging his head.” She tottered towards Izuku’s bedside, delicately moving aside the wrapped bandages and dark curls. “He’s got an old scar right above his ear, along the left half of his head. I didn’t notice before since his hair is so long. I had to cut it back a bit to access the wound.”

Toshinori leaned forward, a frown creasing his brows. Sure enough, the faintest white line traced its way from ear to temple. He reached out to touch it without thinking, feeling the faint bump of raised scar tissue. A bad feeling rose in the back of Toshinori’s mind, black and discomfiting.

“It’s old. I would’ve thought he’d hit his head when he was little, if it wasn’t for the precision of the scar. I know he’s been in my office now and again for migraines?”

“He told me that’s a side effect of using his Quirk.” Recovery Girl hummed. From the tone, she sounded doubtful.

“A person’s Quirk shouldn’t hurt them physically. Not if they’re not constantly overusing it. Mental Quirks do often get headache-related backlash, though.” Her dark eyes were serious as she smoothed Izuku’s hair back over the line, letting it fall back into place. “In my professional opinion, the incision looks like the sort used for traditional brain surgery. What I can’t tell you is who might still be using such a method when healing Quirks are available.”
The answer was evident: Someone who didn’t want it being known that they were operating on children. The dark feeling swelled in Toshinori’s chest, suffocating. There was still so much that no one knew about Izuku’s past, or the people that had tormented him. The more he found out, the more Toshinori was filled with equal parts anger and grief.

“In your opinion, do you think he will tell you how he got that scar if you were to ask?” Recovery Girl asked. Toshinori shook his head. She heaved a long breath, shaking her head. “Then my best recommendation is to keep an eye on him. I’ll have a brain scan ordered, just to make sure the concussion hasn’t caused any lasting damage. If it brings up anything else, you and his mother will be the first to know after him.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me.” She looked at him sharply from behind her glasses.

“Get the boy talking more in therapy. Arrange a meeting with the teachers involved in his life and find the people responsible for hurting this boy as much as they have.” Recovery girl’s hands tightened on her cane, arthritic joints popping with the motion. “Because whoever made that incision, knew what they were doing.” Her unspoken words sent a shiver down Toshinori’s spine.

Whoever did this, has done it before.


****

Don’t think about it.

“Don’t think about what?”

Green eyes glowed in the dark, through the metal slats of a cell. A child, deep in the twisting darkness of the League’s Hideout. They spoke again, peering unblinkingly into the dark. Their mouth didn’t move, but Izuku could hear them all the same.

Don’t think about the lab.

The image flickered before his eyes, snippets of time moving back and forth. It hurt his head. Izuku flinched away from the brightness of it, struggling to comprehend what he was seeing. It was him, stumbling through the bar. The night he’d killed Fyrefly. He remembered distantly how cold he’d felt, how he’d immediately gone to throw up in the bar sink.

The image didn’t last. As if on fast-forward, he got the soundless image of Shigaraki yelling at his unresponsive form huddled on a bar stool. Izuku watched, strangely detached from the scene even as Kurogiri held Shigaraki back from striking Izuku. Words were being exchanged, but they were underwater, muffled and forgotten. Shigaraki’s anger faded, replaced with a sullen line of his mouth.
The image was moving again, and this time Izuku struggled to hang on. A dark room. Being dragged in by Kurogiri’s warping Quirk, spat out onto cold stone floor. Overhaul. A voice speaking through a television screen. Cold metal table. Straps. No, no please-

Eyes staring out from a prison cell. A face pressed close and screaming, reaching for him with claw-like hands.

Don’t think about it!

Don’t THINK ABOUT IT-

Izuku woke up in a cold sweat, his teeth clenched tightly. He jolted, trying to sit up and panicking when he couldn’t. His heart was slamming itself into his ribcage, a rabbit-fast rhythm. A voice spoke by his ear, calming.

“Easy, my boy. It’s Toshinori. You’re alright.”

Some of Izuku’s panic faded upon seeing the skeletal man, his heartbeat slowing. He drew in a shaking breath, casting a glance automatically down at his body for injuries. His right hand was bandaged and casted, a sling around his neck supporting and immobilising it all at once. That was what had been holding him down.

When he could breathe again, Izuku offered Toshinori an approximation of a smile. It was probably wobbly, all things considered. His face hurt. Most of him hurt.

“I take it I didn’t win the match, huh?”

Toshinori didn’t smile back. Izuku’s grin slipped off of his face like wet paint. He shifted a little in the bed, the stiff sheets rustling.

“You could have died today.” Toshinori’s voice was very soft, but it went through Izuku like a spear. He tried to object.

“Cementoss would’ve stopped the fight-”

“You deliberately put yourself in the line of fire to egg Todoroki on. Why?”

Izuku opened his mouth, a denial hovering on his lips. He fell silent as Toshinori looked up at him, blue eyes seeming to see right into him and stripping away the lies. Izuku looked at him, his arm throbbing under a layer of pain killers and the memory of Todoroki’s face before he was knocked unconscious in his mind.

“I had to.” He admitted, casting his gaze towards his lap. “It was the only way I could get him to fight for real.”

“What do you mean?” Toshinori asked. He sighed at Izuku’s silence, a line of frustration tugging the corners of his mouth downwards. Izuku resisted the urge to shrink into the bed. It wasn’t that he
regretted what he’d done, quite the opposite honestly. It was just that at the time there hadn’t been any other option. Izuku didn’t have Iida’s speed, or Bakugou’s power. He just had his brain, and a Quirk that knew how to pick apart people to see the parts that made them vulnerable. He’d wanted Todoroki to see him as a competitor. If he also happened to give him the push needed to realise that he didn’t have to be alone, then was breaking his arm and head really so bad?

“I knew Recovery Girl could heal me enough that I’d be okay. I took a risk, but it was calculated. I just… wanted to show Todoroki that he didn’t have to go easy. That I wasn’t just another hurdle.”

“Todoroki hit you so hard that your arm bone burst in fragments. Your concussion might have caused brain damage if Recovery Girl wasn’t on hand.” Toshinori leaned forward, the intensity in his gaze not having lessened. “I told you that if Todoroki was dealing with something that needed intervention that me or Aizawa-Sensei could help him.”

“He wasn’t going to listen to Aizawa-Sensei, not if I didn’t convince him first that he needed help.” Izuku pressed on stubbornly. “When I was… When I first got here, nothing anyone said convinced me you were trustworthy. It was Ochako- what she did, that made me realise that you were trying to help. I can help.” Izuku bit his lip, his head throbbing in dull tandem with the humming of the vitals monitor at his side. Toshinori’s face crumpled, a house of cards falling in the middle.

“Helping someone doesn’t mean you should put your own health at risk.”

“Bullshit!” The exclamation burst from Izuku’s mouth, the rare swear causing Toshinori to go a little paler. “You put your health at risk all the time to help people! Don’t think I don’t notice the coughing fits and bloody tissues!” Izuku glared up at the man. “Every day you go out of your way to make it to school, to work in the evenings when you think I’m asleep, to help my mom out with groceries and shopping. But you’re not healthy either, and it’s getting worse! Isn’t it? Am I just going to find you on the floor one day, or will I get a phone call telling me that you’re in the hospital? Or dead?”

“Izuku-“

“You keep secrets from me. You keep secrets from everyone. I don’t even know what your Quirk is, other than it hurts you. I don’t know why everyone keeps telling me that All Might’s interested in me despite the fact that I’ve barely interacted with him. You keep saying you know him but I’ve never seen the two of you talking! You keep everything far away from you so that no one else gets hurt!” The anger was a hard sliver of glass in Izuku’s chest, stabbing his heart. His voice felt like rusted nails as the back of his eyes burned. Toshinori looked at him as if he’d been stabbed, but he was too angry to care. “You don’t get to tell me not to be self-destructive. Not when you’re worse.”

Toshinori was grey-faced, ashen in silence. Izuku would be sorry about it later. He could walk, Recovery Girl had healed him well enough. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, gritting his teeth against the pain. He walked out of the infirmary, leaving Toshinori still sitting on the edge of the bed. The man never seemed so small, or so fragile. Izuku told himself he didn’t care.

He had fixed this, given Todoroki the boost needed to get started. That small change meant the world to Izuku. He’d done something about a problem that no adult had noticed, without inconveniencing
anyone or getting Shouto in trouble with his dad (at least, he hoped). He’d leave the information written recorded for Aizawa-Sensei, and then he could go save Eri without guilt weighing him down. He’d bring her home, and then maybe, just maybe, he could patch things up with Toshinori.

He could do this. Izuku just needed a little more time, a little longer. He’d hurt the man, and it sucked, but if it kept him safe, then Izuku didn’t care. He wanted him to find another way? Then fine. He’d do this his own way.

Izuku was better at playing a villain, anyway.

****

When Shouto had been very small, he’d watch the news with his mom. It was maybe a strange memory to cling to, but it’d stuck over the years. He could remember if he tried hard enough the way her hand had felt on his head, her cool skin against his own. Tucked into her lap, he’d watch reports about heroes fighting villains and guess with her who’d make the next news headline.

His favourite had always been All Might. That was a secret, the kind that made his mother press a finger to her lips and look anxiously over her shoulder. That was okay though, because it was a secret shared between them.

“Can I tell you a secret, Shouto?”

He really had always looked forward to keeping those secrets for his mother. They were for him, and only for him.

“The secret is that I think your Quirk is beautiful.”

When had he forgotten that secret?

His knee throbbed, but the pain was muted. Recovery Girl had given it a once-over, frowning and tutting over the painful-looking bruise that ran purple from kneecap to mid-thigh.

She hadn’t seemed suspicious, though. Shouto could thank his few lucky stars for that much. Not that his brain seemed it care, it still felt like his stomach was trying to fall out from under him.

He was so tired.

The door smashed open, breaking Todoroki from his thoughts. He turned, finding himself face to face with one Katsuki Bakugou. One confused, angry (and when wasn’t he angry??), violent Bakugou. Predictably, this went about how one might imagine, given the fact that Shouto wasn’t the friendliest person, and barely knew Bakugou to boot.

“Why the fuck are you in my prep room?!”

It was not, in fact, his prep room. Shouto let him figure that much out on his own. He turned his head
away in silence, refusing to take the bait.

Somehow, the lack of response seemed to egg Bakugou on further. He scowled, his expression twisting from irritation to actual outrage.

“You always ignore people… the least you could fucking do is acknowledge your final opponent! Look me in the damn eye!”

Shouto flinched, the response too automatic to hold back. More light than power, Bakugou’s strike puttered out almost immediately. His statement had a strange echoing of Midoriya’s. Both of them had claimed he’d been holding back. The similarity made Shouto wonder if Bakugou knew more about Midoriya than he usually let on in class.

“You and Midoriya… you used to be childhood friends, right?”

The change in topic seemed to throw Bakugou. His rage was temporarily forgotten, replaced with wariness as he shifted his glance somewhere away from Shouto’s face.

“He moved when we were four.” His tone seemed to beg for the topic to be dropped. Katsuki shoved his hands into his pockets. He was wearing a coat with a puffed up hood: Shouto had the suspicion it actually belonged to Ashido.

Shouto pushed on, aware that he was stepping onto a landmine.

“Was he always so quick to get involved in other people’s affairs?”

Bakugou seemed to balk, a growl low in his throat. Shouto watched as something unreadable passed his face, complicated for Bakugou’s usual facial tics. A long stretch of silence permeated the air before he answered.

“…Yeah. He always was like that. Even when we were kids. It was damn annoying.”

“Is that why you two don’t talk anymore?”

Bakugou scowled.

“No. And it’s none of your damn business why we don’t anymore.” He kicked off from the wall he was leaning against, but his expression still wore that complicated sort of look that Shouto couldn’t decipher. “You should focus on your own familial problems, and prep for our match.” Shouto startled at the mention of his family, but Bakugou wasn’t finished. “Either way, I’ll crush you and your flames if you don’t get out of your damn head.”

With that piece of philosophy, Bakugou left. Shouto was left to his own devices, wondering how Midoriya had managed to befriend someone so basely unpleasant. The fact that Bakugou wasn’t wrong about where his priorities should lie only put Shouto more on edge. He was entering closer to the twilight zone every day.
Nicknames were a funny thing- they stuck even when they stopped fitting. At one time, Katsuki could admit that the name Deku had given him had been appropriate. He’d been little, and at one point to an outside viewer, a girl. ‘Kacchan’ stuck even when he’d shed that identity, the seams stitched together popping as he’d burnt it to ashes along with the memory of his childhood best friend.

But like a bad coin, it’d come back. So had Deku. So had the guilt that Katsuki tried so hard again and again to deny, bury or hide in anger. Like his damn therapist said every time, nothing that happened ever really disappeared. If he wanted it gone, he had to force it to leave, deal with the shit and move on. Which was how he found himself in the prep room, writing another stupid letter, trying to understand why he felt two hits away from blowing something up after a fifteen second conversation with Half-n’-Half.

"Kacchan! Are you okay?"

Dear Shitty-Hair,

Y’know sometimes I think that I’m still stuck in kindergarten, despite everything. All I remember when I try to think back is feeling so shitty, and I think sometimes I avoid thinking about it for that very reason. But the truth is that I never really bothered to grow.

At first, I think it was ‘cause my mum was so afraid she was going to lose me. First with Deku’s kidnapping, but also because of being trans. It’s hard to explain to Cis people (don’t be offended it’s just a term for people like you or Deku), but parents of trans kids are so afraid that one day they’re going to wake up and their kid won’t be their kid any more. It’s bullshit, but it’s how my mom took this. So she coped by telling me I could be a boy, if I didn’t really change. Never out loud but… y’know when you can tell when your parents feel a certain way, even though they say nothing at all? She cried in her room when she thought I couldn’t hear for two days when I finally told her I was going on hormones.

Fuck I sound like a pussy

What I’m trying to say is: I’ve never had to change. I’ve spent so much time working on myself physically that the emotional’s all one big ball of confusion. And I think that maybe that’s not a good thing. I don’t know how to be anything but Katsuki Bakugou, the kid who blows up when angry and picks fights and be mean.
I can’t help with delicate, mushy family stuff or trauma when I can’t even deal with my own

I don’t know how to talk to people. Sometimes I’m jealous of you for that. Even if the thing you’re going to say is idiotic, it’s always the ‘nice’ thing. The ‘good’ thing. I know that if I try talking to Deku, he’ll see I haven’t changed at all.

The truth is: He’s changed entirely. Deku always wanted to be a hero, and he’s gotten what he wanted and what he’s dreamed of. He’s better off without a bully constantly tearing down his self-esteem. His head never worked like mine, he crumbles with pressure. He’s a bleeding heart and I can barely get out of my own head long enough to care that Half-n’-Half’s going through shit I can’t even begin to understand.

I never grew a heart, not for the stuff that people get upset over. Trying to stay my mom’s kid I think meant I kept my selfishness, too.

Katsuki sat with the pen in his hand for a long damn time, uncertain of what he wanted to write and half tempted to cross out the entire last paragraph. A knock on the door distracted him.

“Can we come in?” The soft voice was familiar, but no less irritating. He scowled, his expression caught between embarrassment at having been caught writing his feelings as much as surprise.

“Aiko. What’re you doing here?”

She had her sister with her, she usually did though. Katsuki knew Aiko’s dad worked two jobs and that her mother was out of the picture. She smiled, lifting Sayuri’s hand in a little wave which the tiny gremlin enthusiastically took part in. Sayuri stuck out her tongue at Katsuki, finned ears wiggling with the motion.

“You’re mean when you fight!”

“Yeah?” Katsuki grumbled “Well, you’re weak when you fight at all!”

“Hush, both of you.” Aiko cut in, a chiding expression on her face.

She frowned at Katsuki, the expression thunderous enough that he listened. For now, at least.

“I came to see you of course. To support you and another friend in the festival. What, did you think I wouldn’t come to see my running partner’s performance?”

He glared, shrugging a little. Katsuki growled into his crossed arms on the table.

“You can tell your uncle I’m fine. I know he checks up on me through you.”

“That’d be against the law as your therapist. Uncle wouldn’t do that to you, and you know it.”

He did know it, but it didn’t stop the more anxious part of Katsuki’s brain churning. He liked Aiko
as much as he liked anyone (minimally), but the fact that she was Mr. Kyokan’s niece and that he’d met her through a therapy exercise (running) made their friendship odd. In three years, Mr. Kyokan had never indicated that his niece had shared something with him that Katsuki had told her in confidentiality. It didn’t mean he liked the fact that one of his healthiest friendships was found by someone paid to hear him whine.

“… Chihiro’s still at band practice?” It was his way of asking about Aiko’s girlfriend, without actually seeming like he cared. Aiko beamed, a soft light reaching her eyes as she nodded.

“She says hello to you and your family. Asked me to tell her if you won anything at the end of this.”

“I’m gonna crush this competition.” Katsuki assured. Aiko rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, yeah. Tell that to me when you actually win, champ. I’ll get you a stuffed bear for your troubles.”

“Absolutely the fuck not-”

“And if you do lose, then I’ll take you and Midoriya out for lunch, and we’ll work on a training system together to get both of you stronger.”

Katsuki blinked, his brain rapid-firing as it tried to connect the pieces.

“H-how the fuck do you know Deku?!”

****

He never intended to become a villain.

Really, no one started out on that path with villainy in mind. He still wouldn’t call himself one, if he was being honest. He was a necessary evil, a darkness to balance out the false light that captivated the average citizen. That didn’t mean he liked killing. It was regrettable, that he’d been driven to this point.

But that was alright. Hopefully with this last hero, a message could be sent out to the world. Ingenium was popular, well-liked. He would become a symbol of his conviction.

“It’s a pity, but your death isn’t going to be in vain.”

He spoke to the man lying beneath him, quivering in a pool of blood. He didn’t cry, not like some heroes that Stain had killed. Ingenium seemed determined to put on a brave face, even as he choked soundlessly on his own blood. Blue eyes burned as they looked up at him, pain and fury brightening them in the dark.
The feeling of something looming ahead tingled in Stain’s veins. Maybe this would be enough to finally draw out those that needed to be cleansed from this society. Maybe this would be enough to make everyone understand. He wasn’t doing this because he liked killing.

He was doing this to save everyone.
Iida could count on his hand the number of times he’d been truly afraid. The first had been when he was very little, young enough that he still had the plastic strap around his glasses. His parents had been called away on an emergency, his care left to his older brother. Tensei had watched him as he’d sat patiently on the couch the entire night with his heart in his mouth, the rain seeming to fall endlessly from the sky, as if it were crying.

They’d come home safe, but for the first time Iida had a vague concept that his parents were mortal. The thought had shaken him down to a profound level.

The second time had been at USJ, when he’d been running for his life and the life of his classmates. When he’d first met Midoriya, in fact. Iida found it hard to remember that fight, the image of what Midoriya had been like before he’d become a student at UA at complete odds with the Midoriya he knew now. Midoriya now had colour in his face, a smile sometimes, and a soft side that was rapidly turning into his motivation to become a hero. It was a transformation that Iida was ashamed to admit he didn’t think would happen at first.

This was a combination of these events somehow, his brother in the hospital, the rain falling down from the sky in thick sheets that he could barely see through while running. Iida was early, but of course he usually was so that wasn’t at all out of the normal. If he was early he could visit his brother before school. He could clean the classroom, he could organize Sensei’s pens, he could wipe down the board. He could be professional and kind and be everything a member of his family was meant to be: Organized.

All of it would distract him from the image of his brother in a hospital bed, barely clinging to life. He kept telling himself that it was all a dream, that he’d imagined the phone call with his mother at the Sports Festival. If he kept moving, he didn’t have to think about the fact that the people around him
were treating him like fragile candy floss.

There were worse reactions though, Iida supposed.

Midoriya had taken to avoiding him. Not in an obvious way, and not in a way that Iida felt like he should call him out for, but subtly. Since the Sports Festival, Midoriya had been a little odd, a little subdued. It was a change that Iida thought at first he’d imagined, until Uraraka had taken him to the side. She’d nervously twisted her hands in the folds of her skirt, pink cheeks a little paler than the norm.

“Does Deku seem quieter to you?”

“What do you mean?” Uraraka had shifted from foot to foot. She glanced over her shoulder, as if she were worried that Midoriya might be just around the corner.

“Something’s off. Since the Sports Festival, he’s strange.”

“He might just be busy, he’s started extra lessons with Aizawa-Sensei for his reading comprehension and combat skills.”

Uraraka seemed hesitant to agree. Her brown eyes were filled with worry, and Iida was selfishly relieved that for once in the past few days it had nothing to do with him. He offered her a comforting smile, despite his own feelings towards Izuku’s absence in friendship.

“I’m sure that Midoriya will in time share what’s wrong. He may just need time.”

“You might be right,” Uraraka offered a small smile in return. Her hand reached out to pat Iida’s arm. “You too, okay? If you need to talk to someone, I’m here.”

Iida wished he could take her up on the offer, but the thought of talking to anyone at the moment sent a feeling of dread through him. He had to keep moving, had to keep his mind off of the anger and the fear that’d begun to grow in his chest after seeing his brother permanently crippled. He didn’t want anyone to worry about him, not about this. He was lucky, his brother was alive. He was lucky… that’s what his brother wanted him to keep reminding himself of, at least.

“I will be alright. Thank you for worrying, though.” He moved Uraraka’s hand from his arm, offering her a small wave good-bye. “I must go to class, though. You should too soon, or you’ll be late.”

He was class representative, after all. He had to be strong.

*How can you hope to live up to the title of Ingenium, if you can’t even fake a smile?*

****

“How would you write ‘I am going shopping with my mother.’ In Hiragana, and then kanji?”
Izuku thought about the characters that’d been shown to him, setting his pen tentatively down onto his notepad. Carefully, he traced out the characters, trying to picture the shape of the sentence in his mind’s eye. Two sentences, one a foundation and one building upon said foundation. When he was done, he stared at the paper a moment before handing it over to Aizawa-Sensei.

His teacher took the paper, scanning the sentence over with a practiced eye. He set the notepad down, a look of rare approval written on his face.

“Your Quirk definitely helps you. You memorize things very easily.”

Izuku flushed with the praise, dropping his gaze down to his desk.

“I-I guess. I was always told it was annoying. I remember a lot of things, and most of the information’s pretty useless.”

Aizawa frowned, leaning forward to not unkindly rap at the top of Midoriya’s head. The boy jerked back, more surprised than hurt.

“Stop that.”

“What?”

“I’ve complimented you five times in these lessons, and five times you’ve tried to undermine the effort. It’s irritating and untrue.”

Izuku looked a little embarrassed. He hadn’t even been aware he’d been doing it.

Thankfully, Aizawa-Sensei wasn’t one to hold a grudge. His teacher leaned back in his chair, seeming to exhale the annoyance from his shoulders. It was a little weird seeing him without the bandages, Izuku hadn’t really gotten to interact with him when he wasn’t gravely injured at some point. It felt like a strange reversal, his own hands still a little clunky as they were wrapped in bandages. His teacher’s monotone voice was occasionally softened by his expression, a trait that was oddly vulnerable, in Izuku’s opinion.

It went the same way when Aizawa-Sensei was feeling malicious, of course. His smile was disconcerting to look at, a thing that stretched across his face in catlike satisfaction.

“I think we’ve made enough headway for today. Think it’s time to pay Shinsou a visit?”

It was a common pattern, lately. Izuku would get to UA a little earlier, practice writing and reading, then they’d meet with Shinsou outside in the school’s yard to practice hand to hand combat. Well, Shinsou practiced hand to hand combat. Izuku’s injured hands meant he practiced stances and watched Shinsou get his ass kicked by Aizawa-Sensei.
He really did get his ass kicked. Often. It would’ve been funny, if Izuku wasn’t painfully aware that in time he’d be next. Shinsou was enthusiastic if nothing else, and that was probably the only thing that’d kept him going to these lessons. He was learning, but he was tall and gangly and unused to using his limbs in any sort of fighting capacity.

Izuku watched as he was kicked across the training circle once again, wincing in sympathy. At least the first lesson they were both given was how to fall properly.

“I told you that you need to plant your feet. You’re tall, so your center of balance is weakest at your legs.” Aizawa-Sensei was usually blunt with his pointers, but Shinsou didn’t seem to mind. The boy nodded seriously, brushing the dirt off the knees of his gym clothes before getting back to his feet. From what Izuku was learning about Shinsou, that was his nature—hardworking and focused. All under a guise of laziness of course. Both of them were getting better, but these things were slow.

After, Shinsou and Izuku would hang out in the cafeteria if there was time before class started. Izuku wasn’t sure who started this ritual, but it became habit, almost like it’d become habit to study with Ochako during lunch break. Seated in the cafeteria, Izuku got to know Shinsou better, and learned a few things about the quiet general studies student.

The first and most obvious, was that Shinsou’s favourite hero was Eraserhead. This went hand in hand with Shinsou’s blunt confession during their first hangout that he was an orphan.

“My mother died shortly after I was born. My dad was killed in a car accident when I was four. I don’t really remember much about him, but apparently his Quirk was Insomnia. He never needed to sleep. It made him a good doctor. At least that’s what the papers about him said. The care home kept some newspaper articles about him for me for when I got older.” Shinsou said all of this with a mild enough expression, the sort of practiced dialogue that came with repeated use. Violet eyes flicked to Izuku. “My foster parents took me in when I was ten. I’ve been with them ever since.”

The nice thing about Shinsou, was that Izuku didn’t have to pretend to be something he wasn’t.

“The League took me when I was about five. I’d been with them until the USJ incident.” He bit into his slice of toast, cramming it into his mouth and chewing rapidly. Though he knew where his next meal was coming from, old habits die hard. Shinsou watched the entire motion with lazy amusement on his face. He took a much more conservative bite out of his croissant.

“Did you like, ever meet a villain you thought was cool? Like a superhero of the villain world?”

Izuku thought about it for a moment. A smile broke out on his face as he recalled.

“I met Gentle Hero once! Which might be lame but I thought he was cool. Also Scream. The latter one got arrested for drug trafficking, though. She was kinda scary.”

“Mhm.” Shinsou licked crumbs from the edge of his lip, seeming thoughtful. “Must be common enough to see people you know on the news.”
Izuku shrugged.

“Personally, most of the people I spent time with don’t make the spotlight. I never really got along with the big villains. Most people who get that famous… they’re not interested in kids. They’ve lost a sense of humanity a while ago.”

Shinsou’s expression stayed neutral, but something in the set of his mouth seemed a little sad. Izuku tried to ignore it. One thing he liked about being friends with Shinsou, was that pity was off the table. Izuku didn’t ask him if he felt bad about being an orphan, and Shinsou didn’t ask him if he felt bad about being a villain.

He was surprised when Shinsou despite this asked for his number.

“So we can hang out outside of class.” He explained, reaching to grab Izuku’s new phone and texting in his contact. “Do you want to hang out tonight, actually? I can show you that cat café I keep boring you about.”

“Oh, I’m actually busy. My mom wanted me to help her with groceries.” The lie came easily, but Shinsou still looked at him with a stare that seemed to see a little too much through his bluff. He didn’t question it, merely shrugging and sliding the phone back into Izuku’s hand.

“Suit yourself. Figured I’d ask.” He didn’t seem upset, and somehow that seemed almost worse. Izuku kept his expression fixed, turning back to his breakfast. He tried not to let the conversation fall into silence, but felt the rest of it was somehow muted and grey. Shinsou realised that nothing that came out of his mouth from that point on was genuine, stare flat and distant.

It was a friendship of unspoken agreements, but that was okay. Izuku’s secrets were growing into a snarled garden, and not having to keep track of the lies was welcome relief.

That wasn’t the case at home.

Since fighting with Toshinori, the apartment had become a place of tension. Izuku wasn’t about to apologise for his words, and Toshinori didn’t seem to know in the first place what to do. The frail man had become a shadow in his own home, skirting around the edges of Izuku’s vision and staying out from underfoot. For someone so tall, Toshinori sure knew how to move soundlessly.

It was to the point that even Izuku’s mom had noticed the change in their interactions. Izuku’s days had been spent lately watching her fuss and fret silently, washing dishes that were already clean or staring at him like she was afraid he’d disappear into a puff of smoke. It chafed, and Izuku was torn between talking to fill the yawning silence between all of them and snapping angrily at the slightest trigger. He felt like Kacchan, which wasn’t his usual temperament at all.

All of this was mixed with the guilt that he was very much keeping secrets. There were many things
from his past he didn’t want anyone to know, He couldn’t look Iida in the eye, not with his brother in the hospital. *Hero Killer Stain*, a villain and a vigilante. Izuku was furious on Iida’s behalf, but the message the man had brought to the hero world with Tensei’s injuries couldn’t be denied. Izuku couldn’t help but be ashamed, because he agreed to an extent with that message: The hero world was irrevocably corrupt. There were some things you just didn’t say though, not to a friend who was grieving the loss of his brother’s ability to walk.

So Izuku didn’t tell him anything at all, he had no words of comfort to give. Instead, he waited until late in the evening in his home, until Toshinori left and his mom fell asleep watching some soap opera. Until he could only hear the creak of the apartment building settling in the dark, Izuku lay still and silent. Then he sat up, and reached under his bed. His hands curled around the notebook Aizawa-Sensei had given him, originally meant for writing. Izuku tucked it into his sweater, slipping noiselessly to his feet.

*Seamstress* would be waiting for him.

****

“Lilies or a fruit basket?”

Hizashi looked at Toshinori, holding up the two options at the hospital gift shop for appraisal. Hizashi’s hair was down, tied in a loose braid. It made him look absurdly like a florist as he held up the somewhat sad looking plant. Toshi barely needed to think on the question.

“Fruit basket,” He said with certainty “Tensei always *was* practical.”

“He likes oranges especially.” Shouta piped up in agreement. He reached over to the fruits basket, reaching inside to place the oranges in front, next to a melon and plums. It was a strangely soft moment, given the gravity of the situation.

The hospital had made a special exception towards visiting hours, on account of their positions as heroes. That meant that the hospital was eerie in its silence, the only people left nurses and the odd patient well enough to wander the hallways. It never failed to bring a weight to Toshinori’s shoulders, vague memories of being in pain and lying prone in a hospital bed echoing. The fact that he, Shouta, Hizashi and Nemuri were visiting made the feeling extra bleak. They’d all gone to school with Tensei, though Toshinori had been in his last year while the rest had been his classmates. It wasn’t the first time any of them had witnessed a colleague get injured, and it wouldn’t be the last, but it never stopped hurting in a way. It was a part of their profession that no one liked to think about, the average career span for a hero was somewhere in their fifties.

“He also likes blue.” Nemuri piped up, virtually unrecognizable in her civilian wear with her hair tied back and red glasses on. She’d plucked a bow from the gift bag section of the store, tying it about the basket in a flourish. “There. Now it actually looks like a gift.” She nodded to herself, smiling wide. “Let’s give him our best faces, shall we?”
Tensei’s room was on the third floor, a quiet section at the end of the hallway. They’d come as soon as they were allowed to, which meant that they still needed masks to enter Tensei’s room. The act made Hizashi looked vaguely depressed.

“Y’know… I hate this sometimes. Every time I visit my parents, I have to tell them someone I know is hurt or dead. It’s stressing my mom out, and she doesn’t even bother with the news most times.”

“I know,” Toshinori sighed. He found himself breathing in time with the flicker of fluorescent light, as if he’d left part of himself in this hospital. If his partner’s noticed, they had the grace not to speak of it. He reached out a skeletal hand to run over Hizashi’s back, searching for words to make this alright. It was never alright.

“Tensei’s going to be okay, eventually.”

“It’s not him I’m worried for.” Shouta admitted. He too looked different, grimmer and in casual clothes. The unspoken acknowledgement of his most diligent student was present in all of their minds. Tenya had become quiet in a way that only came with grief. He was still in shock, mourning the loss of a brother as he once knew him.

It was Nemuri who seemed to know how to guide the way. She steadied herself with a breath and a smile.

“Come on you three, enough moping. You’re heroes, and that means that when the world is dark, we smile.”

“Underground heroes don’t.” Shouta grumbled. Nemuri socked him in the shoulder, a look of exasperation on her face.

“Well, maybe if they did, you would have an action figure or two.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” Hizashi piped in grimly. He handed a wad of cash to the cashier. “Mine comes with a detachable Mohawk. My figurine is bald if you lose the headpiece.”

Nemuri’s cackling brought a grin to all of their faces. The weight in their chests collectively lifted.

Yes, Toshinori thought *Heroes have to keep smiling in times of trouble.*

But that didn’t mean they had to find reason to smile all alone. Perhaps that was what he should’ve better explained to Izuku back at the Sports Festival. The only problem, was that now the boy wasn’t speaking to him at all. The weight came back, and it sat sour in the back of Toshinori’s mouth. He kept his silence, wallowing in it with a fixed smile on his face. He wondered if it was as fake as he felt.

****

*Hey. It’s Hitoshi. I kno it’s late but I wanted to ask you something.*
Shinsou’s phone screen illuminated his face in the dark. He lay on his bed, curled on his side so the light didn’t travel down the hallway. His foster brothers and sisters were sleeping.

No reply came from Midoriya. It brought a frown to Shinsou’s face, though the more rational part of his brain tried to brush it off. Izuku might have been asleep. It was late. Sort of. Well, late if you were thirty years old.

He texted again, feelings jumbled about it.

_Listen. IDK if you’re awake but something you said today… didn’t sit right. Call me paranoid, or a dick I guess. Wanted to know if you were OK._

He’d never really had friends before. Hitoshi wasn’t sure if the worried beating of his heart was normal or if was a product of finally having someone to talk to. Was it normal to pick up on someone’s ticks so quickly that you could tell when they were lying almost immediately? He stored that question away for another time. He was being dumb. Like, _Really_ dumb. Also maybe creepy, considering he’d been Midoriya’s friend for only a few weeks.

_The traitor thing’s made me a bit on edge I guess. I know you know yourself and the streets, but be careful yeah? Aizawa-Sensei told me they still don’t know who the informant is and with Stain running around… Feels ugly._

Still no reply. Shinsou wanted to be irritated. He wanted to assume Midoriya was asleep, or ignoring him purposefully. He wanted an excuse to put his phone down, get some sleep (Because god knows he didn’t ever get enough of it) and see Midoriya tomorrow. He wanted to trust him, because that trust had been given to him unquestioningly. Shinsou was forever grateful for that, and he should’ve paid it forward by minding his own business.

That wasn’t what he did.

Instead, heart in his throat, Hitoshi opened another contact. Scrolling through his phone, his thumbs hovered on his keyboard as he debated typing a message.

_Hi Aizawa-Sensei, it’s Hitoshi._

He bit his lip. No, that was too informal.

_It’s Shinsou. You told me to text you if there was an emergency… I think I’m calling one in._

Midoriya was going to kill him. Then again, Midoriya hadn’t answered his damn phone.
In the end, nosiness had introduced Hitoshi to Izuku. Nosiness possibly ending their friendship seemed fitting, if it had to happen at all.

****

It’d been a while since Fuyumi had visited the house. Her stays were often short, but a pleasant surprise to Todoroki. As a kid, she was old enough to be a sort of poor replacement for the hole that their mother left in all of their lives.

She seemed well enough, better than when she’d still been living at home. Shouto’s sister was now a school teacher, and from what she shyly described a good one too. Shouto found himself making tea for her, even though he knew she’d only stopped by because father was out, and because she wanted to see him. Old habits died hard- he automatically rummaged until he found her favourite black tea and some biscuits.

“You’ve gotten taller.” Was the first thing she said as he seated himself across from her in their big kitchen. Fuyumi’s smile was fond. “Little stronger too, looks like.”

“Aizawa-Sensei’s a good teacher.” Shouto shrugged, a little embarrassed by the attention. “Between him and training at home, I’ve got my hands full.”

“Mhm.” Fuyumi hummed, grey eyes flicking to the tenser bandage around her brother’s knee. Since the fight with Midoriya, Shouto’s leg had been gradually healing. It was mostly just bruised, at this point. “He’s not making you fight on that, is he?”

In truth, Endeavour hadn’t been making Shouto fight much at all. Since the match against Katsuki, the house had been silent in the sort of way it only was when a storm was building. Shouto’s father hadn’t been happy at his throwing of the match. The unspoken rule in the household had been broken, even if he couldn’t prove it. No Todoroki let their personal problems out in public. Not even his mother had broken that rule.

It was strange how he’d been so afraid to do so, until the moment it’d happened. Now, Shouto wasn’t sure he could’ve done anything differently.

“You’re lost in your head again.” Fuyumi commented, not unkindly. Shouto startled, his hands tightening around his empty tea mug. The kettle shrieked, he stood to grab it.

“Sorry. I’ve had a lot on my mind recently I guess.”

“Does the ‘a lot’ have something to do with a certain boy at the Sports Festival, perhaps?”

Shouto really did jerk this time, until he saw the impish smile on his sister’s face.

“How did you-”

“I like to keep tabs on you, when I can. And your fight with that Midoriya kid seemed to really get
you riled up. His match seemed good for you. Don’t worry, I’m not going to tell father that you’re still going over the fight in your head.”

Shouto breathed a silent sigh of relief, slumping back into his chair. It was true that his mind was on Midoriya, or rather how that fight had gone. He hadn’t thought he’d been that obvious. If even Fuyumi had noticed, then his father definitely had.

“Hey, don’t panic just yet.” Fuyumi seemed to read his mood quickly. She bunched her cardigan more tightly about her middle as she reached for the tea pot he’d just set down. “Father has a lot on his mind lately. I doubt he’s noticed. He’s currently focused on whatever nut-job keeps burning down his investments.”

That was right. Word was, no one had caught the guy yet. Shouto didn’t know who was ruining his father’s day, but he was selfishly grateful. He’d barely been bothered at all for the last two weeks.

Fuyumi poured her tea, the steam fogging her glasses. She reached for Shouto’s cup. One milk, no sugar, she still knew just how he liked it.

“Do you think mom’s okay?” The question came from Shouto, nearly surprising himself. Fuyumi paused, staring into her teacup silently. A look of grief clouded her features, mingled with anger.

“I haven’t spoken to our mother in a long time, Shouto. Not since she hurt you.”

“That wasn’t her fault.” Old defensiveness rose in his throat, bitten back at the last second.

“No. But not leaving before she got to that point was.” His sister set the cup down before him, the clink loud in the evening silence of the house. “Natsuo talks to her, once in a long while. Why are you asking?”

Todoroki stared at his own reflection, perfect halves of either of his parents. How had Midoriya seen past that Ghost? Shouto wasn’t sure, but he wanted to find a way for himself. He wanted to let himself be himself, whatever that was.

“I think I need to see her.” He looked up at his sister, uncharacteristically young and uncertain. "Please, can you help me see her?"

Fuyumi looked hesitant, but not for long. A deep, long breath exhaled from her, her shoulders relaxing. Her voice was wet as she reached one hand across the table to touch his own.

"Of course." She said quietly, eyes far away. "Of course I can take you to see her."
Emerge

Chapter Summary

"Will You walk into my parlour?"
Said the spider to the fly.

Chapter Notes

hey sorry this chapter is late! I impulsively decided to go to a cottage with limited wifi on Monday, and so couldn’t get this out. Thanks for waiting and I hope you enjoy the chapter!

It was a long way to the meeting point, but the night air was cool and it made Izuku’s eyes shut in pleasure as he pressed his face against the open bus window. There was the promise of rain on the air, and it made the city smell cleaner, fresher even as he left it behind. There’d be a train after this, taking him away from Musutafu, into Hosu.

*Draw a star, and think of me.*

Seamstress’ Quirk was a weird one, even Izuku could admit that much. She’d made a name for herself with it though, for those who knew the right questions to ask. She lived apart from society, due to the nature of her Quirk and due to her personality. The nickname of *Widow* wasn’t just a jibe towards her arachnid-like appearance, after all. The rumour was that she was on her seventh husband, but that might have just been idle speculation. Izuku never saw anyone at her lair, save for the women she took in now and again. That didn’t mean he didn’t think it fit her, no. Any rumour might have fit the villain, if only because there was very little actually known about her past.

What Izuku knew was this: She was older than she appeared, nocturnal, and quite possibly borderline omniscient within her hunting grounds. Her Quirk was the sometimes peculiar bridge between animal and man, and it made her otherworldly and disconcerting to interact with.

She made the strongest costumes available on the black market. She could also provide information on nearly anyone within her umbrella of knowledge. Seamstress also didn’t accept cash payments. She accepted *information*, an eye for an eye. Since coming to meet her around five years ago, Izuku was one of her favoured customers. His Quirk played into her wants and needs perfectly.
That didn’t mean he didn’t think she might eat him, if she thought his information wasn’t good enough. He swallowed tightly at the thought, throat bobbing with the motion. Forty-Five minutes to Hosu, forty-five minutes to reflect on his decisions. It was too late to turn back now; he’d spent all his bus fare just getting out here. He had a return ticket, and nothing else.

*You’re doing this for Eri.*

He reminded himself, setting his jaw in determination. He just needed to know where she was, where the League had taken her. Then he could come up with a plan to infiltrate, and bring her home. He could even bring the information to the police, if he felt like he couldn’t do it alone.

Izuku was aware he was trying to justify it. Maybe it was because he kept thinking about how his mom was going to react when she found his bed empty. She’d cry, or maybe she’d call Toshinori. The thought sent black guilt through Izuku, not ideal for criminal activity. He bit into his lower lip, hard.

*Stop that.*

Izuku couldn’t think about this. Not now, not without thinking about Eri and how long she’d been left alone. He had to do something. Someone had to help, and the police still hadn’t given him any answers. He was going to do this, he just needed answers.

****

“How’s the hospital food?”

Tensei smiled wryly at Nemuri.

“Terrible. They keep trying to feed me yogurt. I *hate* yogurt.”

She cackled, sitting in the waiting room chair cross-legged. The sound made the rest of the heroes in the room smile.

Tensei looked rough, Shouta would admit to himself. His old school friend was wrapped in bandages essentially head to toe, a mask attached to his face to help him breathe. He had a fuzzy way about him, pain medication making it difficult to focus on one thing for too long. He’d brightened though upon seeing them come in, pressing a button by his side to let him sit up. From that point on, they’d gotten on as old friends do, tentative at first but quickly falling into old roles.

Tensei hadn’t changed much since high school, in little ways none of them had. Hizashi was still the loudest, and the first to make someone feel better. Shouta was quiet, and quick to sarcasm. Toshinori had a sense of humour rooted in physical comedy, born from being ridiculously tall and having a form that changed with his Quirk. Nemuri was still the glue that somehow held them all in orbit,
more level-headed and honest than any of them could stand to be with their feelings. Toshinori in private believed her to be responsible for his, Hizashi and Shouta’s relationship in many ways.

“You guys really didn’t have to get me a fruit basket y’know. My little brother’s already been in and out and I feel like I’m going to be eating nothing but cantaloupe for a while.” Tensei gestured sheepishly to a corner of the room, where indeed there was another fruits basket.

“It’s an excuse to get our own fruits and veggies in.” Hizashi jibed “You don’t want scurvy, do you?”

Tensei snorted.

“Like *I* am the most likely one to get scurvy.” He shot a look towards Shouta who happened to be sucking on a jelly packet. The man looked up from his phone, shrugging blandly.

“I accept my fate.”

“You’re a shining example to your students as always, Shouta.” Tensei said, a smile to soften the blow on his face. “How’s my brother holding up? He hasn’t been trouble I suppose?”

“Tenya? No. The only trouble Tenya gives is when he insists on trying to organize my classroom notes for me.” Shouta grunted. “He seems to be doing alright. A little quiet, but I don’t really blame him given everything that’s happened.”

Tensei nodded, his expression methodical. It was with this introspective expression he admitted the news to them.

“The doctor says my engines won’t run like they used to. I’m afraid I have to tell you all that my days of being a hero are over. Sorry to tell you all like this.”

Hizashi went a little pale. Toshi watched as his expression crumpled from its joy.

“Tensei-”

“It’s alright, Hizashi. But I wanted to let Tenya’s teachers know. I intend for him to take the title of Ingenium. I don’t know if he’ll take the offer yet, but I put it on the table. I feel if anyone can keep up my good work, it’s my own brother.” Tensei looked at his hand, delicately tied down by IV drips and pace trackers. A grim note entered his voice. “Stain… I need you all to know he doesn’t intend to stop. I was meant to be a message for the hero world.”

“If he thinks he can bully the entire hero community, he’s a bigger fool than I gave him credit for.” Shouta began, but Tensei shook his head, a swift jerk of contradiction.

“No. His aim is the big heroes in particular. Heroes like All Might, like Endeavour.”

Toshinori felt the weight of Tensei’s gaze on him like a physical thing, heavy and expectant. He was supposed to have the answers, being the number one hero. He was supposed to make the difficult decisions, and having a man critically wounded in front of him demanding an answer was a heavy weight to bear.
“We can’t give in to him. Not without appearing weak to the media.” It was cruel. Tensei smiled in visible relief.

“That’s what I’d hoped you say.” He murmured.

There was a deep exhaustion lining Tensei’s features, he slumped back into his bed.

“I worried that losing my Quirk… it’d all be for nothing. But I’m starting to look on the bright side. I’m just hoping that Tenya can see it too, once Stain’s apprehended.”

Toshinori wanted to reassure Tensei. He wanted to tell him that children were resilient, and that Tenya would bounce back. He wanted to tell him that Stain would be found and apprehended, and that it would solve the ever-shrinking state of his abilities.

His chest constricted, and Toshinori coughed into his hand. His fingertips came away red.

Shouta’s phone buzzed, the noise loud in the hospital room. His initial disinterested glance at the screen soon turned into a puzzled creasing of brows. The man’s dark eyes narrowed. Toshinori knew that look well. His heart began to rattle in his breast.

“Shouta-?”

“Where’s Midoriya?” The man asked, something in his tone edged. Toshinori felt his heart plummet down to his nonexistent stomach.

“At home, why-”

“Call him.”

“What’s going on?” Hizashi had half-risen out of his seat, reacting to the tension in the air. Shouta grimly began punching in numbers on his phone, impatience lining his person.

“Could be nothing.” He muttered, the underlying note all to clear.

Could be something.

Toshinori got out his phone, searching his contacts until he found Midoriya’s name.

****

My Quirk is to draw small objects towards me.

It was not a Quirk that brought much attention. In the grand scheme of things, it could barely lift a heavy serving plate. Inko had never trained it, never thought it to be special. She’d never imagined herself as a hero, never saw her Quirk as more than anything but a unique facet to her person. Not particularly powerful, but hers. Her husband, he could breathe fire. She’d thought it was the most
beautiful Quirk, had hoped that if she were to have a child they might take after Hisashi’s side of the family. Secretly, she thought her own Quirk to be pathetic, nothing that would ever stand out for anyone.

Inko was beginning to believe her Quirk however, was cursed.

To lose one’s son once, was a nightmare.

To lose him again, it was as if he was irrevocably being pulled out of her grip again and again. What other explanation was there? It seemed like fitting irony: She could draw things that didn’t matter, clothes or toys or books towards her. Yet she couldn’t hold onto the only things she ever gave a damn about. Her husband had left, Izuku had been taken. She’d been left with nothing, only an empty house filled with things she could pull her direction. What good was a Quirk if you couldn’t bring your son back to you?

Sitting as she was in the UA waiting room for the second time, nervously twisting her hands together, Inko felt rage. Rage at herself, and helplessness. She’d lost him again. She’d lost Izuku again, and this time he’d left. He’d left… and only given a notebook addressed to a teacher and a single page for her.

I'm sorry. I'll be home soon.

-Izuku

Inko would rather be Quirkless. Her rage crystallized, burning hard in her chest and mingling with grief. She cupped her hand to her mouth and bit back a wordless noise of loss.

****

There were corners of Hosu that the public eye wasn’t privy to. Corners that seemed to invite shadows and crevices and back alley deals. In these cracks were the people that became Seamstress’ eyes and ears.

Her Quirk was peculiar, and it gave her a physical appearance that most would find frightening and monstrous. Called Arachnia, her powers gave her a spider-like body, huge and deceptively delicate looking. Her multiple eyes sat on a high forehead, dark hair often held back so that you had no choice but to meet them when you talked with her. Those eyes could see in the dark, and seemed to know more than they should. Their reflective nature was hypnotic.

Her most powerful ability however was her threads. Invisible to the human eye, there were three
types she could make, including the one that let her track people. The gentlest vibration under her
tracking thread could be felt by her from hundreds of miles away.

Izuku truly didn’t know if Seamstress had a distance limit, though he imagined she must. That was
how she kept track of him and all her other ‘clients’. She tied a thread to their finger, which they
never saw or felt. Then when they drew her symbol and thought of her, she’d feel the web move.
She’d organize a meeting point, and have one of her followers guide her client to her hideout.

Standing shivering and alone at the foot of the bridge, Izuku hoped that her messenger would arrive
soon to collect him. He didn’t feel right being out here, not without his mask and not without any sort
of weapon. His staff was too conspicuous, and the knife felt flimsy tucked into his jeans. The street
was dim and Izuku strained to see movement in the shadows.

The hair on the back of his neck prickled, and a voice spoke behind Izuku’s ear.

“Seamstress is expecting you.”

Izuku spun, but the figure was already moving. They leapt backwards, standing noiselessly several
feet away. The lower half of their face was hidden by a thick wool scarf, but there was no missing
their steady gaze, lantern-like and golden.

“I didn’t hear you coming.” Izuku said, surprised.

“No one does. It’s my Quirk-call me Soundless.” They stuck out a hand to shake, which Izuku took
after a moment of processing. Slim and brown, Soundless could’ve been a small girl or a young boy.
It was hard to know which. Behind the mask, Izuku thought they might be smiling. Soundless
gestured ahead of them. “Follow me. I’ll take you to my boss.”

They pushed onward, their feet muted so they appeared as if they were floating. Izuku sucked a
breath through clenched teeth in a whistling arc.

Into the spider’s den.

He followed behind.

****

“In my professional opinion, Izuku Midoriya is not fit to be out on his own, and is likely in a
compromised state of mind.”

Shouta had been frightened many times in his hero career. It was hard to escape, wasn’t it? Being a
hero went hand in hand with witnessing the worst of humanity, the frightening and the terrible. It
was worse when you had something to protect, because those fears had a way of worming
themselves into your personal life.
Hitoshi’s message had led to a phone call with the boy, which after some stuttering lead to Shouta demanding Toshinori call Mrs. Midoriya. This led to a frantic manhunt, growing out of control as no sign of Izuku appeared. An emergency meeting had been called, Midoriya’s note to his mother leading everyone to fear the worst. So Tsukauchi, Hizashi, Toshinori, Shouta and Nedzu had been called.

“Do you think he is likely to return to the League?” Shouta turned to Momoka Nara, determined to face the worst situation head-on. He could see Toshinori out of the corner of his eye frowning thunderously. He’d always had a soft heart, but Shouta knew teenagers were volatile with their emotions. Unpredictable.

“I don’t think so, not unless the League have some sort of blackmail on the boy. Midoriya has proven to be incredibly self-sacrificing, when motivated. He doesn’t act selfishly.” Mrs. Nara’s Quirk bloomed vines under one dark eye, peering out from amidst the leaves and greenery. “My running theory is that he’s gone to meet a perceived ally, perhaps because there’s someone he wants to get into contact with. I know he experiences a lot of guilt and from what he’s shared with me I suspect it’s to do with feeling undeserving of freedom.”

“So the question is, who is he trying to contact and why.” Hizashi spoke up, having been silent until this point. Out of all of them, he was the one who knew Midoriya the least. It was a statement that was oddly insightful, and Shouta was struck by how even he underestimated his partner’s brains under the bravado.

“A teammate? Colleague?” Toshinori asked. His skin had gone grey, tension lining his shoulders. Shouta considered the matter heavily- any way to get information on the league would have to come at a price. What did Izuku have to give? Surely not money. His thoughts turned to the careful notes Izuku had started to write- information on his classmates, on the heroes around him.

Shouta’s heart sunk as the pieces came together.

“Someone who values information. Secrets. Midoriya collects stats on everyone and everything around him. I’m sure a few villains would pay a pretty penny in information for data on heroes.”

“Midoriya wouldn’t do that!” Toshinori burst out suddenly. His hands slammed down on the table, cold indignation alight on his frail face. “The boy wouldn’t sell out his comrades just to get some information!”

“I understand your emotions, but you need to understand how this looks to an outsider.” Tsukauchi interrupted gently, placing a hand on his friend’s arm. “To the police force, Midoriya is an uncooperative victim that still bears the weight of his crimes. His betrayal could be a tipping point in his case.”

“He might think it’s for the best if he thinks he’s trying to help someone.” Hizashi suggested, a long and considering expression on his face. His hands were crossed tightly in front of his chest, unease written in his lanky frame. Behind his glasses, his green eyes were narrowed. “You said he acts unselfishly? I’d believe it. What if there’s someone else in Midoriya’s position. Someone also taken
“by the League.”

“That’s a bit of a leap,” Shouta argued “We can’t just make that sort of assumption, not without some proof.”

“… Like a dream?” Mrs. Nara interjected. Orange Lilies were spreading across her neck, curling in her hair. All teachers turned to her, question written across their faces. “Working with Midoriya has meant trying to address his nightmares. They’re often rooted in his own trauma. My Quirk if it’s touched someone’s psyche can store certain images, echoes of the dreams if you will. It’s not exactly foolproof, but I can give you the last session Midoriya and I worked on together. I’ll warn you it’s not entirely logical, being a dream.”

“Do you think it will help?” Nedzu spoke for the first time since the meeting had begun, dark eyes pensive. By way of answer, Mrs. Nara’s eyes closed as she began to shift.

The flowers receded, dying back into a nest of dark hair. The hair soon turned white, billowing out in cold waves. She shrunk physically, becoming smaller before Shouta’s eyes. Red eyes opened, filling with tears as a child in a filthy hospital gown peered up at him.

A shrill, childlike voice pierced the air, but it didn’t come from the girl. It was an echo of Midoriya’s dreams, and so had no voice of its own.

“Brother! Help! I’m scared. Please help!”

The girl lifted her hand, and they watched in stunned silence as her lips parted in a silent scream, her body unravelling like a tapestry pulled apart in threads. From the darkness, a shadow emerged. Inky and black, it spilled over the meeting table, oil-slick and realistic enough that Shouta found himself reminding his instincts that this was a Quirk. The darkness gave birth to a face, but it wasn’t a face that he knew. It was eyeless, tubes coiled about the neck.

Beside him, Toshinori let out a strangled noise. The dream went dark, and the figure vanished.

****

“Midoriya, it’s a pleasure to see you. Please, have a seat.”

It always began this way. Seamstress was polite to a fault, and demanded manners be respected in her home. The decorative wallpapers of the hotel, clean carpet and tea resting in the waiting room for him upon arrival gave Izuku the feeling of a well-oiled machine. He sat, though he couldn’t see the source of her voice just yet. He assumed she was hiding somewhere in the rafters, as spiders were wont to do.

“Hello again,” He mustered, because it seemed like the right thing to say. Soundless was putting sugar in their cup across from him, stirring away. It was loud in the eerily empty hotel lobby. “Thank you for getting in touch with me. I could use your help.”
She giggled, the sound echoing across the lobby. Izuku strained to catch sight of Seamstress, but the shadows were too deep. He didn’t dare touch the tea.

“No at all. You’re one of my favourite clients after all. Such a polite, sweet boy. I still owe you for rescuing one of my children.”

The memory of how Izuku had first come to know Seamstress was an interesting story. One of her ‘children’, nicknamed Tamale, had accidentally been shot while trying to cart drugs through a rival gang’s territory. Izuku had happened to be in the area, had found the kid in an alley bleeding out. He’d stemmed the bleeding, and asked the boy if he had someone he needed to get back to. The boy had given him directions to the abandoned hotel.

“Tamale’s still with me today because of you, with only a scar to show for it. What can I do for you? A costume perhaps? A new mask? Or is it information or a commodity you’re searching for?” She said the last part coyly, and Izuku got the impression that she knew more than she let on. Seamstress usually did, and that was half of navigating conversation with her. A shadow moved in the upper right corner.

Izuku’s hands tightened in his lap.

“I’m here to give info for info. Tit for tat.”

“Oh. You know I do love gossip.” She sounded amused. “But your information will need to be good. If I already know it, I don’t consider it payment.”

Soundless spoke up then, their chest puffed with pride. They had a tittering laugh, moving down their scarf so they could sip at their tea. A tattoo of a star adorned one of their cheeks.

“Mistress has eyes and ears all over Hosu. What makes you think you have good information?”

Izuku reached into his sweater pocket slowly. Soundless’ eyes watched him with hawkish intensity. He pulled out his notebook, chalked with information on his friends, classmates, teachers. All of it was written in careful handwriting, learned only a week prior. One notebook’s worth, nothing compared to the information stored in Izuku’s mind.

A shadow from the ceiling moved, and the notebook was taken from his hands as a nearly-invisible thread trapped it. Pulled up towards the ceiling, Izuku watched as it vanished. The quiet noise of pages being flipped filled the silence.

“Interesting,” Seamstress’ voice was tinged with glee. The dry movement of eight legs making their way down a wall made the hair on Izuku’s neck stand on end. “This is certainly a hefty payment.” He looked behind him, and found himself face to face with dark eyes. He resisted the urge to flinch, taking her in. Seamstress was larger than the average person, her torso red and black and arachnid. Her upper half was mostly hidden by wild hair, dark and long. When she smiled, her teeth were sharp. “Tell me little Ghost, I hear that the League are looking for you. Their payment wasn’t enough to gain my favour, but yours is. So I wonder what they’re trying to hide, and what you’re trying to find.”

“I need you to help me save someone from a yakuza member. Name: Overhaul.” Izuku swallowed
tightly. He didn’t dare flinch. Seamstress hummed.

“I know of Overhaul. The neurotic type. Am I to have him killed? If so this notebook might not be enough, he’s guarded by all number of distasteful minions.”

Izuku shook his head.

“I need you to find out where he keeps his experiments. Specifically, a girl called Eri.”

“Ah. The Yakuza’s daughter.” Seamstress’ mandibles clicked in thought. “It should be doable, but I warn you that the girl hasn’t been seen by my informant in some time. Overhaul yes, but not the child. It may take time to find her.”

“There’s one more thing,” Izuku pushed on, the guilt eating at him. He was doing this for the good of everyone, he just had to remember that. “For full payment, I mean. I-I need to know about the Hero Killer. About Stain. I need to know where he’s going to strike next.”


“What will I get if I tell you?” Seamstress asked. Her smile was wooden, she’d always liked a game.

Izuku looked her in the eye, his hands white-knuckled in his lap. His answer was simple, a promise.

“You get me.” He said “Me, and all my Quirk can give you. You get front row access to UA.”
Manhunt

Chapter Summary

Do I sense a costume opportunity?

Chapter Notes

Next time: Iida gets into a knife fight and comes out badly for it, Izuku goes to rescue his dumb ass. Shouto goes to rescue BOTH of their dumb asses. Where will Gran Torino is tired of these meddling kids and he hasn't even met them yet.

Thank you as always for reading, and commenting, and kudos! I read each one <3 For those of you going back into school like me (last year of college aww yis), I hope it goes well~

Gran Torino was retired, officially speaking. Something to do with his age, something to do with the health risks, something to do with the trauma of losing Nana Shimura and being forced to raise her protégé etcetera ad nauseum. The point was, people at some point expected him to slow down, and he was usually alright with that. He’d earned the right to take a back seat to most events, and learned to use his elderly status to his advantage.

When Toshinori called, he’d expected talks of tea or a visit or discussion. He hadn’t expected the ragged edge to the man’s voice in the dead of night, distracting him from his book. It was automatic, how he marked his place and held the phone closer to his ear.

“It’s been a while, you planning on paying me a visit soon?” There was a small, choked noise in the background. Gran Torino frowned. He knew every mannerism Toshinori had by this point, his flaws and his strong points. This wasn’t just a normal discussion if the boy was struggling to keep his sense of humour.

“Sooner than expected. Do you remember Izuku Midoriya. The boy I told you about?”

Gran Torino did. Toshinori had spoken of Midoriya, a boy that had a troubled past but was trying to turn a new leaf. He’d thought the idea a little foolish, but knew better than to try to tell Toshinori. The man had always had a soft heart, and steering him away from a good cause was like trying to steer away a golden retriever from a trash can.

“What about him?”
Toshinori’s voice was harried. Torino suspected he was in his *All Might* form, given the slight hitch of his breathing. He was running somewhere, and fast.

“He’s gone missing. Security cameras pick him up headed towards your city, but the leads go dead soon after. You know Hosu better than any younger hero.”

Gran Torino hummed, and thought. Where would a runaway go in Hosu, one with a past in villainy? A better question might be where he *wouldn’t* go. People went missing in this city all the time, even without criminal ties. Torino sighed, raking a hand through his hair as he thought long and hard.

Nana had been cruel in a way for leaving so soon. He never had been any good with kids. Not Toshinori, and probably not this Midoriya.

That didn’t mean he didn’t feel obligated to try.

“I’ll keep an eye out for the brat, see if I can’t knock some sense into him should I find him.”

There was an exhale of audible relief.

“Thank you, Sensei.”

“Don’t thank me. Shift back to your normal form and get some goddamn sleep. It’s two in the morning.”

Toshinori wouldn’t, and Gran Torino knew as much. He still had to try. As he hung up, his legs swung themselves towards the edge of his bed automatically. He stood to his feet, wandering over to his closet. His costume lay half folded over a chair.

****

A long two nights passed, and Izuku Midoriya wasn’t found. 1-A was informed of the situation on the morning of, though in a heavily edited manner. The staff had agreed that someone had to come up with an explanation, if only to keep the students from panicking.

The lie felt wrong in Shouta’s mouth, he’d never liked hiding things from his students. The attempt to shield them from the seriousness of the issue didn’t really seem to work- as soon as the words left his lips his students were on their feet.

“What do you *mean* he’s missing?!” Ochako cried, her hands slamming down on the desk loudly.

Her voice was quickly drowned out by Bakugou, who’d wrenched himself from his morning slouch to snarl.

“What the fuck are you trying to pull? Why wasn’t anyone *told* the fucking idiot went up and disappeared—”

“Sensei, why would Midoriya *choose* to leave UA?” Iida’s voice cut over the rest, genuine
confusion and an edge of genuine *hurt* in his voice.

“Somebody’s gotta go after him!” Kirishima rejoined.

Shouta lifted his hand, signalling for silence. His class did so reluctantly, muttering and shifting in their seats as if the very thought of standing still might hurt them. Shouta sucked in a slow, considering breath. This had to be handled with care, delicately. Teenagers were often impulsive, and he could already see the scheming on his student’s faces as they sat in silence and glared up at him like he was the enemy.

*The perks of being the teacher.*

When he was sure he had everyone’s attention (*Looking at you Ashido. Stop writing emergency notes to Kaminari*) he continued.

“I will only say this once- No one in this classroom is to engage in any sort of rescue effort, search party, or attempt to get into contact with Izuku Midoriya in any way that will hinder the police in their own investigation. Failure to do this will result in *immediate* expulsion. Do I make myself clear?” His eyes rested on each of his students, scanning each expression for signs of oncoming anarchy. He found a few, but none so willing to risk losing their place in his class.

*Good.*

“Let it be clear that the staff at UA are doing everything in their power to return Midoriya to his home safe and sound. In the meantime, today’s class will be focusing on preparing you for your various internships.”

Damage control. Shouta absolutely *hated* it.

****

*Remember to keep your smile, Toshinori!*

That’d been one of his last conversations with Nana Shimura. Often Toshinori’s mind went back to it, trying in vain to find some way he could’ve stopped her from heading to the battle that took her life. That was natural, wasn’t it? To wish that one did more in a time of crisis. If Nana had survived her final battle, she might have been here today to tell Toshinori what to do.

He’d never felt so utterly and completely helpless before, or so terrified.

The image that Izuku’s dream had brought forth was something he still wanted to deny, *had* denied at first to his colleagues and partners. All For One was supposed to be dead, Toshinori had given up
his stomach and his health to ensure it. Yet like a faceless demon the villain had risen from Izuku’s worst nightmares, smiling in rictus grin. He suppressed a shudder, staring into his untouched tea mug. The drink had long gone cold. Toshinori hadn’t been able to concentrate on much of anything, tea or otherwise.

The sick knot of worry in his stomach kept twisting tighter and tighter, until it was a lead weight where his stomach would have been. There was nothing he could do. He knew that logically. There was very little All Might could do, not until it was concluded that Midoriya hadn’t simply run away by the police. He had to obey the law, as was his duty as the Symbol of Peace. That didn’t mean that it didn’t chafe, or that he could look Mrs. Midoriya in the eye when she wandered like a ghost from her room, searching listlessly for water or food. She’d barely eaten anything in two days, and Toshinori with his stomach problems had eaten even less. They were two shades, drifting at the edge of each other’s respective territories.

Toshinori wondered how long this pretense could last, until Inko finally held him responsible. After all it was his fault. He’d told Izuku that he couldn’t keep doing things against the book. He’d told Izuku that he needed to be better. He’d never asked about Midoriya’s past, or pushed at him to open up. He’d tried to give the boy space, had tried not to burden him with the secret of being All Might or the secret of his Quirk. He’d held Midoriya at arm’s length, and now Toshinori would pay for it.

*Keep Your Smile!*

Toshinori scowled into his cold tea, an abrupt wave of self-loathing striking him. His hands tightened around his cup, before he stood with creaking knees to go to the sink. He wanted Midoriya there, if only so he could be honest with him. He wanted to tell the boy that he was All Might, and that he cared about him, and that it didn’t matter if he was a hero, that he was a *kid.*

He wanted to tell him lots of things, but hindsight was clearer.

He’d wanted to tell Nana lots of things before she’d left too.

*I leave the rest to you.*

Toshinori pressed his hands to his face, shuddering silently. His smile felt more like a baring of teeth. He’d never felt so alone.

****

Iida had chosen his internship for a reason. Perhaps if his teachers weren’t so absorbed in the latest disaster involving Midoriya, they might have noticed. Maybe not. He knew when to not look a gift horse in the mouth, and signed on to work in the Hosu district. While everyone was looking one way, go the other. Midoriya would’ve been proud.
He told himself that he’d look for his friend while he was here, since this was the last place Midoriya had been seen before vanishing. There wasn’t anything wrong in keeping an eye out, and Sensei never explicitly told him that they had to filter their internships over Midoriya’s disappearance. If he happened to patrol conveniently close to the train station, and make his way conveniently over to the neighbourhood his brother had been attacked in, then no one could really call him out for it. Besides, it’d been two weeks and much to his frustration he hadn’t gained much traction on either case. He was basically hounding a lost cause.

This is what Iida told himself, even as he strayed further from the route his internship had given him. Past the buildings that were familiar, into shadows that the GPS on his phone lead him towards. Hosu was a big city, and much of it twisted and turned in a way that was hard to follow. Iida found himself further away from the bustle of people, and with it came a disconcerting sort of not-quiet one only found in a city. There was the distant hum of cars, somewhere water was running, if he listened closely he could just make out the rolling wheels of a train on its track. He wondered if Tensei had heard the same things, and the thought filled him with a mixture of unease and anger.

It was what made the rumble of a distant explosion sound like the world shattering. Iida turned his head towards the noise, his heart in his throat. The weight of his helmet, the costume that felt still so ill-fitting on him seemed to pull him towards the ground.

*You should go back; you should see if people need help.*

That was the protocol, what his mentor had told him to do. But the alley that Tensei had been hurt in was only a block away, in the other direction. Rooted in place by indecision, Iida felt his palms grow slick with sweat. What would his brother have done? The answer to that was simple. Did it matter, though? Tensei wasn’t here. Tensei would never work as a hero again. The thought burned in Iida’s mind, and he had to choke back the suffocating grief lodged in the back of his throat. Someone had to pay for that, surely? The world wasn’t so unfair that good people like his brother would get hurt like that, and the man who hurt him would be allowed to run free? People like Midoriya wouldn’t just go missing, and leave more questions than answers as to why?

A muffled cry from the alley made his decision for him.

*Someone’s in trouble. No one else is around. Someone has to help.*

His anger, the feeling of helplessness solidified. Iida ran towards trouble. Tensei would’ve followed protocol. His brother wasn’t around to make that choice. Not anymore.

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“You’ll spend a week with me, and in that time I will make you a costume, and tell you your purpose
This was Seamstress’ promise, an induction into her care. Izuku had no choice but to take the offer, given that he had nowhere to go and the police were looking for him. He took a room in the abandoned hotel, which turned out to be less abandoned and more filled to the rafters with strays.

Seamstress’ informants tended towards children to young teenagers, the disabled or the easily forgotten. On his floor alone, there were seventeen other kids who had in some way come to her care. Some of them were obvious as to the reason why, like the sasquatch-looking boy down the hallway. Others were less evident. Izuku hadn’t thought that there was anything particularly odd about the mute six year-old whom he’d met at three in the morning one night while wandering restlessly through the halls. That was until Soundless told him gleefully of her Quirk:

“She causes madness if she speaks to you. If she sings, she can get someone to fling themselves from the balcony. All rumours though, on account of the fact that she never speaks. She writes in a notebook when she needs something.”

These were recluses, people who did not fit into society. Like Izuku, they’d been taken in, given a place to live as themselves in exchange for their service. In a strange way, he’d never felt so far from home and so normal. Here, he was just another new face, and Seamstress’ hotel was far safer than most villainous hideouts.

Soundless had taken to being his tour guide. They seemed to enjoy sneaking up on people, and without the grime covering their face and the scarf Izuku could see they were much younger than he thought. If he had to guess, closer to thirteen than fifteen.

“Here the mistress gives us order and food. No stealing, no killing in the hotel, and we get books or games if we get information she likes. Older kids take care of the younger, it’s more civil then some of the homes we came from.” They gestured down towards the centre lobby, which Izuku could see through the slats of a staircase railing. Several children were crouched there, kicking back and forth a bright red ball. They seemed to be playing a game that involved a lot of shrieking and running about. “If you break a rule, you get kicked out. No ifs ands or buts.”

“What if you double cross her?” Izuku asked. Soundless burst out into surprised laughter, throwing back their head.

“No one double-crosses the mistress. She’d know before you even had the thought in your head.”

Fair enough. She did occasionally eat people, Izuku supposed. Soundless continued their good-natured explanations, walking beside him cheerfully.

“If you do really well, mistress makes you part of her elite team.”
“Elite?”

Soundless puffed up their chest. Their green eyes sparkled as they explained.

“People with strong Quirks, or people who get the best information. There’s ten of us, including me. We get allowance, money, for our jobs. Some of us have even gotten info on All Might once or twice.”

Izuku didn’t know how to tell his excited new companion that he’d had classes with All Might. It was a little amusing, given their fanaticism. Kids that lived on the thin line between crime and normal society often idolized and hated heroes at once, and were fickle about their praise. He had the feeling that if he shared his experiences, Soundless would be jealous and tease him at once. He elected to stay silent, intent on watching and waiting for the right opportunities.

Seamstress trickled information to him. First, she told him about Stain.

**Approximate Age: Thirty-One**

**Began as a vigilante at fifteen.**

**Original name: Chizome Akaguro**

*He has a sense of duty to cleanse the world of ‘fake heroes’, and has amassed a certain fan base for his actions.*

**Believes heavily in Quirks and Convictions.**

**Quirk: Bloodcurdle. Immense Endurance and pain tolerance.**

It was a wall of ability that Izuku found himself up against. The Hero Killer had yet to really be defeated in a close fight, his only real weakness being his inability to work with others. With his staff, his only real hope would be to keep the vigilante at arms-length, until he could figure out a way to tire him out or trick him.

One thing was certain, heroes like Ingenium were at a disadvantage so long as they had to fight in close range. Izuku didn’t like where this fight was headed, and he hadn’t even tracked the vigilante down yet.

Eri as it turned out proved to be a more difficult matter. Izuku was told that the informant dealing with the League had found Overhaul, but that the girl was still missing.

“I’m told that she is definitely alive as they’re still speaking of her, but that she is being held in a secure location. The last we’ve seen Overhaul; he’s tucked himself away in his little Yakuza palace.” Seamstress had spoken from her usual perch, her voice trailing down from the rafters of the foyer. “I will have my informant try to give Eri a message, if you’d like. That way she might be able to get herself to a secure location in which you may rescue her. In the meantime, I’d like to discuss your costume.”
It was a topic that Izuku didn’t know how to avoid: He needed a disguise. He hadn’t worn a mask since his service with the League, but his original Kabuki mask was long gone. He wanted something similar, and yet something different at once. It was a frustrating decision, and he spent more than a few nights drawing and redrawing what he wanted.

_Something not as dark. But still functional in night time operations._

He wanted to be able to move, and wanted pockets. _So many pockets._ For weapon storage obviously, not just for snacks. He also wanted gloves, rubberized preferably. Maybe a hood?

The idea came to him as a rough sketch, curled up around one of his notebooks late into the night. With it, came a voice that sounded suspiciously like Toshinori’s.

_You keep smiling. Even when it’s hard._

When he handed it off to Seamstress, he thought he heard a note of interest in her appraisal.

“Hm. I should be able to make something out of this in two night’s time. Come back to the foyer then, darling.”

The sound of her webs being spun followed Izuku as he left the spider to her favourite sort of job: A fashion show.

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Two weeks passed like this. Izuku felt a gnawing ache of homesickness. He drowned it by doing all he could to keep track of things from home. He learned that Shinsou recently was able to do a backflip during training, and that Ochako had decided to do an internship with Gunhead. His heart filled with joy for them. When he heard that Shouto had chosen an internship with his father, or that Iida was making his way towards Hosu, his heart sank. He had an idea of why his friend had chosen to come to this city, a few reasons in fact.

Izuku asked Soundless to keep him updated. He hadn’t expected much, but when it rained it poured. He’d lifted his head as they’d burst through the door, uncharacteristically loud given their Quirk. Izuku had known almost immediately that something was wrong. The edge of Soundless’ scarf was dark red with blood, their green eyes burning. They didn’t bother with greetings, panting hard enough that their thin chest heaved with the motion.

“The city’s being overrun by monsters. Seamstress says they’re called _Noumu._ She said you’d know what they are.”

Izuku felt his blood freeze in his veins. His chest squeezed as he remembered the inky darkness, the feeling of being held down.
They’re here for me. They know I’m here.

He swallowed, nodding silently.

“There’s more,” Soundless pushed forward. “I have to protect the hotel and the other kids but… your classmate. Tenya Iida. He’s here too. Before I was cut off from him by the crowd of people, he was headed in Stain’s direction.” They pushed their dark hair back from their face. Soundless was sweating. “T-those things… those monsters. The heroes are going after them… what are they?”

Izuku didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure he could. Instead he got to his feet, mindlessly shuffling towards the still-folded costume at the foot of his bed. He hadn’t tried it on yet, but he knew it would fit. Seamstress’ clothes always did.

“They’re not human.” Was all Izuku could manage. Then, louder. “I need you to take me to Iida.”

“You’re crazy.” Soundless shook their head, a shudder running through them. “The entire city is crawling with Noumu.”

Izuku expression was determined, a dangerous glint in his eye. By way of answer, he slipped on his new mask, a mouth guard covering the lower half of his face. Kabuki-mask style, it presented a black mouth with white fangs turned up in a grin.

“Take me to him.” Was all he said. Izuku stared hard at his staff, thinking. They needed help from someone who wouldn’t rat him out. Someone with a shared secret.

He knew already who that might be.

Soundless let out a string of curse words, long and elegant and frustrated. Then they tightened their own scarf about their face, and did as they were told.

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“We’re needed in Hosu city. Noumu are swarming.”

Shouto’s head snapped up, processing his father’s words. They’d come in almost a bored tone, the man looking at his phone at the latest alert. He was already in costume, the two of them out on patrol in a nearby city.

It’d been two weeks since Izuku Midoriya had disappeared in Hosu city. Two weeks, and he’d taken his father’s internship for lack of interest in anything else. Two weeks, and he still couldn’t quite bring himself to acknowledge how often he checked his phone for some sort of sign or update. He wasn’t sure why he thought Midoriya would message him. It wasn’t like he’d really gone out of his way to create a lasting friendship. There hadn’t been a chance, between the Sports Festival and his father breathing down his neck and the visits to his mother’s hospital.
Shouto was owed nothing, nothing at all. Midoriya had kept his secret, despite every indication that he wouldn’t. Shouto had every reason to believe that their brief relationship had come to an end. Despite his fear that his teachers would find out about his home life, Shouto had been pleasantly surprised by Midoriya’s silence.

He shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, should he? With his classmate gone, Shouto was content being the only person who knew the secret behind the Todoroki household. He tried to tell himself that the thought didn’t make him feel lonely. He tried to tell himself that Midoriya’s absence didn’t make him angry.

After all that talk about fighting for first place, and you left me to grab it on my own?

Hosu was a coincidence. The Noumu were a freak accident, one that Shouto and his father would have to work hard to deal with.

His phone buzzed, the ringer on silent. When his father wasn’t looking, Shouto dared to glance at the screen. A single message from an unknown number glowed brightly up at him.

It was a location, nothing else. Heart in his throat, Shouto checked the GPS on his phone, matching it to Hosu. His thoughts went a million miles, trying to deny the text and absorb it at once. This could also be coincidence. Midoriya and the word coincidence were starting to become synonyms in his brain.

How do you always manage to get yourself into so much trouble?

He thought down at the phone, nervously darting a look back to his father. Shouto owed Midoriya nothing. But Midoriya didn’t just send random texts, not without something hidden in them.

He’s in trouble.

There was no logical reason to believe that. Well, no logical reason save for that he’d been missing for two weeks already.

Damn it.

Shouto opened up his phone one-handed, nodding absently to whatever rant Endeavour was going on about the state of crime in Hosu. He wrote a single message, relying on his fingers blindly hitting the right keys.

On my way.

Then, after a moment of thought:

Don’t do anything stupid.

It was possibly too much to hope for.
Pain was the first thing Iida registered after the yawning span between falling and hitting his head. He blinked woozily, unsure of what was up or down. Everything hurt. A copper taste filled his mouth. He looked up, and found himself face to face with a jagged sword.

Slowly, Stain’s voice filtered through the ringing in his ears.

“Pathetic. You’re just a boy, trying to fill shoes too big for them.”

Iida’s head was spinning. He coughed wetly. Stain regarded him down the hilt of his blade, lifting the weapon to his mouth. As he did, a heaviness overcame Iida’s body. Like his nerves had been detached, he suddenly couldn’t feel his arms or legs. A panic took over, his breathing turning fast and shallow.

He hadn’t thought much past killing Stain, getting his revenge. With that option gone, he was suddenly very aware of his own mortality. “You’re going to die here for your efforts. I told you to run, but it appears the stupidity of heroes starts young. You didn’t even try to help the victim,
concerned with petty revenge.”

Iida stared up, helpless to stop the blade as it whistled through the air. He had the thought that his brother would blame himself for his death. He had the thought that he should’ve probably stopped this before it’d even began.

He had the thought that even as he was terrified, he knew Stain was right. He hadn’t been thinking. He hadn’t been thinking at all.

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Hosu was in chaos. Izuku had barely stepped out of Seamstress’ hotel before the sound of screaming reached his ears. Something was on fire, the choking smell of smoke was on the wind, the sky dark and thunderous. He wrinkled his nose, following Soundless. He tucked his face more deeply in the yawn of his hood.

They moved quickly, ducking out from behind the back alley and onto a main road. Only briefly, their Quirk made them all but invisible with all the other noise around. Izuku did his best to keep up, scanning the streets that they passed and feeling his heart squeeze tightly in his chest. There were Noumu everywhere, almost as much as there were heroes trying to contain them.

It’s like a swarm.

Izuku thought, sweat beading his forehead as he ran and ducked into another alcove. Soundless really wasn’t giving him a chance to catch his breath. They kept weaving into turns that didn’t seem like they should exist.

It’s a swarm, and I’m trapped in the middle of it.

If he lived through this fight, he was going to have a hell of a time getting out of the city. It was already a pretty big if.

“Your friend’s this way, past two turns and a long alley.” Soundless had stopped short, their chest heaving and sweat on the back of their neck. Their green eyes flicked towards Izuku. “I go no further. I don’t want the Hero Killer thinking I’m a good practice target, ya feel?” They looked up at Izuku, something uncertain in their expression. “It was nice meeting you. Try not to die, okay?”

Izuku watched them leave, noiseless and frightened. He caught one last glance of Soundless, looking out towards the mouth of a main street. Their dark hair was illuminated briefly, green eyes catching the reflective light of a building erupting into flame. Then they disappeared down the shadow of an alcove. Izuku was left alone, a shivering feeling of apprehension digging its way between his shoulders.

A shout he recognized moved his legs.
One minute, Iida was watching Stain’s knife falling towards him, irreversible and final. The next, the man was gone. Well, not gone exactly. He just couldn’t turn his head. It made it somehow more frightening, as he strained to make out what was happening around him. The sound of grunting, fighting and kicking was loud in the alley, a blade skittering off somewhere in the corner of his eye. Iida’s breaths were fast and sharp as silence fell, adrenaline quivering down his spine.

The voice that spoke was not who he expected.

Maybe, he should’ve known.

“You’re the last person I expected to get themselves into trouble.”

Midoriya.

Iida craned his head, his stomach doing flips as he saw his friend’s outline in the darkness. Midoriya was standing between him and Stain as a physical shield, his staff held between his hands and crackling blue-green electricity along its length. It was bright in the darkness, reflecting in Midoriya’s eyes so that with the fanged mask he wore he looked haunted. This was one haunting Iida couldn’t help but feel grateful for. It soon dissolved into panic.

Midoriya is here. Midoriya is going to die with you.

“You need to leave! He’s too strong, this doesn’t concern you!”

Midoriya gave him a look. It was the first time Iida had seen that look on his friend’s face since the USJ incident. It was cold, calculating, Iida felt something unsettled settle into his panic. When midoriya spoke, it was to Stain, not Iida.

“I’ve heard a lot about you. Stain: The Hero Killer.”

“I could say the same about you.” Stain had gotten back to his feet, his eyes gleaming in the dark. “A villain gone hero, with a price on his head should anyone bring him back to his master. Tell me, Ghost, did spending time with heroes enlighten you to their cause?” He spat the word ‘cause’ like it was poison in his mouth. “Or are you like Shigaraki- a spoiled brat that’s serving as a means to an end?”

Midoriya didn’t respond. Instead, his head tilted in consideration. The edge of his staff twirled, planting itself in the ground beside him. Iida couldn’t lift his head too far, couldn’t read the expression on his friend’s face.

“I grew up on stories about you. I was taken in by Shigaraki, but it was two villains that raised me: Spinner and Magne. They told me you were what a true hero looked like. I praised you more than I
praised All Might, or Eraserhead, or any other hero for that matter. But that Stain didn’t go after kids. I’m wondering what changed.” Midoriya lifted his chin, his gaze steady and accusing.

Stain smiled. It wasn’t a nice smile, more like a baring of teeth. His red eyes flicked about restlessly, searching as Midoriya was for an opening. He had a restless sort of energy, his hand curling and uncurling about the hilt of his blade.

“Big talk, for a kid that’s killed as much as I have.”

He moved fast, too fast for Iida to track. Midoriya was moving too, a beat before Stain. He dodged, kicking up and out so that his staff came a hair’s breadth away from striking Stain upside the head. It was a risky move; Iida saw it for what it was: Defensive. Midoriya wasn’t budging, using his staff and his body as a physical shield between him and Stain. With one move, he’d effectively given his friend the worst possible vantage. The back of Iida’s neck had broken out in a cold sweat.

He’d never felt so useless.

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Gran Torino hadn’t seen Hosu this destroyed in a while. He’d been riding the train, on his way to get some groceries when the Noumu had invaded his city. It’d happened quickly, one moment he’d been sitting quietly in an empty row, contemplating the issue with Toshinori and the Midoriya boy and the whole League mess.

The next he’d been sent flying, his Quirk barely managing to catch him as he’d been blasted back by a Noumu crashing through the train window. He’d been spending most of his time since that point rescuing citizens, trying to make a dent in the chaos. Damage control.

Not that there was much to be done, what with Endeavour around. The man hated to work with others, and he’d come with Quirk blazing, demanding that he be put in charge. He held a room captive, that much he’d give him. Holding it through fear in these times worked as well as any other method of leadership. Personally, he just didn’t have much patience for it.

What he did have interest in through despite himself was Endeavour’s boy. Everyone who cared even slightly about hero work knew the name Shouto Todoroki. From his birth, the boy had been promised a golden future ahead of him, the perfect inheritor of his parent’s Quirks. There’d been a news buzz when Todoroki had finally began his life at UA, and more when he’d made such a strong show at the Sports Festival.

He was not anything like Gran Torino expected. In all honesty, he’d been preparing himself to meet a spoiled young man, possibly worse than the number two hero himself in self-absorption.
Shouto was quiet as he introduced himself. His eyes never stayed trained on anyone else for too long. He was hiding something. Gran Torino had learned that sort of look, raising Toshinori was not as easy as many people probably thought it’d be. Lying was a learned habit, and the secret of All Might was perhaps the biggest lie of them all. So he recognized a liar, and he recognised when someone was distracted. Teenagers these days looked at their phone all the time, and maybe Shouto wasn’t so different in that sense. Yet he kept edging out of his father’s direct line of vision, mismatched eyes carefully scanning the crowd of officers, waiting.

Here was the thing, Gran Torino wasn’t stupid. When Toshinori had called him in a panic, asking for his virtually adopted son (not that the blockhead would ever admit it), Torino had suspicions. A teenage boy never went out completely alone, no teenager ever really did. They had contacts, people they trusted, some sort of safehouse. The Midoriya boy had spent months with the class of 1-A? Chances were, he had a contact or two he was keeping, trusting.

The Todoroki boy looked like he kept his mouth shut on important things. It was a stretch, but not entirely a bad one. Gran Torino deliberately averted his gaze, focusing instead on the crowd of heroes trying to keep a flying Noumu reigned in.

It was fierce, a strangely human cry leaving its beaked mouth as it thrashed at the chains and ground its teeth. Mindless, it seemed determined to rip its way through any obstacle it was faced with. It was strong, but not intelligent. Not really.

When it reared its head, pulled on its chains and sent a few good officers flying? Endeavour stepped in. The bulk of his body temporarily blocked Gran Torino’s view of Shouto. In that breath before and after, the boy moved.

One thing people underestimated about being old was that if you looked tired enough, people didn’t mind if you made a show of stepping back, and tucking out of sight. Gran Torino did just this, keeping a half eye on the boy. When Shouto slipped into a back alley, he silently counted to thirty.

The people of Hosu would be fine, Endeavour had brought more than enough men, enough that it was flooding the streets and impeding progress. Gran Torino had a promise to hold, and a pretty good gut feeling. Find Midoriya, and maybe he’d learn just why Noumu were attacking Hosu in the first place.

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“Your ‘friend’ only took on the name Ingenium because he wanted revenge. Do you honestly think a boy like that will grow into a man worthy of the title ‘hero’?!”
I’m Ingenium. The hero that’s going to beat you!

Iida winced as Midoriya was sent flying, scrabbling for purchase. Not quickly enough- Stain was fast as well as strong. You could predict a person’s moves, but if you couldn’t keep up with them then there wasn’t a hope in hell of blocking. He watched, helpless to stop it as his friend was cut, sent rolling to a standstill down the alley strip. There was blood. A lot of it. Panic was starting to cloud Iida’s vision.

This was a mistake. It was beginning to clock in for Iida that he’d screwed up badly. Badly enough that he might not be the only person to pay for it.

“Stop! Please, Midoriya just- just run away!”

Why won’t you run away?

Stain scoffed. He’d drug himself towards Midoriya, a boot planting itself firmly on the boy’s sternum. Midoriya winced at the pressure.

“Kid’s more of a hero than you are, y’know.” He commented. “He’s fighting for you. Fighting for a second chance at life. You don’t deserve it, but he doesn’t see it that way. Isn’t that right, Ghost?”

Midoriya grit his teeth, green eyes glaring up at Stain through the blood trickling down his forehead. He spat weakly at the Hero Killer’s boots.

“F-Fuck your ideals. I’m the last person who should be praised for being a hero. Iida’s a-actually brave.”

“Brave? Ha!” Stain threw back his head, a nasty grin curdling his face. “Your friend is reckless, stupid, and impulsive.”

“And you almost killed his brother! I think going a little crazy might be expected!”

Midoriya snarled. His head was tilted towards Iida, exasperation and fear and anger bleeding into his voice.

“Yeah! He might have gotten both of us killed! Yeah, he’s no match for you! I’m no match for you, we’re both fifteen! But I was the one who ran away because I thought my friends wouldn’t go looking for me. I’m the one who thought no one cared enough! That was my fault. It made Iida come out here, maybe it wasn’t the only reason, but because of me Noumu are roaming the city because I couldn’t just stay with UA!”

Iida felt something ragged in his chest tear further. Midoriya’s voice was rusted nails across his back, jagged and bitter. His eyes closed tightly, his face pressed to the pavement. Iida had never felt so useless, so small.

I can’t measure up. I can’t help. I can’t do anything to save Midoriya, or fix my brother. I’m being
It was like he was a kid again, waiting for his parents to come home.

“I’m messed up.” Midoriya croaked. “You’re right. There are heroes that hurt people. Heroes that take advantage. Heroes that never, ever deserve their title. But you’re pretty fucked up too if you think that killing kids is the answer to the problems in hero society. It’s kids my age who wanted to be more, want to do better that came after me. It was the kids in my class that showed me adults I could trust. And yeah, I broke that trust! But it wasn’t because of them. And the crazy part is I know they’re still my friends!” He looked up, over towards Iida. Midoriya’s gaze was steady, so steady that it drew Stain’s stare over towards Iida.

Neither of them noticed when Midoriya’s hand encircled his staff. His voice was eerily calm. “And as long as I have legs that move, arms that can punch, then I’m going to defend a person’s right to a second chance.”

His thumb pressed down on his staff, small metal orbs spilling free from its container. A bang reverberated through the alley, blasting back Iida’s hair with the force of it. Bright light dazzled his eyes, he had only a moment to press his face back against the concrete. Pink foam swelled forward, sweeping Stain up in its path.

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Shouto heard the noise before he found them. He recognised the tone, the bright light like a beacon lighting the way. Swearing, he doubled his speed, the ice on his shoes sliding him forward. He had a bad feeling, clamouring with the relief at his guess being right.

*Now I just hope I’m not too late.*

He didn’t see the shadow behind him, fixated on moving forward.

Gran Torino was texting as he followed, his Quirk making him silent and fast. He hated texting, especially in gloves. It felt like his fingers were made of sausages, trying to painstakingly type out a message to Toshinori.

*Gt yr boy. Snding the address nw.*

Close enough. Besides, Stain was quickly becoming outnumbered. A smile broke out on Gran Torino’s face, the one that his pupil used to describe as ‘unsettling’. It’d been a while since he’d had a good old fashioned crack-down. This was one fight he had a feeling that the Hero Killer just might regret instigating.
As Toshinori would no doubt tell anyone who’d listen, he’d never had much patience for idealists.

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In the darkness of the hotel lobby, Soundless made their way towards the Foyer. The main entrance was being carefully guarded, so that they’d had to knock and use the passwords that rarely the children of the hotel bothered to use. That was the nature of the place, it was rarely needed. No one really went to Seamstress, unless they were desperate. It was too much of a gamble.

Now, they made their way slowly, still feeling unease. They’d followed their part perfectly, but there was always the chance that Midoriya had read them. Analysis Quirks were tricky like that, they’d had to practice for many weeks with the Mistress before she’d deemed them a good enough liar. Others had failed her, and Soundless shuddered at the thought.

Their hand turned the doorknob to the foyer, entering. Though the door wailed, their Quirk made their footsteps noiseless against the carpet, their breath inaudible to the human ear.

Seamstress spoke, her voice coming from the rafters.

“Did you guide him to Stain?”

“Yes, Mistress. He’s currently involved in a fight over his friend with the Hero Killer. Gran Torino and Shouto Todoroki are also on their way.”

There was a light chuckle, pleased.

“Thank you, dear. You’ve done well.”

There was the clicking of legs moving, Seamstress lowering herself closer to the floor. Soundless swallowed tightly, having learned to hide their flinching at this point. You got used to the Mistress, or you didn’t last long here. She skittered her way to the centre of the lobby, seating herself a few feet away from where Soundless stood. Her many eyes gleamed in the darkness, a human hand reaching for the plate of cookies and tea habitually left on the table.

“Shigaraki’s been told of the boy’s location. If we play this game right, I’ll have all the information I need on both the League and UA. Payment from Shigaraki for leading the boy to him, and eventually payment from dear Midoriya as he’s reunited with his beloved Eri. Then, information on UA. We handle this delicately, and in a year’s time the League and the heroes and vigilantes like Stain will be running about like chickens with their heads cut off. And I will hold the cards.”

She bit into the edge of a cookie, crunching delicately.
Soundless bowed at the waist, their dark hair falling over their shoulders.

It was always a web with their Mistress, and everyone inevitably wandered into it.
All right, All Might

Chapter Summary

Midoriya: "I'm filled with unchecked trauma."

Toshinori: "Hi 'filled with unchecked trauma', I'm Dad."

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading! Next week: a run in with your friendly neighbourhood Bird-Monstrosity ;))

“Shouta. Shouta, wake up. Toshi’s almost here.”

His eyes were dry. They hurt. Hizashi only used that soft, gentler tone of voice when he’d fallen asleep somewhere he wasn’t supposed to. Shouta swallowed a groan, wishing he could just sink back into the general pit of sleep. He opened his eyes, and realized that he'd passed out at his desk. Again.

Lifting his head, he was greeted by the sight of Hizashi, holding a tray with three paper cups. His hair was down and loose, dark circles under his own eyes to match Shouta’s habitual ones. He smiled, setting a cup down by Shouta’s arm. Coffee, black with two sugars. Shouta reached for it gratefully, already knowing the other two cups would have green tea (for Toshinori), and a soy-based macchiato monstrosity (for Hizashi’s lactose intolerant, sugar-loving ass).

“How long have I been out for?” Shouta asked as soon as he’d taken a sip, feeling the first buzz of caffeine on his tongue. Hizashi hummed, pushing aside one of the mountains of paperwork at Shouta’s desk so he could seat himself on the edge of the desk. His expression was considering.

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Right.

Shouta looked at the stack of homework and notes that Midoriya had slowly started to make for him with his writing lessons. On a purely analytical level, Midoriya’s learning process was fascinating to watch. He’d started as a beginner, and the first few notes showed trademark mistakes and errors that most small children would make. Yet his processing ability, the speed in which he absorbed and
memorized information could be seen in each repeat lesson. The latest papers looked like a seventh-grader’s work, almost caught up with the rest of 1-A. The only frustrating part is that Shouta’s own studying of them had yielded absolutely nothing of value pertaining to Midoriya’s disappearance.

“You don’t seem like you found much, huh?”

Hizashi watched as Shouta groaned, pressing his head against his forearms before forcing himself to sit up.

“I can’t afford more sleep. I have a gut feeling that the problem child left us some sort of clue, and I just haven’t pieced it together. Toshinori’s losing his mind, and Midoriya’s mother is fit to pull her kid from UA, and I don’t blame her. We’re a school of heroes and couldn’t stop her son from waltzing his way back into trouble. That isn’t even covering my student’s reactions.” Shouta pinched the bridge of his nose, breathing sharply. He was overtired, and he knew it. There was a pulsing tension headache starting up in the front of his skull, pounding away. “Bakugou picked two fights in the first ten minutes of homeroom today, one bad enough that I had to call his mother. I caught Mina on her phone, just watching the news. Uraraka keeps staring out the window and Kaminari fried himself twice just trying to cheer everyone up. Yayaozuru started crying at lunch and no one knows where she went for the full half hour to deal with it by herself.”

Shouta tilted his head back, the dark fan of his hair falling down across the back of his chair. Hizashi reached out to touch his hand, thumb brushing across his partner’s knuckles.

“Kids deal with things like this in different ways.”

“They keep looking at me like I’m the reason Midoriya left. Because I won’t tell them anything. Because I can’t if I want to keep them safe.” Shouta’s dark eyes flit towards Hizashi’s face. The man wasn’t prone to emotional outbursts, but Shouta’s eyes could be expressive. They held in them now frustration, and sadness that he likely wouldn’t acknowledge let alone admit it. “How can I present myself as a capable teacher for heroes if I can’t even support my class in a time of crisis? I keep coming to this idea hoping Midoriya left something, because if he hasn’t I have to admit that one of my students instead of trusting his teachers decided it was safer on the streets using questionable criminal connections.”

“You’re putting too much pressure on yourself. You know that, right?” Hizashi gestured to the paperwork. “You’re the only one who had this idea. You’re the only one out of us who noticed that Midoriya was struggling in class. I’m his English teacher, and it slipped past me. It’s not that you’re not doing enough, Shouta. You’re not asking for help.”

Shouta made a grumbling noise under his breath. Hizashi huffed, leaping off of the desk. He’d slept, and so had more energy.

Bastard.

Shouta thought, not without affection. He watched as Hizashi began walking through the rows of empty desks, humming as he took stock of the classroom.
“We know that Midoriya sits in this desk, and that he’s a thinker. He wouldn’t have just put a note or something important in a place where anyone might be able to grab it, right?”

Shouta nodded, playing along. Hizashi strode forward, towards Shouta’s desk.

“Then my best bet is that he put it somewhere where you only would have access to it.”

“I’ve already searched my desk—” Shouta protested. Hizashi shook his head, pulling the drawer out as far as it would go. He nudged Shouta’s chair further back, giving himself some room as he reached one arm up and behind.

“Before my moms adopted me, I lived in a foster home. Rough sort of space, with lots of other kids. I learned that if I wanted to keep things that were important to me—money, photographs—I had to get creative.” Hizashi rummaged for a moment, his green eyes lighting up as he evidently found something. He straightened, revealing what was taped behind Shouta’s desk drawer.

It was a lined notebook, careful print on the cover revealing it addressed to: Aizawa-Sensei. Shouta’s breath caught, torn between hope and disbelief. Hizashi flipped through the pages, green eyes scanning the pages. His excitement and colour slowly drained from his face.

“Shouta.”

He put the notebook open on the table, revealing its contents. Shouta rolled forward on his chair, scanning the document. He felt his chest tighten as he saw it for what it was. That feeling tightened further into something suffocating as he flipped page after page, eventually landing on one in particular.

“It’s a formula, calculations that he’s memorized from somewhere.” Shouta had a feeling where, given the author’s name. “He memorized it, even without being able to read it.”

“What’s it for?”

Shouta scanned forward, the page he’d come to making the back of his neck feel cold and clammy. There was an anatomical drawing, a girl with a horn sprouting from her head. The notes carefully clustered on the side went into her Quirk, words like neutralizing and Isolating effect highlighted in his mind.

“I’m not sure… but it looks like a human-made Quirk neutralizer.”

“Human-made?” Hizashi looked ashy, leaning over Shouta’s shoulder. He read the information, his expression growing cold. “You mean she’s-?”

The girl from Midoriya’s dream. Shouta flipped the page, finding a letter addressed to him. He felt his throat close into white panic as he read it.

Shouta jerked up from his seat, the wheels screeching across the linoleum in protest.

“We need to find out everything we can about Kai Chisaki.” Shouta read the author’s name at the
corner page, already getting his phone out. The glare of the screen lit up his face as he began typing. “Text Toshinori- he needs to know that Midoriya’s done this for a reason.”

“Shouta,” Hizashi had already gotten his phone out, freezing upon reading something. He tilted the screen towards Shouta, so he could read the caption.

**BREAKING: NOUMU SURROUNDING HOSU CITY AS HERO KILLER IS STILL AT LARGE.**

Below it, a follow-up:

**ALL MIGHT SEEN HEADED TOWARDS HOSU CRISIS. HE IS HERE!**

****

**Dear Aizawa-Sensei,**

_Her name is Eri, and I consider her my little sister. She came to the League when I was a kid, taken by a villain named Overhaul. These notes are a few years old, I don’t know if I wrote them down completely correctly. I could only write the shape of what I saw, guessed what I could. My memory of that time isn’t very clear._

_I wanted someone to know why I’ve done this, when bad things come out about me. I wanted someone to know that I wasn’t lying. You, my mom, Toshinori, everyone, saved my life. But I promised her that I’d always come back for her, and she’s too far hidden for the heroes to get to her. So I have to be a villain. Because Overhaul won’t let her go, and I can’t hide here and pretend like bad things aren’t happening to her every moment I can’t protect her._

_I can’t pretend like they didn’t do something to me too. I can’t remember, but it’s because my brain won’t let me remember. I can’t just pretend it’ll go away. So long as I’m at UA, all of you are in danger. There’s something in my head that I shouldn’t know. Something I saw. I need to know what it is before I can find a way get rid of it so they stop coming after me. I don’t think Shigaraki wants me back because I’m his. I think he wants me back because I have something locked away in my Quirk, a piece of information he can’t stand to lose._

_I’m sorry. When this is all over, I’m not really banking on coming out of it. If I do, I’ll accept responsibility. If I don’t, then I’ve set up other measures. One way or another, the League isn’t going to hurt anyone any more. Not if I can stop it._
Thank you for having me as a student,

-Izuku Midoriya

****

It was a simple enough idea: A stalemate.

Izuku had a simple plan, and it was one that was brutally effective so long as one didn’t have anything left to lose.

He’d offered information on UA to Seamstress, but what he hadn’t told her was that he’d also taken information on every villain he’d ever spent time with. That notebook, well it was kept with a person that he truly believed would never let it fall into the wrong hands.

He knew Seamstress was probably the person who’d let the League know he was here. It was the only thing that made sense, given the fact that he’d told no one else his plans. He’d counted on it, in fact. Well maybe not the Noumu, but the League arriving definitely. At the end of this, he was going to return to the League, and tell them the truth:

He was going to leave with Eri and bring her somewhere safe. If he didn’t tell the keeper of the notebook that he was alright and the two of them were safe, everything he knew would find its way to UA. It would find its way into the hands of the media, any public platform, everywhere. Seamstress would realize that the information he’d given her, though valuable, was peanuts considering in the notebook he’d documented her years of unpaid child labour.

And maybe, maybe, Midoriya could leverage his own freedom too in the process. He doubted it, though, couldn’t imagine his life after something this dangerous. He couldn’t imagine much past the fact that in that notebook, everything about him would also be made public. It had to, to take down Shigaraki and… and All For One.

****

Shouto had been on the receiving end of Midorya’s foam trick once before, in the Sports Festival. It hurt more than someone might think, especially since it blinded you effectively and took away your sense of bearings as the foam swept you off of your feet.

It didn’t surprise him to round the alley, and find Stain struggling to get back up. What surprised him
a little more was Iida, immobile and screaming, being carried by the foam directly towards him at mach five.

Both of them were screaming then. Shouto barely managed to use his Quirk in time, his ice flowing from his feet so that the momentum didn’t knock him over too. He slid, holding onto Iida’s shoulder until he could stop them with the adjacent alley wall.

“That hurt.” Shouto couldn’t help but grit his teeth. Iida was taller than him, and his costume was heavy.


There was a hard revving noise from Iida’s engines. Todoroki grunted from underneath him. Iida’s knees were digging into his back.

“Can you please get up if you can? Rescuing’s kind of hard when you’re on top of me.”

Iida jerked back, the panic of the situation settling back into his features. He immediately craned his head, trying to see where Midoriya and Stain ended up in the foam.

As it turned out, the situation wasn’t exactly good. Midoriya had managed to avoid the flash, but he was waist-deep in his own foam, the narrowness of the alley not allowing it to disperse. He was scrabbling for purchase, trying to hack his way out. Stain was blind, but Midoriya was making a lot of noise. The Hero Killer stumbled towards him, a growl building in his chest.

“I’ll fucking kill you, brat!”

Todoroki moved, a hand extending outwards as flames ignited at his fingertips. Stain was fast, feeling the heat of them and moving on instinct, away from Midoriya. Shouto didn’t even get a chance to singe him.

Fast, then.

Shouto pressed Iida back into his feet, trying to analyze the situation. They needed to be faster.

Midoriya broke free from his foam, rolling to a safe patch. He wasted no time, face lighting up at the sight of Shouto.

“Todoroki! You came!”

“You’re not really one to send random texts.” Shouto admitted, trying not to show how relieved he privately was. Midoriya was alive, Midoriya was going to be alright. All of them would be.

His relief didn’t last long. With a roar, Stain was suddenly moving with purpose. Blind but accurate, his knife was flung with startling accuracy in Shouto’s direction. He acted on instinct, moving in front of Iida, a wall of ice shooting up from his fingertips. It barely made contact in time, chips sparkling in the air as the knife wobbled, hilt-deep in a wall of ice.
Stain took his chance. He was suddenly in Shouto’s direct path, faster than Midoriya could keep up. Shouto braced himself as the ice was shattered, forced back as another knife went hurtling perilously close to his cheek. The sting of the graze burned like a clear arc.

The knife was attached to a bandage. Shouto watched as if in slow motion as it was yanked back, towards Stain’s waiting tongue.

Iida was moving, faster than Shouto had ever seen him move before. His eyes burned as he kicked the knife out of Stain’s grip, aiming for a kick across Stain’s face. It connected, the Hero Killer sent flying. Flying straight towards Midoriya, who brandished his staff.

Stain spun, and Shouto saw as if in slow motion the two knives he kept strapped to his boots pull free into his hands.

There was a moment, where Shouto felt his blood run cold. Iida’s engines were too hot to use. He was too cold, his flames still uncontrolled and unpredictable. A low tremor was starting to shiver up and down his arms.

I’m not going to be fast enough.

He was still moving. Midoriya’s staff was jerked out of his hands, Stain using the force of his blades on the contact points where Izuku would’ve put his hands.

Shouto wasn’t sure what he felt in that moment. He wasn’t even really sure if it could be defined in a single emotion. What he did know, was that looking at Izuku it occurred to him suddenly how different Midoriya looked.

He was wearing a strange costume, nothing like the one he’d designed for his time at UA. The mask was different, almost demonic in appearance. That wasn’t it, though. There was something in Midoriya’s eyes that’d changed. Something fundamental.

The light in them, Shouto realized. The determination that’d burned in Midoriya up until this point was gone. There was only a sort of fear, a rabid sort of desperation as he seemed to realize what was going to happen at the same time as Shouto. Midoriya’s gaze slid past Shouto, the green in them bright chips of desperation. He mouthed a word, and Shouto felt his chest squeeze as he made it out.

Run.

Run away.

Take Iida, and run.

It occurred to Shouto that Midoriya was so different. But he was also the same.
The knife connected, and Izuku let out a hoarse scream as he and Stain fell to the ground.

Shouto had very little time to register it, white noise thundering in his head because there was blood and the knife had been pulled into Stain’s hand at some point, and suddenly his knees were buckling from underneath him. He couldn’t move, could barely breathe. He kept seeing Midoriya, still and silent on the ground even as Stain got to his feet. The alleyway was pooling with red.

Like when mom used to get hit. Like when you did. Get back up. He has to get back up.

His cheek pressed to the dirt, Shouto closed his eyes. His stomach was twisting itself into knots, his left side burning while his right froze. He couldn’t feel anything. He felt too much.

Iida was shouting, something angry. Something desperate. He charged forward, and Shouto couldn’t find the words to scream that he come back. That he’d end up hurt too.

Not dead. Midoriya’s not dead.

A wind began to pick up in the alleyway. It swelled into a tornado.

****

“I’d say that’s about enough of all of this.”

Gran Torino looked at The Hero Killer, whom he’d just punted against a wall rather hard. Out cold, Stain hadn’t been expecting another hero to arrive. Under normal circumstances, one wouldn’t have. Torino shuddered at the thought of three children taking on such a man alone.

For a pro however, already injured as he was, this capture was a piece of cake.

Gran Torino marched forward, picking his way through the mess that was the alley. Bits of foam, blood and debris were scattered about, his short stature making it a bit of a climb to reach his destination. He grabbed handcuffs from his utility belt, leaning forward to clap them on Stain’s wrists. After a moment of consideration, he also took the man’s blades away. Better safe than sorry. He tossed them out towards the mouth of the alley.

“There. Better.” He grunted to himself, tottering about face to look at the stunned children before him. Well, two of them. The third wasn’t looking too well, and Gran Torino had the suspicion that this was the Midoriya boy.

He clucked a little too himself, his gaze darting towards the other two. With Stain unconscious, his Quirk had no hold. Endeavour’s boy had pushed himself to his feet, running towards Midoriya’s still form. Though his face was usually expressionless, there was a kernel of urgency set in his jaw.

The other boy was more openly emotional. Crying, a pretty normal reaction for a fifteen-year-old
that’d just seen their friend get stabbed.

Gran Torino shook his head to himself, humming a little. This was going to be a mess for Toshinori to come to.

“Is he conscious?” Gran Torino asked, approaching the boys. Todoroki’s head lifted, mismatched eyes taking in the elderly looking hero.

“Who are you?” He asked, his tone stiff and a little rough. His friend with the glasses nudged him, distraught but apparently more conscious of manners. He bowed deeply at the waist.

“Thank you for saving us. I’m Tenya Iida.” He stretched his arms out, gesturing to the entire mess surrounding them. There was a catch in his voice, but Gran Torino was taken aback by his honesty.

“This… this was all my fault.”

“I thought it a little odd that two unlicensed heroes would make off on their own.”


So he really doesn’t know, huh.

He chose not to fight that interjection, focused on the present.

“One of your teachers has been called. He’s on his way currently. I stepped in because I noticed that you were acting funny. If you’re gonna slip off during a crisis, don’t do it when you’re with your father. He draws too much attention on himself and the people around him.”

Todoroki’s jaw went slack, digesting the information slowly. His expression lost some of its sharpness.

“He’s breathing, but he’s not waking up.” He said, his voice wavering slightly. He didn’t cry though, and for that Gran Torino was grateful. He never was much good at crying.

Iida on the other hand, had no such reservations. Tears and panic were rolling off of him in waves, threatening to become a black pit of guilt.

“This is all my fault. If I hadn’t gone after Stain…”

“Then your friends wouldn’t have had to come save you. You’re right. But considering one of them is injured and you seem like the empathetic type, it’s not going to cost you your studies. I’m not going to tell you out to anyone but All Might.”

“All Might?” The two boys said in evident confusion. Gran Torino scratched the back of his head, thinking back on it. Huh, he guessed he’d never told them who was on their way.

“We’re work friends.” He lied.

Toshinori, you’re gonna owe me for this.
Thankfully, he was saved from making any more excuses. A wet cough turned everyone’s heads, Midoriya opening his eyes. Gran Torino knelt, examining the stab wound. It was shallow, shallower than it should’ve been.

“T-thought the Kevlar vest would come in handy.” He wheezed, sitting up a little and wincing. He pressed his hand to his side, and Gran Torino saw that Stain had grazed him. Messy, but not lethal. The boy’s eyes sharpened quickly, and he craned his head to look up at Gran Torino and his friend’s relieved faces.

His expression flickered in disbelief, the panic settling in. He reached up to grab Shouto’s shoulders, as if trying to make sure he was actually there.

“You didn’t run away? Why- where’s Stain??”

“It’s alright now.” Gran Torino interrupted calmly. Midoriya turned towards him, confusion crossing his face. His gaze landed on Stain’s slumped form, eyes widening.

“Who’re you?”

“A friend of mine.”

A voice said from the mouth of the alleyway. Midoriya shrank against the brickwork, his eyes going wide. Any colour in his skin had bled away. Everyone knew that voice. No one knew it better than him.

“All Might,” Gran Torino got to his feet, short stature dwarfed further by Toshinori’s height. “You’re late.”

All Might wasn’t smiling. The corner of his lip was stained red. He seemed haggard, and Gran Torino slowly realized why. The general din of the chaos outside had gotten louder, noisier. He was covered in nicks and scratches, small marks of battle on an otherwise perfect form.

“We need to leave. The city’s being overrun by Noumu, and Endeavour wants all citizens out of here so heroes can do their job without worry.” Burning blue eyes softened as they saw Midoriya, though his face remained impassive. “Young Midoriya, come with us. We’ll figure out your situation after all of this is over.” He lifted a hand, but it froze at Midoriya’s reaction.

The boy was backing away, deeper into the cove of the alley like a small and frightened child. His gaze never left All Might’s figure.

“Y-You shouldn’t be here.” He said aloud, voice thick with fear. “You don’t understand. I can’t go back. I have to do this-”

“Midoriya!” Iida interrupted, his voice tight. He made to grab his friend’s shoulder, but Izuku ducked out of the hold, lifting his staff to defend himself.

There wasn’t anywhere for him to go. The alley was a dead end, All Might and the others blocking
the entrance. Like a wild animal, his gaze flicked between them, resting on Todoroki finally. His voice held in it a note of desperation.

“You have to trust me. I-I can’t go with you. I can’t go back without her.”

“Who?”

Izuku bit into his lower lip, the skin white between his teeth. His breathing was fast and shallow.

Shouto had never seen him like this. His mismatched eyes held a thousand questions that Izuku didn’t know how to answer.

Why did you run away?
Where did you get that costume?
Why can’t you come back?

“We can help you if you’re in trouble.” All Might said. Izuku was filled with sudden hatred of the man, hot and fast and bitter on the back of his tongue. He glared up at him. Now of all times when Izuku would’ve gladly given the world for him to disappear?!

“Why should I trust you?! You never came for me! No hero came for me!” The words were spat at him, like a blade thrown. "You weren't there, and they hurt me and h-hurt E-Eri-" Izuku felt like the words were crawling out of his mouth, from somewhere black inside of him. Before with Stain, he'd been bluffing. A little of his own feelings, mixed with lies and emotional vulnerability that he so often struggled to show. This felt molten, desperation turned into a knifepoint. All Might looked ashen in the face of his words. Though he hadn't gotten smaller, Izuku felt like his words had punctured the man, leaving him looking deflated. Izuku hated him for it.

All Might stepped forward. Izuku held his ground, closer and closer until the man was kneeling on the ground in front of him. Izuku had never bothered to get this close to the man before, looking away in class at his shoes or his shoulder. Anything to avoid seeing him as a person. It was easier to hate an idea.

This close, Izuku could see his sunken expression, the smudge of blood at the edge of his lip, the smile lines around his mouth. He could make out the minute scars across the man’s knuckles, the earnest expression that was so similar to someone else that it made Izuku’s breath catch. It made him see and connect the pieces he’s hidden from himself and his Quirk, see the strain in the man’s every muscle as he struggled to keep his form.

All Might has a time limit.

Was the first thing he’d ever known about the hero.

Toshinori is chronically ill.

Now, Izuku knew this, even as his eyes burned and a shuddering emotion was shaking him.
“I’m here, my boy.” All Might said. Izuku didn’t say anything, his hand pressed to his mouth and his staff dropped to the ground. Toshinori seemed to understand. He came forward, and Izuku could in a strange way feel the familiar skeletal hold in the tight hug around him. "I'm sorry I wasn't there. But I promise, I won't leave you ever again."
Toshinori had never thought of a future for himself. Not in the way that others did.

Many pro heroes didn’t, unable to fit an idea of a lover, a child, a nuclear family into the necessary dangers of their everyday lives. Heroes died, the average age for his job had long since passed him. He should have been retired long ago. Every day he spent out in the field was a day that he made the conscious realization that he wasn’t young any more. From his bad joints to his stomach to his breathing problems, every injury was tacked on in a layer of experience that too soon caught up with him. It was his armor as much as his crutch.

He’d let so many things pass him by this way. It only occurred to him later in life how deeply flawed that thinking could be.

It occurred to him that he hadn’t really let that sentiment go, even when he’d fallen into Hizashi and Shouta’s relationship. He’d told himself they understood, that here was a relationship that would never assume too much from him, or ask him to change. He was right, and he was wrong, but that was a story that was complicated and a long time coming.

Midoriya had changed his mind. Toshinori suddenly wanted nothing more than to take the boy home, call his partners, and make sure Inko was alright. He wanted to be there for the boy in a way no one else had been for him in his life. Maybe that was because he’d seen something of himself in him, or maybe it was the guilt, but either way the need and want were the same.

There’d be a lot to talk about, and much of it would be painful. For a day at least, he thought Izuku
deserved to rest. The boy had been through enough that his hear ached at the thought, his hand tightening on Izuku’s shoulder.

The boy was quiet, had been since he’d been guided out of the alley. His expression was conflicted, eyes red from crying. He was probably in some shock as well, given recent revelations. There was a bone-deep weariness in his posture, though he smiled well enough for Todoroki and Iida when they shot looks at him when they thought he wasn’t looking. They were up ahead, Iida limping from injuries, his arm limp at his side, but otherwise mostly unharmed. He kept trying to engage with Gran Torino, who was tolerating his questions with limited patience.

Toshinori and Izuku lagged further behind, far enough away that Toshinori knew the whispered question Izuku asked was for his ears alone.

“So… Is your ‘other form’ like, flexing a muscle or something?”

“In a way.” Toshinori confirmed, quietly impressed at how quickly Izuku seemed to understand the nature of his Quirk at a glance. “I used to be able to flex it for days at a time, but due to my injuries, my time’s shrunk dramatically.”

“Three hours.” Izuku confirmed, his gaze distant. “I… when I was first told to go over information about you I thought it was because of a limitation factor. Like, how Kirishima’s Quirk can only work to such an extent before he starts being unable to breathe.” He shook his head, shooting Toshinori a reproachful but resigned expression. “I don’t know whether I should be upset that you didn’t tell me, or relieved you didn’t. I wouldn’t have taken it well.”

Toshinori sighed, casting a glance towards Izuku. He gave in to the impulse to rest a hand on the boy’s head, ruffling through his curls. It worked- breaking Izuku from the grim expression on his face. He pushed the hand away with a flush.

“It’s not your fault. I chose to let you into my personal space, and tried to hide an integral part of myself from you. Even when you inevitably became tangled up in it, I kept lying. I said I trusted you and then gave you every reason to believe the opposite.”

“I didn’t trust you either.” Izuku admitted. His hands curled into fists at his side, amusement melting into shame. He looked like he was dreading the answer to his next question. “My mom’s going to kill me when I get home, isn’t she?”

“I think she’s just going to be happy you’re alright, my boy.”

“Yeah, but I feel like I caused all this damage to the city.”

Hosu had only just managed to get the situation under control. Thanks to Endeavour, and thanks to the heroes on reserve, the Noumu had by and large been detained. Red and blue police lights
illuminated the cops as they tried to escort civilians to safety, plainclothes amidst colourful costumes and Quirks. Izuku was looking on the scene with an ill sort of acceptance, his fingers twisting themselves into the cuffs of his gloves. His next question burned in Toshinori’s guts, hot metal in his stomach.

“Stain… he let us live. Didn’t he.”

It’d been close. If Gran Torino hadn’t gotten there in time, Toshinori didn’t want to think about the consequences.

“… Almost definitely. He’s never really had an M.O for children. It’s possible your age influenced his feelings, in spite of his ideals.”

Izuku stared ahead, falling into uneasy silence. Toshinori would’ve paid a small fortune to get a glimpse of what he was thinking.

“Toshinori!”

The voice called, turning everyone’s head. Toshinori startled, making out Hizashi and Shouta separating from the herd of heroes in the distance. They quickened their pace upon being recognized.

“You found him.” Was the first thing Shouta said, slightly out of breath as he took in Izuku’s form tucked against Toshinori’s side. His dark eyes widened as he saw Todoroki and Iida, relief melting into exasperation. “How did you two end up caught up in all of this?”

Izuku came forward, a likely excuse on the tip of his tongue. He was quickly interrupted by Iida, who came forward so that he could bow as low as possible at the waist.

“It’s my fault.” He admitted, causing Aizawa-Sensei’s brow to rise. Iida had trouble breaking classroom rules, let alone public law. “I went after Stain because I thought I could get revenge for my brother. It wasn’t heroic at all and both Midoriya and Todoroki came to try to save me. I’m willing to accept all consequences for my actions.” He said this with a devastated expression on his face. The entirety of class 1-A knew what Aizawa-sensei’s policy was with students that did not act like heroes in training.

It was Todoroki who piped up, Native still unconscious on his back.

“Without your help, Native would have died. I’m not saying what you did was smart, but I don’t think it should be ignored that you did save someone.” He directed his mismatched gaze towards Aizawa, a glint of steel in his even stare. “If Iida’s going to be punished, then Midoriya and I should be too.”

“You’re all going to have to deal with consequences.” Aizawa-sensei stated plainly, looking deeply disgruntled by the whole mess. “But I’ll be honest- the citizens in Hosu right now are our main priority. Rest assured that all citizens, will be taken care of.” His eyes landed on Izuku, and something meaningful passed between them. Izuku’s expression melted into something akin to relief.

It was short lived.
There was a distant rumble, like the sound of some great building shifting and settling. The wind seemed to change direction, Toshinori’s hair suddenly being tugged to the other side. He frowned, casting his gaze in the direction it was being pulled. Unconsciously, he checked his time limit: Ten minutes left.

There was the sound of some sort of explosion, ripping through a building. Screams resonated.

“What was that?” Hizashi blinked, adjusting his glasses. A plume of smoke had risen in the distance, sirens beginning to shriek. Whatever it was, it’d come from the centre of the city, where Endeavour had supposedly gotten the situation under control. Toshinori had a feeling of unease trickling through him, settling somewhere deep in his bones. It was oddly a mirror to Nana’s departure.

*I’ll be back soon, Toshi. Stay here and wait for me.*

“I don’t know, but I might be needed. Eraserhead, Gran Torino can you take the children to safety?”

“Hang on-!” Izuku spoke up, an objection clear on his face. There was indignation and worry written all over him. Toshinori’s hand tightened on his shoulder, before moving away. He shot the boy a look.

“You three are not heroes yet. It’s clear that the League is after you. I can’t be worried for your safety and fight to my full potential.”

“I can take them.” Hizashi interjected. “I’m not good at close range fighting, and the inner city may need all the help it can get. My Quirk’s better suited to fending off long distance enemies. All of you should go. Whatever’s going on in centre, it looks bad. Shouta can take Stain to the police that way, too.”

“I don’t want to be babysat and hide!” Izuku cried, frustrated by the situation. He gestured towards Stain, who was still unconscious. “I can help! We helped!”

“Midoriya,” Aizawa interjected. “Sometimes being a hero means knowing when to take a back seat.” He gestured to the boy’s injuries, and to Iida’s non-functional hand. “You are all injured. You’re minors. We need you to do the responsible thing and get away from this city. Do you understand?”

“Yes, but-”

“Do you understand?”

Izuku sucked in a breath through his teeth. He felt cornered, parented on all sides. Finally, his resolve crumbled.

“I understand.” He said, his voice wavering. Aizawa smiled, the rare smile he only used when he was being patient. For the first time, he looked a little less stressed since getting here.

“You can trust us, Problem Child.”
Izuku looked at them, then to his friends. His voice was unhappy, but not unsure.

“I know.”

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In the heart of Hosu, everything had taken a turn for the worse. An explosion had ripped through the heart of the city, its detonator unseen. Endeavour barked orders, demanding the heroes fall back away from the enemy.

They’d levelled a building, its base crumbling away so that its main front was gone. The dust had created a cloud, Enji’s eyes and throat. He coughed, trying to see through the debris as to the cause of all this. He could only just make out the blue and red flash of the police cars, some tossed aside like small toys in the chaos. He called out an order, his voice carrying over the sudden screams and noise of brick tearing away from itself.

“Hold fire! Prepare for an attack!”

His Quirk illuminated through the smoke, and slowly as the concrete settled he could make out a figure in the centre of the destruction.

Something cold ran in Enji’s normally impassive face. The figure was small, smaller than they should’ve been. His voice held in it coiled tension, a spring loaded and waiting. He had a bad feeling, a gut instinct making itself known.

“Nobody shoot before they can make out the target! That’s a direct order!”

The first thing he made out was white hair, shining brightly in the dust. It was tied up into two twin buns, the rest of the long locks left to fall loosely in a curl around the person’s face. Half of her face was covered by a plain black kerchief, expression numb and blank. She wore nondescript clothes, a purple sweater and plain black pants. A horn sprouted from her forehead, arcing in a curved shape where bright energy crackled from it. Her hand was outstretched in the direction where the building had been, where it was still systematically dissolving before everyone’s eyes.

It was a girl. It was a child.

Behind her was a young man, thin with dark hair. A bird mask hid the bottom half of his face, though it seemed locked in perpetual clinical boredom. One hand was gloved, and this rested on the girl’s shoulder. The other was touching a slab of concrete that had fallen beside them. He leaned down, saying something unintelligible in her ear. The girl nodded silently.

Enji grit his teeth. He had a premonition of something bad happening, even before the rubble started
to move, being absorbed into the bird-man’s personal space. Into his skin.

“Everyone take cover, now!”

Endeavour moved, a flame wall dividing the general police from the two figures a split second before it happened. The rubble started to take a form, the bird man melting into it behind the girl. He became a monster before everyone’s eyes, a behemoth of stone and concrete and metal.

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“We need to get out of the city, and the quickest way to do that right now is to take the evacuation route for civilians.” Present Mic explained. He pointed to the highlighted arrows that had been painted, neon paint provided by a hero called Highlight. She specialized in rescue work, her paint unaffected by any debris or damage until she willed it away.

They followed the arrows as a group. Izuku both comforted and a little frustrated by Present Mic’s usual cheer. He didn’t feel very cheery.

In truth, his head was still swimming, trying to assimilate what he knew about Toshinori with All Might. It wasn’t easy, admittedly. Everything he’d been taught about the number one hero had been put in an unflattering light at best. His own feelings didn’t help either.

He must have been lost in thought, because Shouto nudged him gently in the ribs. Izuku startled, looking at the boy. This was a whole other set of complications, because Shouto really didn’t know much about what was going on. Even Iida knew more, and the unspoken questions were now openly written on Todoroki’s face. He kept his voice low, at least, keeping a half eye on Present Mic (who was walking ahead and chattering away).

“So… new costume?”

Izuku almost laughed, despite everything. Shouto was so awkward sometimes.

“Pulled in a favour from a friend.” He joked.

“Were they the ones that convinced you to leave UA?” He said it mildly enough, but Izuku saw the way Shouto’s hands tightened at his side.

“…No. No I did that myself.” Izuku sighed. Shouto was quiet, and in truth Izuku struggled to read his face. He always held his feelings close to his chest, and right now was no different. He always felt unless the situation was extreme that Todoroki had a mask on.

“So… you interned with your dad.”

Shouto grimaced a little. Any talk of Endeavour never failed to put that furrow between his brows, a
layer of ice in his posture.

“It was easy. He has the most connections out of any hero except maybe All Might himself.”

Izuku could sense there was more to it than that. He shot Shouto a small look, silently calling him out on the lie. The boy averted his gaze, the tips of his ears going a little pink. Izuku was delighted to realize that Shouto was embarrassed.

“I also knew he was looking over the Hosu district. Both Iida and you were acting weird, and both of you ended up here. My instincts proved right.”

“All of us were trying to cover each other’s butts.”

Shouto shook his head. The corner of his mouth twitched upwards.

“We’re all idiots. We almost got killed today.” He cast his gaze towards the shallow cut at Izuku’s side, bandaged but still bleeding sluggishly. “Without Gran Torino, things would’ve gone much worse.”

Izuku’s grin shrank, melting into something gentler.

“Without you, Gran wouldn’t have found us. This really wasn’t your fault. Iida and I were the knuckleheads that tried our hands at vigilantism. I’m sorry I got you involved.”

“I’m not.” Shouto murmured, so quietly it was almost unheard. The two fell silent at that, both embarrassed and neither really knowing what to say.

There was so much Izuku wanted to tell Todoroki, so much he was still so afraid of him knowing. Thankfully, Shouto wasn’t stupid. He was a thinker, and he’d been given plenty of evidence today that was difficult to ignore.

“You weren’t really an exchange student when you came to UA, were you?”

Izuku shook his head. Shouto didn’t have to think much about his next question.

“You showed up after the first villain attack on UA. The USJ incident.” Silence. Izuku couldn’t bring himself to look at the other boy, frightened of what he might see on his face. He kept his gaze trained to his shoes, wishing that the voice in the back of his head would shut up.

“He’s never going to look at you the same way again.

“… Did you mean it? When you said you wanted to be a hero?” This wasn’t the question Izuku had been expecting. He startled a little, green eyes widening as he looked up and met Shouto’s gaze. The boy was looking at him intently, closer than he had been before. “When you said that you wanted to be a hero because you wanted to save people who thought they couldn’t be saved. Did you mean it?”

He’d nearly forgotten what he’d said at the Sports Festival. Izuku had been in a lot of pain, running on adrenaline. He thought back to that time, how he’d been desperate to get Shouto to treat him as an equal. Wordlessly, he nodded. Shouto’s jaw firmed, and he hummed aloud in thought.
“Then I think, it doesn’t matter how you got to UA. What matters is why. And your reason, it’s as good as mine or Iida’s.”

Izuku read the unspoken between Shouto’s words, hardly daring to believe it. He didn’t care. He’d figured it out… and deliberately turned a blind eye.

“I’m not a hero. I’ve... I’ve done things that would put me in jail.” He said on reflex, because he wasn’t. He didn’t deserve that title, like Stain had said. He wasn’t anywhere near heroic.

Shouto smiled.

“Neither am I, yet. That’s why we’re here, aren’t we? Besides,” He cast a glance to Present Mic, who was currently talking Iida’s ear off about some radio channel or other. Iida was listening attentively, though he looked a little bored by it. “Someone once told me that where we came from doesn’t define who we are. It’s our actions.”

“Shouto-”

“Your Quirk is your own,” Shouto said simply. “What you do with it is what makes you a hero.”

*What you do with it.*

Izuku thought about Toshinori. He’d let him into his home, took care of his mother when she needed it, welcomed him as a student and as a paternal figure. He’d chased after him even after Izuku had yelled at him, and told him that he didn’t trust him. He was lost enough in thought, that he barely heard Present Mic’s exclamation until it was too late.

“Iida! Get down!”

Present Mic dove in front of Iida, knocking him over just as a huge shadow descended upon them. A Noumu. It was reptilian and bat-like, wings stretching and blotting out the sun. It was fast, fast enough that Izuku only had time to knock Shouto to the ground.

He felt the moment its talons wrapped around his middle, crushing him of all air.

“Midoriya!” Iida cried. Izuku couldn’t respond. He was being wrenched up into the sky, his hand outstretched towards Shouto. His friend was screaming, scrambling to grab hold of his hand that way already too far away. Izuku was already too high up, climbing higher. He wasn’t sure what he was shouting, but he could feel his mouth moving.

Present Mic was yelling, but not using his Quirk. He couldn’t, Izuku realized. Not without risk of hitting him.

The Noumu shrieked, a terrible cry that deafened Izuku’s ears. His friends became specks in an
instant, far below on the ground.
Chapter Summary

We will defeat you with:

All Might: Friendship!
Gran Torino: Harmony!
Endeavour: Incredible Violence.
Eraserhead: And Love!

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late update! Life got in the way of editing <3 Enjoy~

Don’t think about it.

Bright eyes stared out from cell bars, reflective in the dark. They blinked up at him, seeing and not seeing him at once. Izuku stumbled back reflexively, already afraid.

He’d come here to hide.

He hadn’t expected to find someone here, in the basement of the bar. Much less, had he expected to see a child his age. It was clearer the closer he got, that that’s exactly what it was.

It was a boy. A boy with batlike wings stretched out behind him. Sort of pudgy, though he soft in a way that meant he’d lost some weight quickly. This close, Izuku could see he was quite dirty. He looked like he’d been crying.

Something inside of him said he recognized that face, though Izuku couldn’t pinpoint from where. Everything before his life with the League was a distant memory, more of a dream sometimes. He deliberately tried to forget it, if he could.

“I know you.” He said out loud, or at least he thought he did. The eyes didn’t waver from his face. They seemed blank, confused. Hesitantly, Izuku tried again.
“Did they take you too? How long have you been down here?”

Silence. Izuku crouched down by the bars, feeling a sense of sympathy for the boy despite his quiet. There was a feeling of comraderie, the two of them stuck down here with no one and nothing looking for them. “Do you have a name at least?” He asked, eyes tracing the dark outline of the boy’s wings in the dark.

Nothing.

Izuku sighed. He might have known it was too much to hope for, to make a friend. He got to his feet, his head turning towards where he’d come. He thought he knew the way back, and Shigaraki was probably angry enough that he’d stormed off by now. He’d avoided going to the other room for another day, at least. He was just about to leave when a voice spoke in the darkness.

“Tsubasa.”

Izuku paused, he turned to look at the kid, whose lost gaze had focused on him wearily. His voice was coarse, like he hadn’t used it very much recently.

“My name’s Tsubasa. They took me from my mum.”

The name rang a bell, somewhere deep in the corner of Izuku’s mind. A feeling of unease swept over him.

The boy continued to look at him dully, before finally turning away. His wings curled about him, a shield from the rest of the world. Nothing Izuku could say or do convinced him to move again.

Izuku never saw that boy again. Even when he came back a day later, only an empty cell remained. He told himself it was a ghost, and tried not to think about it.

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Eri had always believed that she was cursed.

It was a thought that she could remember having since a young age, since Overhaul had taken her in. It was a belief that she’d kept to herself, like she kept the distant memories she had of her father. Those were getting fuzzier, and sometimes the reminder helped remind her of what happened when she used her Quirk. People got hurt. She couldn’t control it, but that didn’t really matter did it? The end result was the same.

Chisaki in a way fixed that. Her Quirk took a lot of energy from her, and with the blood tests as well as his Quirk Eri rarely was unable to get control of her Quirk. She was glad, even if the experiments hurt. She could exist without hurting others, without hurting Izuku. Her brother had made the pain worth it, because if she was weak then she could befriend him and he’d make it better.

His leaving had broken her heart. Eri didn’t think she really knew what love was, before. She’d read
about it, but hadn’t really bothered to give it much thought. Usagi’s love for Tuxedo Mask hadn’t mattered to her, a romantic but vague concept. She’d identified more with Usagi’s love for her daughter, Chibi Moon. She loved her brother in a way that she couldn’t remember ever loving anyone before. To Eri, Izuku was the promise that she could get better, that she was better.

Then he’d left, and Chisaki had told her that he wasn’t coming back for her. That no one cared. She hadn’t believed it, hadn’t wanted to. Who would want to believe something that terrible? Love didn’t leave someone behind. Izuku had promised.

But he hadn’t come back.

Even when Chisaki told her that she was ready to meet Sensei, that he wanted to talk to her. Eri hadn’t wanted to, she knew that Izuku was afraid of him. She knew that people who visited Sensei didn’t always come back. She’d curled up on that cot that night, hands clasped together and her face pressed against her pillow. She’d wished and wished and wished that her brother would come back, that he’d tell her that he’d never stopped looking.

Sensei had told her the truth, shown her. The video footage of the Sports Festival had made something in Eri twist until she felt like she was going to be sick. She couldn’t stop clutching her stomach, alone in the dark, sterile room with a monster. Her brother looked happy. He was a student at UA, a hero. He’d forgotten all about her, wasn’t looking for her at all.

*I’m sorry it turned out like this, my dear.*

Eri hadn’t been able to respond to Sensei, it felt like something was choking her in the darkness. She shut her eyes, trying to block out the imprinted image of Izuku’s exhilarated grin as he won the obstacle course.

Like silk, Sensei’s voice permeated her panic.

*I can bring him back to you, if you help. You’re so strong, Eri. I could show you just how strong you can be. I can show you how to control your Quirk, how to not be afraid of it. You’re special, Eri.*

Despite her fear, a part of her couldn’t help but listen. It was what she’d always wanted to hear. The more she listened, the more the fear melted into something bitter and angry.

*He left you. He left you and didn’t even care enough to find you.*
Standing here, the dust and debris starting to clear, Chisaki’s hand tightening its grip on her shoulder, Eri felt only rage. These people had taken her brother away from her. These heroes were looking at her with fear, and she couldn’t help but let her mouth curl into a snarl.

She was no Sailor Moon.

But maybe, she could settle for being Dark Lady, and take her brother back.

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“What do you see?!”

Toshinori called up, unable to look down if he wanted to balance his leap. Shouta was unable to keep up with the speed he and Gran could normally move. As a result, Toshinori had offered a boost. The man was perched on his back, goggles on and long hair blown back from his face. He leaned forward, trying to make out the scene ahead of them. His voice was tense.

“Hard to tell, there’s a lot of debris. Wait- looks like some sort of physical Quirk. The villain’s changed shape into some sort of rock monster.”

“Endeavour?”

“Keeping his distance. I don’t know why he’s calling for a fallback of forces- Shit.”

The curse was one of surprise, and stress. Toshinori rarely heard Shouta swear. He exchanged a glance with Gran Torino out of the corner of his eye. His teacher’s jaw tightened.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s a kid,” Shouta growled, half disbelief and half anger. “A kid and another villain, probably a handler of some kind. They’re using their Quirks together to turn the villain into some sort of monster.”

Toshinori felt his blood turn to ice.

There were a few rules commonly accepted amongst heroes. With the rise of publicity, video footage, and public opinion readily posted, a big one was never doing something that could potentially be seen as doing harm. Facing off against a child was basically a PR agent’s worst nightmare.

Endeavour wasn’t patient, either.

“He’s not going to hold back long.” Gran Torino commented, echoing Toshinori’s thoughts.

“He’s never had to. Shouta,” Toshinori felt Shouta’s hands tighten on his shoulders, wordlessly acknowledging him. “I’m going to drop you a little away from the fight. You’re suited best for
negotiation or capture. I need you to try to talk to the child while I distract the villain.”

“What if he doesn’t want to be distracted?” Shouta asked.

“I’m not going to give him much other choice.” Toshinori confessed. He wasn’t going to let Enji turn this into an uglier fight than it needed to be.

“You know who she is, right?” Shouta asked, his voice tight. Toshinori didn’t reply, his thoughts on Izuku. The boy couldn’t know that his friend was here, or he’d come running. He half thought that this had been the League’s intention, all along.

“Try talking to her. Convince her if she can be reasoned with that Midoriya would want her to come with us.”

They were getting closer to the incident, and the noise was growing. The sound of cement tearing away from itself was deafening. Toshinori held inside of him the only reassurance that Izuku was far away, and that no matter how this event happened, he was safe.

Now he just needed to stop a rock monster while Eraserhead convinced a six-year-old to put down a building.

*Easy, right?*

****

Rubble dust exploded as Endeavour’s fist connected with the stone monster’s, flames exploding up the snakelike creature’s body. It roared, the sound both human and animal as it broke apart only to rearrange itself before his eyes. It was fast, strong and basically regenerative in nature. Enji was beginning to lose patience with the whole situation. Holding back was creating more problems than solving them.

The little girl kept rearranging the landscape, forcing it backwards and forwards in time so that Endeavour could scarcely trust the pavement beneath his feet. Each leap forward meant he had to trust that his landing wouldn’t end in a steep fall- he couldn’t fly after all, only blast his way forward up into the air. He’d nearly landed on top of police officers twice now, and anyone who didn’t have a Quirk was already injured or had turned tail.

A part of him chafed at the idea that a *child* was making grown men cower like mice. A greater part of him was filled with fury at how *he* had to keep his cool. As if being delicate in a terrorist situation ever worked. The girl knew he had to hold back, and she wasn’t shy about flaunting it. Every block he took up to rescue civilians she used to touch another building, fence or pipeline, sending it twisting and bending back time to its default pieces.
Then the monster would eat it, the villain that had changed his shape. He was the real problem. Every attempt Enji made to capture the girl, subdue her was met with an attack from the creature. Every blast of his flames did little to this thing, hurting it but not damaging it permanently. It was infuriating, and Endeavour burned with the knowledge he just wasn’t fast enough, if he wasn’t giving it all he could.

His flames burned higher as the ground shook with a familiar landing sound. All Might’s signature laugh made the police officer working beside Enji openly cry in relief.

“Th-Thank God-”

“Shut up.” Enji growled, sweat plastered to the back of his neck. He blasted back the stone monster again, using the brief respite to turn to All Might.

He’d brought reinforcements, though it was an odd choice. Eraserhead and some old hero in a bright yellow costume. It wouldn’t have been his first choice, but he wasn’t usually a moron.

All Might’s booming voice had a way of rallying people. Slowly, the chaos of the event seemed to quiet as heads turned towards him, unconsciously holding their attention in a way that Enji had never been able to master.

“It will be Ok! I Am Here- and have brought reinforcements! We’ve come with a plan!”

“Of course you have a plan.” Enji muttered, too low to hear.

“Eraserhead, you’re going to work on talking with the girl and negotiating with her. I’m going to keep the villain distracted with Gran Torino and work on getting him away from civilians. Endeavour, do you have anything to add?”

“My vote is on treating them both like villains. The girl’s Quirk is too strong and she’s too angry to be reasoned with. She’s already hurt five officers and nearly killed eight civilians who couldn’t get out of the way fast enough. The rock monster’s fast.”

“Your opinion is noted, but I’m willing to try my luck.” Eraserhead spoke blandly, but his eyes were glued on the girl with pinpoint intensity. Endeavour snorted.

“Suit yourself, you get killed then it’s on you.”

Endeavour rolled his shoulders, cracking his neck side to side. If he was going to do this, he might as well get it over with.

“Just try to stay out of my way.”

All Might’s smile didn’t waver, but it took on a false tilt.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” He assured.
“Target’s been collected.”

The voice came from the shadow of the bar. A moment later, Dabi stepped into view. He was dressed in a thick jacket, the cold outside following him in with a gust of wind as the door closed behind him. He offered a mocking grin towards Shigaraki.

“All according to plan, Boss.”

“Don’t patronize me, Dabi.” Shigaraki voice was pleased, though he did his best to hide it. He sat up from the bar stool he was slouched on, the hand masking his face hiding the glee in his eyes. The habitual scratching at his neck slowed, and stopped. “He’s been detained, then?”

“Locked up downstairs. He’s unconscious, right now.” Dabi paused, blue eyes casting their gaze to the floor as if considering his words carefully. “Our distraction… is working well. A little too well. All Might’s arrived on the scene.” Dabi quirked a brow in thought. “You might get him coming after you for this, you know. Our informant’s told us that he’s developed a fondness for the boy.”

Some of the joy faded, replaced with visible disgust. It didn’t last for long, though. Shigaraki waved one hand in dismissal, still practically purring in satisfaction over a plan gone through.

“Let him come. Sensei’s body is healed, and we have more than enough of us to ruin All Might’s day.” His grin returned. “Midoriya’s a bargaining chip! It’s not like he’ll just let his newfound protégé die, and he doesn’t know what the boy is to us.” He laughed, the sound wicked and dark as he turned towards Kurogiri. “Bring in Eri and Overhaul. We have what we came for.”

Kurogiri set down the glass he was polishing. His lantern-like eyes burned as his Quirk enveloped the corner of the bar, drawing himself inwards.

“As you wish, sir.” He disappeared, folding inwards like a piece of paper until there was nothing but the glass sitting upturned on the table.

“You’ve got your fingers in a lot of pots.” Dabi spoke after the villain disappeared. His tone was mild, but Shigaraki didn’t take it lightly. Red eyes peered out from behind the hand on his face.

“Having Midoriya taken in by UA has put a wrench in many of Sensei’s plans. Though it wasn’t my fault, it’s my job to ensure that things remain as on track as possible in the future.” He paused meaningfully, four fingers splayed on the bar table. “I trust that Endeavour’s involvement in recent developments won’t cause you to act… rashly?”
Dabi’s mouth curled upwards. The scars on his face twisted themselves, even as the coldness in his eyes burned brighter.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, boss.”

“See that you don’t.” Shigaraki asserted. Dabi turned to go, taking it as his dismissal.

Shigaraki reached out towards the glass, lifting it up for inspection. Three fingers turned into five, the glass disintegrating in his palm.

“And, Dabi?” He called, making the man pause. Dabi swung around to face him. Blue flames flickered up his arms, a silent warning. “I know you have a soft spot for children… See that it doesn’t get in the way when it comes to direct orders again. Next time a student from UA sticks their noses where it doesn’t belong… kill them.”

Dabi wasn’t smiling. His gaze was unreadable, hands buried in his pockets. One finger closed around the edge of the playing cards he habitually carried on his person.

“Understood.”

****

“Eijirou? Come downstairs for a minute?”

Eijirou popped an earbud out, realizing his mom was calling him. He’d been absorbed in trying to study. Final exams were coming up, and despite the hectic nature of the last few weeks there was no avoiding them. In many ways official testing stressed him out more than interning with pros. He hated math.

He set the books aside, sighing through his teeth and rubbing at his eyes. Habitually, he checked his phone. Katsuki often messaged him, whether to bully him into focusing on his studies and not the internet or to in his own Bakugou sort of way ask how he was doing. A blank screen greeted him. Eijirou didn’t think too much of it, despite the anomaly of it. Sometimes Katsuki also spent hours training, and wouldn’t check his phone. He couldn’t blame the guy, since the workouts paid off certainly.

The thought made the boy blush, smacking the top of his head to disperse the route those thoughts liked to take. Eijirou got to his feet, padding barefoot down the stairs to see what his mom wanted. He didn’t realize how stressed she’d sounded until he came around to the sight of her frozen in the living room, her hands pressed to her mouth as she looked at their television.

His mom wasn’t a tiny woman, broad-shouldered and tall to boot. She rivaled his height, but as she looked on at the news Eijirou had the frightening discovery that she seemed small. She gripped his forearm as he came towards her gesturing towards the TV. Eijirou saw it was the news, and took in the story. He felt shock and ice fill his veins, a blank sort of terror.
Hosu was under attack by Noumu. At its centre, a showdown between All Might and two lone villains was at its head. That mattered, but it didn’t matter as much to Eijirou what his brain couldn’t get away from, was the friends he knew were there. Iida, Midoriya (though he hadn’t been seen in a while, and it was a thin hope), and Shouto.

“The fighting’s been going on for a few hours.” His mom said. Her voice sounded tight with worry. “I didn’t notice- I was cooking and didn’t check any news reports. Ei, you know people in the disaster right now?”

Eijirou felt his throat was tightening into a noose. His panicked thoughts realized that he hadn’t heard from Katsuki since the disaster began. He pressed a hand to his own mouth, his pulse hammering in his chest.

“I have to go.” He blurted, making his mom’s grip on his arm tighten.

“Hosu’s blocked off. It’s not safe-”

“Not to Hosu. I need to go see a friend. He’s… Someone he cares about might be in trouble, and he doesn’t have a lot of impulse control.”

His mom looked at him, her brows pinched and unhappy. Her grip loosened, instead comforting him by running a hand along his arm.

“You’re back by sunset.”

Eijirou nodded, relief hitting him like a brick. He hugged her, his grip tight about her middle. His mom stroked the back of his head gently, her voice gentle.

“He’s your friend with the explosion Quirk, isn’t he?”

Eijirou nodded, his face burning at having been caught out. She sighed.

“Be careful? You give a lot of yourself when you love someone.”

“I-I don’t.”

“Ei. Be careful. Okay?” She looked at him, red eyes so like his own that Eijirou could barely look at her. She pushed him gently towards the door. “Go. And tell your friend that if he needs to stay here tonight, then he’s welcome to. Really, any of your friends are.”

“You mean that?”

His mom shrugged, tucking a lock of hair behind one ear.

“Any friend of yours is a friend of ours. Besides,” She grinned “I’ve seen the boy- He looks like he’d be willing to eat all the leftovers you and your brothers leave.”

“You make food for ten most days, to be fair.”

“Go.” She waved him off. “I’ll keep an eye on the news and tell you if anything new pops up. Keep
“I love you.” Eijirou said, meaning it more than he ever had before.

“I love you too.” She replied. “Stay safe, okay?”

He nodded, thumbing the edge of his phone in his pocket. He just hoped the Bakugou-Shaped red flag flashing in the back of his mind was a false alarm.

“I will.”
Clinging To You

Chapter Summary

Aizawa, being lifted into the sky: "We're SOAAAAARING, FLYYYYYYYIN'-"

Chapter Notes

Ok so like. I know I've done this twice in a row where I've posted on Tuesday and I will preface this by saying I'm probably gonna switch for the next little bit to instead of "Every monday" just "once during the week at some point". School's kickin' my ass, guys <3 hope you understand.

A separate note is that this chapter has warnings for ideation of self harm but no actual action on said thoughts. Katsuki's section if y'all want to read up until that last point. Stay safe, care for yourselves and if you think you'll be triggered just ask in the comments for a recap and I can do that for ya. There's nothing graphic in terms of action for that, though~

Happy Thankgivin' y'all, and if you don't celebrate then I hope you had a good long weekend.

“I have breaking news that All Might, Eraserhead and an unknown hero have arrived on the scene! All Might's taking on the shape-changing villain- he's drawing him away from the police! In all my years as a broadcaster I can safely say I've never been so relieved!”

When One For All was activated to its greatest potential, Toshinori was faster than the bullet train. He’d tested it once in his teen years, racing against everything and anything he could think of. In a pinch, he could make himself faster than sound.

The rock monster didn’t stand a chance against it, though it was making up for it with sheer tenacity. Regeneration, even a false one like this one, was difficult to defeat. Toshinori had dealt with this before though, with the Noumu at USJ. He just needed to be faster. His time limit was a shining beacon in the back of his mind, a red warning light. He needed this to end soon. He just hoped that Shouta was confident in his ability to convince the young girl that this was a path she needed to leave.
He knuckled down, and pushed his Quirk to one hundred percent. Plus Ultra.

****

Shouta was a hero that had dealt with more children than he could count, at various stages of their lives. It was a career move that he hadn’t expected to embrace, and one that his own past self would have sneered at. A teacher? *Him*? That was a job for Hizashi, or someone at least more personable.

It’d taken him a long time to take pride in his title: A UA teacher. It’d taken longer to understand *why* he was a success story. Despite his appearance, despite his grouchiness and aloof appearance, kids seemed drawn to him. He’d never been able to explain it to someone, even when some of his colleagues demanded it. Hizashi had seemed outright baffled the first few times a child had confided in Shouta instead of someone more approachable. Not meanly of course, but with the poorly-hidden perplexion of someone who felt they were *better* at understanding children. Maybe they were, and maybe that was why Shouta drew them near.

He could understand children who didn’t *act* like children best. Those numbers were disproportionately high in student heroes. They were the kids that had been forced to grow up a little, be it because of their family life, what they’d experienced, or who they were as people. Those were the people he drew, from the first day Hizashi had spoken to him (an orphan with a loud mouth) to Katsuki when he was his angriest, to Izuku.

As All Might distracted the rock monster, Shouta couldn’t help but notice that this girl’s eyes were the same as his students when he’d first met them. They were shuttered, angry. The hurt was buried underneath a layer of bitterness that six year olds seldom had.

Shouta’s capture bandages uncoiled themselves from his neck, like live snakes twisting in the air. Eri’s Quick seemed to suck things into it, his hair being tugged this way and that by the wind. It felt like if he wasn’t careful, his feet might be swept up from underneath him. He grit his teeth, getting closer.

Eri saw him, her face twisting in fear and anger. She crouched and touched the ground with her hands, horn on her forehead sprouting taller. Shouta activated his Quirk, the familiar burn at the back of his eyelids a warning to his own time limit. Eri’s Quirk was snuffed out, the horn on her head shrinking back a little. She let out a wordless noise of frustration, hands coming up as if she could physically hold him back.

“Leave me alone!” She shrieked “Stay back o-or I’ll! I’ll hurt you!”

“Eri!” At the sound of her name, the girl startled. She looked at Shouta a little more clearly, peering out from behind her hands. Shouta didn’t want to use his capture weapon if he didn’t have to, there were too many cameras around, too big of a risk of hurting her. He tried to keep his voice measured, the corner of his vision always keeping an eye out to make sure All Might was keeping the rock
He took a half step closer. “You’re Eri, right? Izuku Midoriya’s friend?”

Something flickered on the girl’s face, hesitation and bitterness mingling. She didn’t answer, her lips tightening so that her lips were white from lack of blood. Shouta dared to take another step forward, and she backed up a half step. His eyes were burning.

“He’s been looking for you. I’m happy to see you’re not hurt. My name’s Shouta Aizawa, I’m one of his teachers.”

“You took him away.” Eri muttered, her hands lowering. Her confusion was beginning to seep through, her voice softening. “He’s not looking for me. No one’s looking for me.”

“That’s not true.” Shouta denied, something distant in his chest tightening. The scene was loud, but he kept his voice quiet. “From the start, Midoriya’s been looking for you. I have the notes he took to prove it.”

“Liar!” She snapped, and Shouta’s eyes finally gave in. He blinked, moving instinctively. The pavement ripped out from under him a moment later as he rolled, quickly reactivating his Quirk.

Eri had torn the pavement around her, until she stood on an elevated slab. She was breathing hard, sweat trickling down the side of her face as she glared at him. Her hands were trembling, still pressed into the jut of pavement. A canyon now separated them, leaking pipes and torn electrical cables sparking between. Shouta could feel his heart in his mouth when he saw how close her feet were to the edge.

“All adults are liars!” Eri spat, red eyes burning. “First my brother, then Him and now you! You all lie!” She shrieked, and Shouta saw the police monitoring the edges of the fight flinch at the sound. “You lie and lie and lie and hurt people and make my brother hurt others! I hate you for taking him away!”

Shouta kept his distance, eyeing the blue crackle of electricity illuminating the pit between them. The edge that Eri was standing on wasn’t stable, it was shedding small rocks that clattered to the ground. Without her Quirk, she looked as she was- a little girl who was very angry and scared. Even if he wanted to now, he couldn’t use his capture weapons, not without risking electrocuting himself or her. Shouta wracked his brains, trying to think of a way to her without frightening her. He could only freeze her Quirk so many times, and All Might even with Endeavour’s help wouldn’t be able to hold the rock monster off forever.

What would Hizashi do. What would Toshinori do.

What could he say that could convince her that a stranger was trustworthy, compared to what she knew? That they could smile and help when faced with something like this?

That’d never been what Midoriya had liked about you, though.

His thoughts answered. He liked you for your honesty, because you’d tell him right from wrong and good from bad.
It seemed so simple, and normally Shouta would be unsure of himself. Honesty wasn’t what children often heard. He’d often look for Hizashi as a compass, something to soften his words and make them palatable.

Hizashi wasn’t here right now.

“You’re scared.” Shouta said, because it was true. Eri looked at him, chest puffed up and conflicted. “I’m scared too.” Shouta admitted, because he was. She looked at him like he was a strange animal, like what he said didn’t make sense to her, like she was asking ‘Why?’

“I’m scared that you’re going to fall, that you’re going to hurt yourself. I’m scared that I’ll get hurt. That I won’t be able to take you away from that man. He hurts you, I know that. Midoriya told me what Overhaul’s been doing to you, and to him too.”

Eri sucked in a small breath. She seemed small as she looked away, down at her arms. She clutched her hands tightly to her chest, restlessly flexing her fingers. Shouta took that as a cue to continue.

“I’m afraid that my friends will die here. That Midoriya will come here and get hurt or killed trying to help you. I’m scared you’ll do something that you won’t be able to take back.”

“Why do you care?” She shot back, but it wasn’t angry. Eri’s voice was filled with confusion, and a sort of desperation as she craned her head as if to look for Overhaul.

“I care because Midoriya is my student, and I care for him. I care because he loves you, Eri. He loves you enough that he risked his life to come to this city, all to find you. I care because you need help.”

She took a step back, and flinched as the rock crumbled from under her foot. Eri wobbled, dangerously close to overbalancing. Shouta swore, but she quickly righted her footing. The wind was picking up again, and his eyes were watering badly. He needed to blink. He couldn’t.

Shouta felt the sweat clinging to the back of his neck like a second skin. He reached out a hand as if reaching for her, stopping by the skin of his teeth. She stared at his outstretched hand, eyes wide and uncertain. Shouta saw one hand uncurl, hesitantly reaching out even as the pedestal she stood on began to crumble away.

A black, inky void began to permeate in the sky.

*Kurogiri, the void villain.*

Shouta swore more loudly, his head whipping towards the rock monster. It’d shaken off All Might like a rag doll toy, launching him towards a building. Endeavour struck it across the face, and received a similar rebuttal. Its twisting, writhing front was turning back towards them. They were out of time.

Shouta turned back towards Eri, realizing his own mistake a moment too late. Her Quirk had
reactivated, and with it her fear. The horn on her head had sprouted, the concrete unravelling to build her pedestal higher so that she was headed towards the portal. Shouta did the only thing he could think of:

He slung his capture weapon towards her, wrapping itself about her wrist. Eri stumbled, nearly unbalancing herself from the pedestal. Her head snapped towards him, her mouth parted in surprise and stunned terror.

She didn’t unwind his capture weapon. The pedestal kept building and climbing. Shouta quickly was running out of rope, the option to be to let go or to be swept up with it. He could see Eri watching him, panic clear on her face as she knelt against the pedestal, her arm outstretched towards him.

Shouta’s hands tightened their grip on his capture weapon. He was hoisted into the sky, the joints in his shoulders wrenching painfully as together they rose into the inky black.

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“If you’re going to be an underground hero, then I you need some sort of insurance, don’tcha’ think?”

It was the day after graduation, they’d all gone out for drinks. Then, it’d just been the three of them: Himself, Nemuri, and Hizashi. Toshinori had still been a legend, golden and untouchable. Shouta had barely given him much thought, more interested in his new and budding career.

He peered at Nemuri through his veil of dark hair, cradling a beer in one hand. They were celebrating, and though he didn’t drink much Shouta did like the way the cold glass felt. The bar was stuffy, too many drunk people and not enough air conditioning to get by.

“What do you mean?”

Nemuri shrugged. In her civilian outfit, she was pretty modest. Her hair was tied back at the neck, her regular glasses making her look a little bookish. She swirled her wine around as she thought aloud.

“I mean; you don’t work in a team or pair like most of us. What happens if you get kidnapped? Or injured? How are people going to be able to find you?”

Shouta hadn’t much thought about it, admittedly. The whole point of being an underground hero was secrecy. People weren’t supposed to know where he was, much less where he was going. He sipped his drink, mulling it over.

“I know some underground heroes give good friends or family a tracker of some sort. Or a distress signal they can send on their phones. The problem comes when that code gets shared somehow or the hero that’s been captured is forced to give it to their captor.”
“Still, might be a good idea.” Hizashi piped up. He was usually the first to get drunk, and the flush on his face was telltale. His volume was also a dead giveaway. He wrapped an arm around Shouta’s shoulder, practically strangling him with the force of his hug. Idiot. “I don’t like the idea of you vanishing without either of us knowin’ you’re ok, ya feel? We loooooooove you after all!” He laughed cheerfully, pinching the corner of Shouta’s cheek. Shouta shoved him off, a patient smile being fought back as Hizashi and Nemuri both cackled together.

It wasn’t a bad idea, the more he thought about it. As to who he might trust well, the two people he trusted most in the world were right here. In the dim light of the bar Shouta sipped his drink and considered the concept, and the startling realization that he’d done what he never thought he’d manage to do: Make friends.

Somewhere, the thirteen-year-old he used to be would’ve been so happy, and so confused. He continued to sip, beginning to flush himself and weirdly, ridiculously content. People were going to miss him. People wanted to know where he went. What were the odds?

****

Katsuki had been going through what could only be described as the worst few weeks possibly created in human history. If he could rate this stretch of time on a scale of one to ten, he’d probably nuke the entire internship project from the get-go and call it a day.

First, Deku had the gall to vanish.

That was bad enough, worse because to the police it seemed like it’d all been consensual on Deku’s part. Which meant the little dirtbag had the gall to ditch UA because he hadn’t felt like he could hack it. After he had stuck his neck out for him. Katsuki fed that anger admittedly. It was easier to be angry, instead of reliving the feeling of confusion and fear when Eraserhead had announced the news to the class. His hands had begun to tremble under his desk, palms sweating as he pressed them down against his knees until his knuckles turned white with the pressure.

No one had been able to give him even half-assed answers, and a part of him had been screaming since that moment that it’d happened again, right in front of him. He’d been unable to stop Deku from being taken after all, even when he should’ve learned from the first experience.

He’d gone home that night and blown up the trees behind their house until he could feel the splinters in his hands, and then screamed and shouted until his mom had come out and told him that he needed to throw his ass into the shower before the neighbours thought the wrong thing.
His house had been walking on eggshells ever since, his dad too damn afraid of confrontation to bring it up, his mom going overboard. She heard him waking up from nightmares, struggling not to blast his sheets to cinders like he so often had when he was a kid.

She’d gone ahead and booked him another two therapist appointments to add on to his once every two weeks. That had started another screaming match. Katsuki could admit he’d lost that one.

Then there’d been the internship. He hadn’t really been paying attention, not as much as he should have. With the anger came procrastination for any paperwork, anything that made him sit still and focus on something that wasn’t smashing a tree or a training dummy to pieces. In the end he’d gone with the one his mom had suggested, and should’ve known that she was coming from the standpoint of who she knew.

His mom was a fashion designer for hero costumes. Who else would she fucking pick but Best Jeanist?

Katsuki spent two days with the man and never in his life had he ever wanted anything more than to snap every toothed comb he could find in Japan, no, The World. He’d come home each night with his hair stuck in place, an ache in his ribs that had nothing to do with his binder, and a bitterness that was quickly needing more than just running as an outlet.

To top it all off, Kirishima was also interning. Which meant he didn’t have time for Katsuki’s whining. Writing letters felt like a poor substitute, when he couldn’t just go over and yell about his problems with his friend like he wanted to.

In short he was sleep deprived, disappointed by his internship, and lonely. Most of all, he hated that when he was like this his brain itched, looking down at his arms and feeling the nasty urge to make all of this hone down to blaming himself. Talking wasn’t going to do shit about the guilt that was drowning him. There was a much more effective way to block that out.

But hurting himself could mean he’d lose the hero internship, if they deemed him unstable to work. Hurting himself meant he’d have to deal with Kirishima’s reaction to it. Hurting himself meant he wouldn’t be able to look his dad in the eye until it healed.

He went to therapy. Shitty Mr. Kyokan gently asked him in not as many words if he thought medication might help him. Katsuki told him to shove it. Mr. Kyokan had merely looked at him, disappointed in his behaviour but saying nothing. He adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses, and set his notepad aside.
“I can’t stop you from doing something, and I unless you express immediate wish to harm yourself or another person I can’t share your mental state with your parents, as requested by you when these sessions began. But Katsuki, I’m asking you as your therapist, and I’d like to think a sort of mentor, to try and think before you do something impulsive. It’s not your fault that Midoriya made the decision to take off on his own, but you don’t have to. You are both still kids, and when the time comes, the pro heroes rely on you getting somewhere safe so they can do their jobs. You need to learn to let go, for Midoriya’s safety and your own. Do you understand?” He stressed, trying to catch his patient's eye.

Katsuki snorted, merely turning his head away. His therapist could be unnerving to look at directly at times, like he was seeing more than what was in front of him. He muttered something dismissive, and Mr. Kyokan sighed. He ended the session early, and Katsuki was grateful to be out from under that invasive look. What did that old man know, after all? He was right, he couldn’t tell Katsuki what to do and Katsuki didn’t have to take shit from him. He resolved himself to pushing the advice aside, hating how it made something in his gut churn and simmer.

Katsuki didn’t miss sessions, though. He kept running, sometimes with Aiko and sometimes alone. Aiko didn’t ask him too much, but he could tell she liked the running. She needed to take her mind off of Deku, too.

Then Katsuki woke up one morning, and was told he wouldn’t be going to his internship. Best Jeanist had been called away to deal with a situation that’d broken out in Hosu. Something had twisted in Katsuki’s chest at the city being named, wanting to hope but not wanting to be right. He’d turned on the news and the volume, ignoring the buzz from his phone in his pocket. He was too absorbed reading the situation, so that even his mother’s cries from the kitchen went unhead (“Katsuki? What’s happening why aren’t you getting ready for work??”).

Katsuki felt some of the numbness push itself away, the brain fog lifting. He felt his heart begin to jackrabbit. He could do something.

Finally, he could do something.

He grabbed his coat, the material feeling foreign after days of coming straight home and working out or sleeping. He tore barefoot towards the front door, slipping into shoes before his parents could realize what he was doing. It was windy outside, the breeze tugging as if urging him onward. Katsuki broke into a sprint, his Quirk sparking in his palms. He wasn’t just going to sit here and be useless. Not again.
Power In Numbers

Chapter Summary

Shouta: "The doctor says that all my bleeding's internal- that's where the blood's supposed to be!"

Chapter Notes

Enjoy the chapter-

Izuku woke up in a dark, unfamiliar room. He felt confused, his body sore and bruised up as if he’d been dropped. His head was swimming in a lurching, precarious sort of way. He gagged, dry heaving against the floor before forcing his stomach to settle.

That feeling of nausea only heightened as he realized that Shouto and Iida or Present Mic were nowhere to be found. That was when his memory started trickling back, the pieces connecting until Izuku’s hands were balling up against his chest. He didn’t know where he was, but he had a good idea. Looking around, he could see that the room he’d been left in was without windows, a single door that he stumbled towards revealing itself to be locked.

*Shit.*

He felt his heart sink into his stomach. Izuku’s Quirk began looking for any possible exit, any way out. Nothing. It was like someone converted a large closet into a jail cell, or maybe a cellar. The walls were made of concrete, and he’d been stripped of his staff. His mask lay on the ground, grinning up at him mockingly. He knew where he was. Well, he knew who had taken him. The panic he was feeling threatened to close his throat, his breathing stuttering and uneven.

If he was here, was Eri here as well?

The thought sent a mix of relief and terror through him, until Izuku really did feel like gagging. He closed his eyes, knees pressing to his chest as he tried to ground himself and stay calm. It was going to be okay. He could get out of this. He had before. People… People would come for him, this time. He tried to feel like that wasn’t just a false placation he was telling himself.
He was jarred from his thoughts by the sound of the doorknob turning. Izuku braced himself, his breath quickening as he tried to guess by the sound of it just who had come to collect him. Fear made his mouth taste like iron, and he moved as far away from the entrance as possible.

“You should’ve just come with us.”

Dabi’s voice was neutral, but it still made the hair on the back of Izuku’s neck stand on end. He’d hoped that he’d never have to look at Dabi again, or any of the League if he was being honest. Like this, cornered and out of options, it felt like he was staring into the mouth of a wolf.

Izuku tried to keep his voice steady. He was proud that it didn’t waver.

“You’ve come to get me?”

Dabi nodded, his face as impassive as always.

“The boss wants to see you. Something about you taking too much time off work.” The joke fell flat between them; it wasn’t really funny to begin with. Izuku tried to keep himself from shrinking inwards at the thought of facing Shigaraki.

“Is Eri here?” He asked, hoping against hope that Dabi would feel like humouring him.

Dabi’s brow quirked upwards. He shrugged, the motion deliberately lazy.

“She’s alive, if that’s what you want to know,” Izuku visibly swayed with relief. He hadn’t dared to think about the sharp pain that would’ve struck him had the answer been anything else. “She’s grown though, since you’ve left. She’s working with us on missions as of late. Developed a bit of a temper.” Dabi’s mouth twisted then into something dark and humorous. “It might not be the welcome back you were hoping for, if you see her.”

Izuku felt an ache in his chest, like he was being stepped on. He exhaled through his teeth, the sound shaky. He had to hold onto the fact that she was alive. That much, that was better than the alternative.

“Oh, but she brought a stowaway by accident, after our last attack. A frumpy-looking bastard that Overhaul’s been working down.” Izuku felt his blood turn to ice. His heart had climbed itself into his mouth and made a home there. Dabi was smiling, but the expression wasn’t pleasant. It was the cold smile he gave people when he was burning their house down, or when he was setting their friend on fire. “I’m told he was your teacher at UA. Eraserhead? Seems sorta fragile, for a pro hero.”

Izuku’s mind was blank, the panic white and oppressive. Anger and terror mixed itself into a bitter cocktail in his throat. He’d never felt this kind of emotion, but he knew he had it. Deep down, pressed close to the rage he felt whenever he thought too long about how he’d been left to Shigaraki’s mercy.

Something must have shown on his face, because Dabi’s grin only grew. He tilted his head in consideration.

“Never seen that look on your face before, kid. You gonna kill me? Kill the boss?” He leaned
forward a little, his voice becoming mockingly hushed. “Between you and me, I wouldn’t stop you.” The smile slipped away, coldness rushing into Dabi’s eyes. “But honestly, I don’t think you have the guts, kid. Most people who go for the hero life don’t.”

He moved out of the door frame, head tilted to the side. Dabi’s voice smoothed back into impassivity.

“I suggest you come along, Ghost. Wouldn’t want to keep your Sensei waiting. He’s visiting the good doctor right now. They seem to be getting on well.” His smile was poisonous, he turned to leave.

“Deku.” Izuku whispered, only to be heard in the quiet of his cell. Dabi paused, head cocked to one side. In his voice was a smile.

“Deku, then.”

White-knuckled, Izuku followed, knowing he had no choice. Together, they went to meet what was waiting for him beyond the door.

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“You know, Quirks like yours are incredibly rare.”

The voice came from a silhouette, framed by light in the open door. Shouta squinted, trying to make out the features of the man. His head hurt, blood was trickling down one side of his face. He woke tied to a chair, his hands zip-tied tightly together and his legs tied to the chair legs. The bite of the ties dug into his wrists as he strained against them, testing their strength. He was in a laboratory of some kind, bubbling beakers and an empty, cold metal table stretched out before him.

A young man stepped into the room, and Shouta could see him more clearly in the shadows. Gold eyes peered out from a face half-covered by a bird’s mask, reminding Shouta distinctly of an old plague doctor. He waved, hands cloaked in bright yellow gloves. “Don’t bother trying to use it in this case though. I gave you a little something to keep that erasing ability under wraps for now.”

It was true, Shouta realised as he automatically tested that claim. He tried to activate his Quirk, and found it fuzzy and difficult to grasp. He squinted as the effort sent a pressure headache shooting across his temples.

“Where’s Izuku and Eri?” He asked, ignoring the man’s attempts at light conversation. Shouta had a bad feeling about the guy, despite how young he looked. There was something dead and unnerving in his gaze. The young man’s face was hidden behind the mask, but he got the feeling that he was frowning as he drew closer to Shouta, moving around the empty metal table.
“Now *that* name you aren’t supposed to know. I think Midoriya’s got a little bit of a loose mouth on him, since he fell into your lives?”

He phrased it as a question, but Shouta wasn’t biting onto the bait. He kept his silence, hunching into his seat as he started testing the binds at his feet: Also tight.

“Did he tell you any other secrets that he should’ve kept with the League I wonder?” The man leaned against the edge of the table, golden eyes meeting Shouta’s as he thought aloud. His fingers tapped restlessly against the metal surface. They only tapped faster as Shouta continued to be silent, and when it was clear he wasn’t giving an answer the man sighed.

“You can call me Overhaul. I like my patients to have a good relationship with me before I start on them. Since you’re not going to talk, I think we’ll be getting to know each other fairly well. In a way, it’s fortuitous. I’d requested your kidnapping at the beginning, during the USJ incident. It didn’t pan out then, and I was disappointed. Your Quirk… it’s something I admire, you see.”

Overhaul leaned closer, suddenly in Shouta’s personal space. He resisted the urge to flinch, instead meeting those gold eyes with his own even glare.

“I’m going to show Eri what happens when to people who try to be heroes, and then I’m going to experiment on you and your wonderful Quirk. When all’s said and done, I think it’ll reach Izuku just what the consequences were for his little running away stint.”

He took off one of the yellow gloves, his pale palm hovering over Shouta’s face. The man did rear back this time, uncomfortably reminded of just what Shigaraki could do, what he’d almost *done* to Tsuyu at the USJ incident. He was thinking of a lot of things suddenly, like how badly the zipties bit into his wrists when he thrashed, or how sour Overhaul’s breath was near his face. He was thinking about the sweat collecting between his shoulder blades and what exists were around him and where Eri and Izuku might *be* in a building he didn’t know the layout of. Shouta was thinking about Toshinori, and Hizashi, and Nemuri, how he’d left his tracking device with the person he’d trusted the most since middle school. He thought about how he hoped against hope that they’d be fast enough to save Midoriya and that little girl before they were hurt for trying to get help.

Mostly, he thought about how easy it'd be to strangle the bastard in front of him, if he had his capture weapon still on him. Probably unherolike, in retrospect.

“I’d advise you to stay still if you can, Eraserhead.” Overhaul murmured. “Let’s see just what I find inside of you, when I take you apart.”

****
In the dark, Eri trembled. She’d been put here, after she’d brought the hero with the bandages to their hideout. It was a punishment, she hated the darkness and this place had no windows save for a sliver of light from the bottom of the door.

It was so cold. She shivered, and if she could see Eri would’ve expected to see her own breath. She wondered to herself how long she was going to be left here.

She’d never directly disobeyed Overhaul before. Her sudden burst of independence was alien to her, driven half by impulse and half by terror. She hadn’t really meant to hang onto Eraserhead’s bandage, dragging him into Kurogiri’s portal with the rest of them. She hadn’t really been thinking at all, beyond her own hurt and how his words made her hurt a little less. She regretted it now, though not exactly because she was afraid of punishment for it. She regretted it because she had seen the glint in Chisaki’s eyes, the delight under his faux-annoyance with her disobedience.

He wanted Eraserhead for some reason. Why, Eri wasn’t sure, but she could guess. He had a Quirk like hers, a Quirk that erased other people’s Quirks. It didn’t even have to be accessed through his blood, only a look giving him the power to disarm someone completely. It was the perfect Quirk, for what Chisaki wanted.

Eri’s knees came to her chest, a lock of her hair nibbled at by the edge of her mouth as she thought. It slowly came to her that they would all be in trouble, if Chisaki managed to take Eraserhead’s Quirk from him. He was going to do Bad Things. He’d already done them with Eri’s Quirk, and it was imperfect. What would he do with an ability that was all he was hoping for? Eri shuddered, hot tears rushing to the back of her eyelids as she pressed her face to her knees.

She was still angry, and still hurt, but she missed Izuku. He’d always been able to tell her what was the right choice, what to do. He’d always been there to tell her it was going to be alright. Now he was here, but she hadn’t even been allowed to see him. Chisaki had told her that he wasn’t ready yet, that he still needed ‘convincing’. She knew what that meant, that they were hurting him. The thought filled her with guilt, black and crushing.

It was her fault Eraserhead was here, she truly believed now that he had been trying to help her. Whether it was because of a debt to someone or out of the goodness of his heart she wasn’t sure, but no one just clung to someone as they were dragged five hundred feet up in the air for no reason.

She had to do something, but she was so afraid of using her Quirk without Chisaki being there to stop her if she lost control. But… he wasn’t the only one now in this place that could stop it now. If she could get to Eraserhead… he might be able to get out by using her Quirk. She hardly dared to hope that he might take her with him, but he’d seemed like he’d wanted to before.

Eri scrubbed at her face roughly with the back of one hand. Her hair buns had fallen out a bit, and
she reached up to untwist them back down to her usual down look. She had to be brave, and though she was very scared of Chisaki and what he might do to her or Eraserhead or Izuku she knew one thing.

He was afraid of her Quirk, too. He’d tried to make her forget, but putting her here in this cell had proven that.

He was afraid of her, somewhere deep inside.

****

It was a strange sight for Ochako to see Katsuki Bakugou on her daily commute to Gunhead’s office. She’d been sent home early, something about an emergency situation that was deemed too dangerous for trainees to participate. She’d usually not take this route, but the buses were backed up because of said accident, and she was hungry. She had some leftovers in her fridge at home.

At first, she thought she’d been imagining his presence as she looked out the window. He wasn’t exactly her favourite person, and if she was looking for him it was usually to avoid him, at UA. He was mean, and proud, and prickly, and well, a *prick* ninety percent of the time. Ochako didn’t have a lot of patience for it, and she wasn’t particularly taken in by the presence Katsuki sometimes held with himself. She felt in a lot of ways he brought his misfortune on himself, being as he was, and that was something that chafed with her, given her own upbringing. She’d worked *hard* to get where she was, and Katsuki complained and complained about a life that comparatively speaking seemed like nothing.

He got blocked from a lot of group chats.

Ochako pretended not to know that it was Iida that usually ended up blocking him, usually for profanity.

So she was unsettled seeing him like this, running on the street like his life depended on it, dressed haphazardly and unkempt compared to his usual cool exterior. Something about his expression drew her attention, even as her bus slowed at a traffic light. Ochako was used to seeing him pissed, and used to seeing him indifferent. However, he nearly got himself hit by her bus, his impatience with the ‘walk’ light outlined with the impatient tapping of his foot. She watched him dart off, the wind tugging at his clothing and an unusually manic expression on his face.

*What in the world could get Bakugou to run like that?*

She thought in bewilderment.

“He was in a hurry.”

The voice came from behind her. Ochako turned, seeing an older man seated in the seat behind her. When he looked to her, Ochako saw that his eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses were colourless and milky. Still, he looked at her unerringly, as if he could see her all the same.
“I… yeah. I know him from class, he’s like that sometimes.” She said the words unthinkingly, a little thrown. Now that she thought about it, her statement wasn’t quite true, was it? Katsuki did often rush around like he had a fire under his butt, but he wasn’t usually careless.

The man smiled.

“Ah, recklessness of being young, right? Maybe he had an appointment he missed.” He turned towards the window, his reflection placid and peaceful. “I was like that when I was younger, though age makes you rethink just darting across the street like that. Still, the world always seems like it’s ending when you’re a teenager- my own niece often thinks so, I know.”

Ochako wasn’t one to normally talk to strangers on the bus, but today had been strange enough already that it felt almost appropriate.

“We’ve been through a lot lately as a school- we’re both in UA.”

“Ah, the school that’s been targeted by villains? Scary stuff, lately.” He adjusted his glasses, seeming to look at her more closely “You were the girl at the tournament with the gravity Quirk, right? You put up quite a fight against that boy with the exploding sweat.”

“We both fought hard.”

It was the first time Ochako had admitted that, up until that point. Bakugou had fought hard in their match, and maybe she hadn’t seen it because of her own desperation to win. She didn’t have a lot of sympathy for him, but the truth was that he was the best because he was constantly working. When she put in extra hours at the training facility, he was often there, beating a punching bag like his life depended on it. At the time, the sight had irritated her. The jealous voice in the back of her head asked why he worked so hard, when he was already so far ahead. She’d worked harder because of it, coming in mornings when she could as well as nights. Every time Aizawa-Sensei had asked who wanted extra time for tutoring, or for self-study, Bakugou often silently sat in his desk so that he could learn more while others left. Everything he did was done with intensity. Calculated intensity, but unwavering in brutal enthusiasm.

She thought about it, and the longer she thought about it Bakugou’s hastiness didn’t sit well with her. It didn’t sit well at all, actually.

“Please excuse me, I’m going to check and make sure he’s okay.” She smiled at the man, and turned to rifle through her bag.

She didn’t usually turn on data for her phone, but something tugged at Ochako’s gut, a niggling premonition. She flipped open her phone, turning it on and immediately receiving half a dozen texts from the UA groupchat.
**Sonic the Hedgehog:** I’m writing this to let you know that me and Shouto are okay and with the paramedic. Do not try to come to Hosu, the entire place is on lockdown.

**GlitterForce:** We heard that you saw monsieur Izuku?? What is happening?

**Sonic the Hedgehog:** It’s my fault. I did something stupid, and I shouldn’t have.

Ochako felt her heart leap into her throat. What had happened? Iida had seen Izuku? She wanted to ask if he was okay, but the threat of keeping the secret about Izuku’s identity kept the words from being typed. She wasn’t supposed to talk about it on the internet, especially not with her entire class online.

**RedRiot:** Guys, I’m glad you’re alright but I’m gonna be honest- I’m kind of panicking

**Pikachu:** What’s up?

**RedRiot:** Bakugou’s MIA, and his mom said he just up and left. He’s been acting weird since Izuku went missing, but I don’t know why. I’m worried cause he won’t pick up his phone and honestly I’m starting to think it’s connected to this.

**Pikachu:** Wtf I thought he hated Midoriya- he ignores him in class?

**RedRiot:** Idk, man. I just know something’s up and he’s not telling anyone and it’s stressing me tf out.

Ochako’s thumb was already pressing a button, requesting the bus stop. It was pressed for her, the old man pulling the cord beside his head. She stood without looking away from her phone, thanking him and texting rapidly.

**GravityGirl:** Uh hey I might actually know where he is. You know the prefecture near that big new outlet mall?

Her phone was vibrating before she’d fully gotten off the bus, looking this way and that for where
Bakugou might have gone. She caught sight of his blonde head ducking into a street across the road. She answered the phone even as she hoped she was faster after training with Gunhead than she had been on the first day of class.

Kirishima’s voice was breathless on the other line.

“Kaminari and Ashido and them are all closer- if you can talk to him try to get him to head to the mall. I’m trying to get all of us to meet up there.”

“You know he’s not going to listen to me, right?” Ochako pointed out, nearly shrieking as a car honked at her while she was trying to make it across the crosswalk.

“You don’t have to get him to listen, you just need to get him to slow down.” There was strange background noise, like Kirishima was pushing past people. “He’s bad at remembering that he’s not the only one that feels like he feels. He’s going to go tearing after Izuku and all of us are going to get into trouble because it’s going to be hard to explain why Bakugou went after him and how we knew.”

 “… I want to go after Izuku too, Eijirou.” Ochako admitted, her pace slowing. It was something she hadn’t wanted to admit, until now. She watched Bakugou’s figure getting further away, feeling a peculiar mix of empathy and frustration over the situation. “… I don’t want to keep lying to our classmates about what Izuku is, or who he was. I just. I want to bring him home to stay.”

Silence emanated from the other end of the phone. Ochako had almost thought Kirishima had hung up on her, and wouldn’t have blamed him. What she was suggesting was skirting dangerously close to breaking UA’s core rule- bordering on vigilantism instead of heroism. It was dangerous, stupid, and it didn’t escape Ochako’s notice that her thoughts were aligned with possibly the most impulsive asshole in her class. That never really was a good sign.

“Look. I’m going to tell everyone in the group chat to meet at the mall. I’m not… I don’t know what we can do, but one thing’s for sure and that’s we’re all going to do better if we’re all on the same page. I know the police wanted this to be kept quiet but I think it’s hurting our class to be divided. All of us keep trying to do things alone and I'm thinking maybe that's where we're going wrong.”

Ochako felt the tight knot her chest loosen, relief flooding her mind. She began to walk again, picking up speed. She saw Bakugou glance out of the corner of his eye, perhaps sensing her movement. He picked up his own speed, ducking suddenly down another side street.

“I’ll get him to the mall.” Ochako promised. “Tell everyone we’ll meet by the centre fountain.”

She could hear Kirishima’s smile on the other end, though she couldn’t see his face. He sucked in a grateful breath.

“Thanks, Ochako.”

“I was going to do something stupid otherwise on my own. This way, we’re all stupid together.” He laughed, and she hung up and picked up her pace. Ochako had never been the strongest runner, but
there was one thing she rivaled Katsuki in spades: Sheer determination.

She didn’t see the old man leave the bus at her stop, watch her leave, and turn to make his way down the opposite street.
The sound of a pipe dripping water nearby was all that could be heard in the distance. Izuku used it to ground himself, a mark of reality as he passed through identical hallways, one after another. Dabi didn’t bother to tell him how far he was taking him, he was a prisoner and so was owed nothing at this point. Izuku didn’t take it personally.

He settled for memorizing the twists and turns they took, all the while doing his best to piece together a plan. Izuku had originally intended to come back to the League, but he’d been hoping to know where Eri was. Aizawa-Sensei being captured hadn’t been part of the plan either, and the thought that he was in Overhaul’s hands made an anxious tremor run down his spine. They had to get out of here, and fast. To date, Izuku and Eri had been the only ones to survive Chisaki’s experimenting, and Izuku had a feeling that it was because they’d been too valuable to kill.

He tried to keep his mind distracted, even as more and more he began to think about the very things his mind so often shied away from. He was being taken to see All For One, and that meant that Shigaraki knew he was here. It also meant that there was a good chance this was going to be his punishment for breaking rules, and that he might not come out of this for the better.

So much effort had been put into his recapture, that Izuku was beginning to suspect he was of value, somehow. Not just as a source of information, but maybe as a keeper of secrets. He knew something that he shouldn’t, something worse than the nature of Chisaki’s experiments. Or maybe, he posed a risk to some operation he wasn’t aware of. That angle began to piece itself together, and Izuku let it...
What did he know about All For One that no one else should know? That he was alive? No, because if that was the case he’d never have been taken to see the man in the first place. So it was something to do with Izuku, specifically. Or maybe, maybe it was all more connected than Izuku wanted to consider.

Why did Chisaki want to work with the League, outside of access to more resources and protection? *Don’t think about it.*

A headache was building from the circular nature of the questions. Izuku grit his teeth. He hadn’t had any water since he’d been captured, either. His mouth was dry and his throat was beginning to hurt, any questions he wanted to ask were risking precious moisture. He glanced towards Dabi, not really knowing where he stood with the villain. The last time they’d met, Izuku had ruined a mission and nearly gotten him and Toga arrested in the process. He decided to test the waters, keeping the anger and fear shoved down to a pit in the bottom of his stomach. What to talk about, though?

Izuku had an idea, though it was a dangerous one. He had to be careful not to give too much away.

“I met someone while at UA, y’know. Endeavour’s kid.”

Dabi’s pace didn’t slow, but Izuku thought he saw the man twitch. Cold blue eyes flicked back towards him, trying to read his intent.

“Yeah? I’m sure that must have been an experience. The bastard has lots of kids.”

“He was… *is,* really nice actually. Not much like his father at all.”

There was a beat of silence in which Izuku forced himself to wait patiently for Dabi to take the bait.

“Is that so? Is his Quirk strong?”

“Very. It’s nearly split in half between both of his parents.”

Something flickered on Dabi’s face, and Izuku wasn’t sure what to make of it. He kept his eyes glued to the man’s back as they walked, trying to find where the right crack to push at was hidden.

“Why do you hate Endeavour?”

“Why are *you* insufferable?” Dabi countered. Izuku’s gaze traced the scars on the man’s arms, how they disappeared into the sleeves of his jacket only to curve up his neck in ragged horror. He got a distinctly unpleasant feeling twisting itself into his stomach, like eels struggling to break free.

“Shouto… he told me some things about his home life when I spoke with him. He doesn’t seem to like his father, either. To be honest… I don’t think I like Endeavour very much at all. I think… We could come to an agreement? If you’re interested in knowing more.”
“Hm.” Dabi replied, his tone deliberately distant. “The guy’s the number two hero, he’s bound to have made enemies. But the tree you’re barking up kid is the wrong tree, and you’re gonna get yourself hurt.”

Blue flames licked up Dabi’s arm, and he stopped and turned. His hand cupped his flames so it illuminated his face in the dark, his gaze hard and unforgiving as he stared down at Izuku.

“I don’t just hate Endeavour, kid. I hate every Todoroki who ever had the gutlessness to be born on the face of this planet. And I’m not helping you, or any of them so long as I breathe. Understand?” He held the flame closer, so that Izuku could see the conviction in his gaze. Izuku swallowed tightly, forcing himself to hold that stare until Dabi turned away.

That attempt was a bust. Izuku had misjudged- thought that Dabi had a personal vendetta against only Endeavour. But prodding had given answers to a different question that Izuku had been searching for, another puzzle piece. Dabi’s resentment towards Endeavour was personal enough that he also hated the man’s family. Which meant that he would eventually be a threat to Shouto.

It also meant Izuku could use that to his advantage. He just had to make it look like he was willing to sell out his friend, without y’know, actually selling out his friend. Easy.

Dabi halted in front of a door that seemed to melt out of the darkness. Izuku followed suit, his throat tightening until it felt like he couldn’t breathe. His feet felt like they were turning to lead.

“What the big boss wants you for, I’m not invited.”

Izuku was left alone in the corridor, Dabi making his way hurriedly back the direction he’d came. He took his light with him, leaving Izuku in the darkness. He shivered- Dabi’s fire offered some warmth, but here underground there was little to be offered.

All For One didn’t get cold.

****

Shouto, you’re bleeding.

The memory rang from when he’d been in grade school, an echo of what his sister was saying to him now. Back then, he’d been bleeding because of something his father had done.

Now, he was bleeding because of a head injury, thanks to Stain. It occurred to him, slow and
sluggish like molasses, that he should probably be checked on by one of the nurses. Looking around, he didn’t really blame them for his being a low priority.

The nurses tent was in shambles, civilians and heroes being carted this way and that, milling around the few chosen members of family that’d been let through to see loved ones not in critical condition.

Fuyumi was his emergency contact. He’d forgotten that he’d done that. Shouto couldn’t help but blink up at her, a little muddled and confused. She was crouched in front of him, frowning as she reached out to touch the bandaged part of his head. He winced, and she drew her hand away.

Shouto could feel there was a block, something fuzzy and distant lingering in the distance. It was like he was forgetting something important, something that he knew was time-sensitive. But his memory was hazy, and all he could remember was Midoriya’s hand outstretched towards him, the gut-wrenching panic and then-

Nothing.

“What happened?” He managed, and when he spoke his mouth felt like it was filled with shards of glass. Fuyumi’s dark eyes softened, relieved that he was speaking.

“Stain woke up. He attacked you and your classmate, Iida. Present Mic stopped him.” Her gaze was a little misty as she cupped his face. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Iida?”

“His own parents have come to collect him. Present Mic’s alright too- though stain stabbed him in the shoulder before he brought him down. Shouto,“ She reached out to take his hand, her fingers habitually cool to the touch. “I wanted to ask before I did it, but mom’s asking if you’re alright… I told her that everything was fine, but… Are you?”

Was he alright?

Shouto felt like his entire body had been beaten in with a hammer. He couldn’t get past the dull pulsing feeling in his head, and the image of Izuku being taken into the sky from the back of his mind. Stain had been unconscious, then. At least, he thought he’d been. Pressing his hands to his face, Shouto’s eyes closed as he bit his lip and tried in vain to push past the aching wall his memory was trying to get past. Like dark water, it reflected nothing at all.

Fuyumi frowned at his silence, sucking in a worried and short breath. She squeezed his upper arm, dark eyes lit with a quiet sort of fierceness.

“You’re coming to my house, tonight.” She decided, uncharacteristic braveness set in her shoulders. “Father be damned. You need someone who’s going to look after you.” She straightened before he
could get the words out to protest, already searching for a nurse with whom she could confirm his guardianship.

Shouto watched her leave, feeling the kernel of anxiety in his chest not leave, but shrink just a little. He was still frightened, mostly for Midoriya, but the knowledge that he wasn’t going back to the Todoroki mansion tonight steadied him. He stared at his hands, curled as they were over his knees, and thought. There was a piece missing, a niggling answer that was just beyond his reach. That feeling sat with him, even as Fuyumi came back with a pen and a stack of paperwork to fill out.

He stared into the bare bulb lamp placed hastily by Fuyumi’s side in an attempt to give her better light to write under. Shouto stared at it until black spots appeared in front of his vision. His headache sharpened until nausea rose in his throat and he was forced to look away.

Midoriya had been taken. Why, he didn’t know, but Shouto had a feeling that he’d been nursing for a while now that things weren’t what they seemed. He wasn’t stupid, and his classmates had been acting… off since Izuku’s first appearance. Since USJ. Get to the heart of the strangeness, and maybe he’d find out just what Izuku had been hiding, what the villains wanted him for so badly.

Shouto had a bad feeling about all of this, like a thorn stuck in his finger. He just had to figure out how large it was, and how poisonous it might be.

Who might tell you, if you asked?

It didn’t take long to think of the answer- Iida was too shaken to do something he shouldn’t, given his latest adventure. Uraraka was too loyal to Izuku to tell a secret. Bakugou didn’t work with others. All Might and the other teachers were adults. Who else had been acting weird since the start of USJ? Would probably tell him, if he pushed the right buttons? Who was friends with Izuku- but would sell him out if they thought he was in trouble?

His thoughts drew towards the Sports Festival, to Izuku’s fight. The memory of Hitoshi Shinsou made Shouto’s brows draw together decisively. He’d heard the rumours before Izuku had vanished- how Aizawa-Sensei had been teaching him and Shinsou hand to hand combat.

Shouto couldn’t do this alone. Ironically, before Midoriya he wouldn’t have even dared to think such a sentence. The thought made him smile, wobbly but evening out. His hands turned upwards, and he looked at them both-One fire and one ice.

That was the marvel of it, even if he was bad at it: Midoriya had a strange way of convincing people who’d been alone all their lives to look up, and see that they could maybe work together.

****
Kacchan, are you hurt?

Kacchan, you're ok, right?

Kacchan, you need to be careful!

No one ever minded their own goddamn business. Well, no one who got along with Deku ever did at least. Katsuki was half convinced that everyone had been wrong all along about the nature of Izuku’s Quirk. The bastard didn’t have an analysis Quirk, no. He had a Quirk that forced people to be disgustingly prone to empathy. It had to be a Midoriya family trait! His mom was just as bad, so that every time Katsuki used to visit he’d felt compelled to do disgusting things like help with the dishes and leave his shoes by the door.

It affected people like Round-Face the worst. Those heroes with a driving sense to see to it that good is personally done by their hand. Katsuki had seen her out of the corner of his vision and honestly for a moment prayed. He knew for a fact that if she caught him, he’d never be hearing the end of this one. He’d be staring at her infuriatingly honest and sincere face and realize he’d be fucked trying to get rid of her because she cared.

So he’d swallowed his pride (probably to Kirishima’s distant screaming) and booked it. His suspicion that he was being followed soon proved to be correct as Uraraka gave chase. Katsuki put the hood of his sweater up, cursing his bad luck.

At least it wasn’t Shitty-Hair. He didn’t have to feel bad about weaving and ducking his way into the nearby mall.

Despite the chaos happening several districts over, it was a bustling weekday. There were countless people milling about the mall, three stories high and known for having the latest in fashion and Quirk News. Katsuki knew how to make himself look small, even if it didn’t come naturally to him. He rounded his shoulders, ducked his head and put his hands in his pockets. Slumping forward, he had the somewhat dizzying thought that to an outside viewer he probably looked like a criminal. He used his glare to clear a path, moving quickly. He thought he caught sight of a familiar poof of bubble-gum pink hair by the cafeteria’s entrance.

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It was lucky in some ways that Mina had wanted to go shopping. She’d had her eye on a leopard-print jacket, and it was rare that her internship finished early. Even rarer was when Denki’s did the same- they’d jumped on the first chance to hang out that they’d gotten in a while.

Mina loved Kaminari- but not in the way that many would understand. Crushes, other girls understood. Friendship, people understood. But she got along with Kaminari especially because in many ways they were as good as siblings. One thought that entered her head often finished in his, and since their meeting at UA they’d got on like a veritable house on fire. It was rare to find this sort of comradery, and Mina loved it even more because of the fact that it’s all that it was.
Growing up pretty, good at sports…not so great at math…not everyone appreciated her beyond the fact that she stood out in a crowd. Denki was good at that. Denki made friends because he liked having friends. He liked her because on top of being pretty, she was a loyal, good, friend. That was more than Mina could say about anyone in middle school, save for maybe Eijirou.

Plus, both of them liked to gossip. Better yet, both of them loved to gossip about other people they both knew. It became habit before either of them knew it- study together as best as they could (the blind leading the blind), get some tea or food, go to the mall. It was fun, and one thing Mina understood surprisingly well as a hero in training was the importance of fun.

When they got the message that they’d all be meeting up at the mall to deal with Katsuki’s latest impulse issues, Denki merely arched one eyebrow towards his hairline. Together they made their way to the main entrance of the mall, just in time to see a kid in a Bakugou-shaped slouch book it into the crowd, a breathless Ochako following not far behind.

“Should we follow them?” Denki asked, watching the scene before them with a mix of nervousness and amusement. Mina had similar feelings, she liked Bakugou (surprisingly) and Ochako (unsurprisingly) well enough, but mixing them together had the potential to create one hell of a volatile reaction.

“We can’t let them tear each other apart, can we?” She responded. Denki groaned, scratching at the back of his neck.

“Why is our class so determined to kill each other?”

“It’s the competitiveness. We’re like a family, and like family not a day goes by where you don’t want to kill one of your siblings.”

Mina grinned, all teeth as she clapped Denki on the shoulder, dragging him forward. “Besides, we do sort of owe Bakugou. Who helped us study for our exams?”

She said this as a reminder, because it was true enough. Without Bakugou, both of them had been looking at supplementary classes. Aizawa’s patience only went so far, and both of them really were terrible at History. And Math. And Science.

“Bully, is a more accurate term,” Denki muttered. His feet were moving despite the chagrin on his face. Bakugou’s teaching method was a little, well, unorthodox to say the least. It involved a lot of yelling, and a lot of clear frustration on his part. But it’d worked, because Bakugou’s strength was bullheaded stubbornness. If Mina hadn’t been getting better at reading Katsuki’s moods, she might not have noticed that it was an attempt to return the favour from the Sports Festival.

“it worked didn’t it?” Mina voiced her thoughts aloud, levelling Denki with a look that could peel paint.

Denki’s sulky silence was answer enough. Mina was already messaging Eijirou, dragging Denki
along by the sleeve.

She knew that Bakugou needed friends, even if *he* didn’t know it. In fact, since the Sports Festival, she’d never been so sure of anything else before in her life. She may not be ‘smart’, but she knew people. She knew what they needed in the same way that Denki somehow instinctively knew what would make them open to talking.

Together, they were the most intimidating friendship makers in all of class 1-A. Katsuki really didn’t stand a chance.
Shouto could always count on two things from Fuyumi’s small apartment: tea was always readily available to be made, and her house inevitably had new photographs. It was her hobby, left over from a grade school art course that had become something more. Shouto entered her front door to find rows upon rows of picture frames, all different sizes and shapes lining the wall.

It was a little like looking into a time-capsule. Shouto always had the feeling that when he looked at these photos, he was looking at the world the way his sister saw things. The pictures followed a timeline, tracing through Fuyumi’s childhood, into her teen years, into adult life. Birthdays, special events, field trips, even a few of her students in group photos were interspersed between images of the district she lived in. There were portraits of people with interesting physical Quirks (a young man with gold-slight eyes and vitiligo stared out from the living room), flowers holding fresh morning rain drops, a shadow in the act of holding a soap bubble. In many ways, it was a shame that Enji Todoroki had never paid much attention to his daughter’s creativity- Shouto privately held the opinion that had she wanted to, Fuyumi could have been a wildly successful photographer. Then again, Enji hadn’t paid much attention to Fuyumi at all.

He toed his shoes off at the door, his older sister already making her way to the kitchen to turn the kettle on. Shouto made himself at home, wandering through the small apartment towards the living room. It too was small, but gave a feeling of warmth and coziness that the Todoroki manor had always lacked. Fuyumi had the choice of using some of the money she was entitled to from their father when she’d moved out, but had never touched it for the sake of her rent. It was a point of defiance with her, rare and out of their father’s direct line of sight. She’d confided to Shouto once that she’d put the majority towards her own education, and the rest towards their mother’s care. So;
she lived sparsely, her home looking more like a student's than a person with a full time job.

Shouto found himself seated in the living room in a large, cheap looking couch. It was butter soft, and very comfy despite the lack of back support and the lumpy cushion in the centre. Its pattern could be described as 'ugly plaid', and as he traced the cushion he sat on with one finger it felt worn and frayed.

His sister called from the kitchen.

“What kind of tea would you like? I have Green, chamomile, um, something fancy from a student teacher conference? I think it’s spicy.”

“Green’s fine.” Shouto said automatically, because he was a creature of habit through and through, and green was the only tea in his own home. Fuyumi got to work, pouring hot water into a tea pot and putting tea leaves into a paper satchel. The sounds of her moving about the kitchen put some of Shouto's stress to ease.

Soon enough, she was seated across from him, setting the tea tray on a low glass table between them. Shouto took his cup gratefully, hoping the caffeine would dull what little was left of his headache after taking his prescribed pain medication for the concussion. He sipped slowly, and Fuyumi glanced at him from under the fan of her lashes and wrung her hands in the small uncomfortable silence. She smiled, and though the smile was laced with its usual worry it was honest.

“It’s nice having you here. I feel like since I moved out I don’t get to see you as often as I’d like.”

That was intentional on their father’s part, and Shouto suspected his sister knew that. He set his tea mug down, a small frown settling in on his features as he replied.

“The house isn’t the same without you or Natsuo. It’s… quiet, lately.” It was the first time he’d admitted he was lonely in the house aloud.

“The place always felt a little haunted to me.” Fuyumi confided in him. Nostalgia was written in her face as she cast her gaze somewhere towards the floor. “I used to go out into the yard with Natsuo, and sometimes if it was early enough I could swear I’d hear voices, whispering in the empty garden. Sometimes I look at the photos I took and I can’t believe I’m an adult now, that I won’t go play in that garden tomorrow morning.” She laughed, the sound self-conscious. She tucked a lock of silver-red hair behind her ear.

Her grey eyes rested on Shouto’s distracted expression- he was still thinking about his last memory at Hosu. Izuku’s hand had slipped through his grasp, and the sick feeling in his stomach now had time to take root and make itself known. Suddenly, Shouto’s tea didn’t seem so nice. He set it back onto the table, resisting the urge to wrap his arms about his middle. He really was alone now, wasn’t he? No one else at UA knew about his home life, and he couldn't see himself telling anyone any time soon.

“You okay? You seem a little out of it. Is it your head?” Fuyumi asked, setting aside her own tea to hover. Shouto twitched, biting down on the urge to apologize arbitrarily. It was a habit that made his sister nervous, as she was prone to apologizing herself. Shouto tried to gather his thoughts, past the crushing feeling of failure and desperation to try and get into contact with someone who could do
something. He’d never been good at verbalizing what he was feeling, his thoughts more images and emotions than words. He envied people who could talk, and have the sentences they said sound like them. He felt he never did.

“I… feel like I didn’t do anything, at Hosu.” He explained, the admission sitting with him in a black pool in his stomach. Staring into his tea mug, he looked at his mismatched reflection with distaste. “Izuku got taken, Stain almost got away… I was knocked unconscious, and what for? I feel like...The villains won.” The admission was a horrible realization, and Shouto pressed a hand to his mouth. He hated pain meds, they made him unbalanced and weird. He felt like he should be crying, but all that was coming was a strange burning at the back of his eyelids. “I couldn’t save him. I couldn't help anyone I was... helpless. Weak.”

He’d never failed at something before. Not like this. It’d never been allowed, presented as an option for other kids, kids that weren’t Todorokis. Even when he’d succeeded less, he’d been urged to view it as a stepping stone for future tests in life. Failure was seen as something Todorokis didn’t engage in, an action for those who didn’t have a family title, a name to uphold. It was why his mother’s weakness had been hidden away, kept secret from anyone who didn’t need to know. Shouto wasn’t even sure if his mom’s original family knew the truth- that Rei had been responsible for hurting her only son in a mental breakdown that had cost Shouto more than just his face.

You can’t fail.

You can’t end up like your mom.

You can’t afford to be a disappointment.

Fuyumi was looking at him with something soft and sad in her face, something knowing.

“Shouto, our father never saw the point of me taking photography, as I’m sure you figured out.” She said this with a wry smile, gesturing to the photos around them. The living room it looked like had been dedicated to nature. Shouto took in the yellow eyes of a fox peering at him from a frame behind Fuyumi’s head, adjacent to a katsura tree hanging on for life in the midst of fall. “When I first started to take pictures, I realized something: I sucked.”

Shouto blinked in surprise, uncertain suddenly of where the conversation was headed. He stared at his sister as she took a deep breath and pressed on, her hands tightening around her tea mug. “I got the angles wrong, I couldn’t get the shutter time right, everything was over or under saturated. I was bad at it, and I kept thinking in those first few months that our father was right. I thought I was wasting everyone’s time, signing up for these courses and electives. I thought I didn’t have a single talent outside of my school grades.”

Shouto stared at Fuyumi, who all his conscious life had been given awards, and prizes and encouragement from her art school teachers. She seemed old, older than she really was as she recounted her story.

“I’m not a brave person, Shouto.” She explained softly. “Not like you, not like Natsuo. I’m more like mom than I think our father knew what to do with. I thought I’d given up so much to fail, and that he’d laugh at me and tell me what I already thought- that I had no talent. But I learned something,
something I don’t think Todorokis usually learn.”

She leaned forward in her seat, setting down her tea cup to grasp Shouto’s hand. His Left side-warm to the point of almost burning, was cooled by her touch.

“I learned about failure, and how to make yourself be good at something through it.” She smiled, and it was unusually vicious and mean for Fuyumi’s mild disposition. “I proved our father wrong fundamentally, and he hated me for it. I worked and worked and I started to win competitions, money, for my photos. All of it went to me, and I saved it away for when I’d need it to leave him. I’ve never seen someone look so bitter the day I moved out, and paid him rent for the last few weeks after school in which I lived on his compound. I shamed him, and he couldn’t do anything about it.”

Shouto’s breath was a tangled knot at the back of his throat. He laughed in surprise, having never heard that last bit of the story. He’d known dad had been pissed when his sister left, but knowing why sent a thrill of satisfaction through him. Fuyumi ducked her head, trying to meet his mismatched gaze.

“I didn’t inherit our father’s strength, Shouto. I didn’t inherit mom’s patience. But one thing I do know is I have the ability to get up again and again, and that comes from failing. And if I can do it, then why shouldn’t our father’s ‘most precious son’ be able to?”

She leaned back in her chair, sipping her tea primly. Shouto felt the knot in his chest loosening, his reflection less monstrous in his tea cup. He lifted his mismatched eyes, regarding his sister with affection.

"You think learning to accept failure is going to help me be a better hero?"

"No," She said "I think learning to accept failure is going to help you learn to be a better hero than our father."

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Katsuki was a hunched gargoyle, blind to the people around him save for the one girl trailing in the peripheral of his vision.

He knew there was very little he could do to dissuade this encounter from taking place. In truth, he’d known it from the moment Ochako had followed him into the mall. People didn’t pursue unless they intended to carry something out, and Round-Face knew his temperament as well as anyone else in 1-A. If it was a fight she wanted, she’d put herself into the situation head on. As usual. He snorted to himself, thinking. She really was more like him than either of them would be comfortable admitting.

Katsuki grit his teeth, digging his hand into his pocket and darting a glance towards his phone. It confirmed his sinking suspicion: Seven missed calls from Kirishima. Which meant that Shitty-Hair was looking for him, and the rest of the class were following. He hated the feeling that he was being tracked, like he was unstable or dangerous. It sat too close to the times his teachers cautioned him in daycare because he was too rough with his friends, or when people whispered that he looked like a villain. He wanted to be mad at Kirishima, but instead he was just stupidly hurt by it. He couldn't be
trusted.

*I don’t need to be monitored. I’m not a monster. I’m not **dangerous**, not like that!*

He shook his head, trying to rid his thoughts of the voice that sounded distressingly like himself at ten years old.

*Fuck.*

This was a set-up. Okay, he could work with that. Pushing aside the fragile, *weak* part of him, Katsuki thought hard about what Ochako would want from him. It didn't take long to formulate and answer, and he knew running wouldn't do much to dissuade her from it. She wanted to know about Deku probably, or stop him from chasing after Deku at least. Which meant Katsuki just had to convince her that he wasn't worth her time. Should be easy, right?

Katsuki slowed down, coming to stand in front of a centre fountain. The trickling water filled his ears, made his chest feel heavy and tight. He was just trying to do the right thing.

*Why did people only stop him when he was doing the right thing?*

Time to be intolerable to deal with.

Ochako’s breathing was laboured as she skidded to a stop behind him. He could feel her eyes on him, though he didn’t turn to look. His eyes were trained on the running water, his reflection muddied and unclear. Though there was a crowd of people, Ochako’s voice was clear. It was direct in a way that made Katsuki’s hackles rise- she was too blunt not to set his own bluntness on edge. He used the feeling of discomfort to fan his anger.

“Where were you running to?”

“None of your fucking business.” He snapped automatically. This was easier than he was willing to admit, and that made him somehow angrier that it came so easily. "Why the fuck are you following me?"

If Ochako wanted to flinch at his tone, she didn’t show it. Her brows were drawn together, a spark of defiance burning brightly in her pupils.

“It’s my business as a hero in training to know if one of my classmates is going to do something that will endanger them.”

Katsuki snorted, and the sound was bitter. He'd figured, but the truth still hurt. He dug his hands into his pockets, sweat slick between his palms.

"Yeah, well. Your help's not wanted. Fuck off and go home."

He turned then, and though he wasn’t the tallest person in the world he towered through intensity that had a habit of making most people cower. It’d worked for him well in middle school. He used it to try and push past her, and was irritated when Ochako merely widened her stance, blocking him with her jaw set.

Round-Face barely batted an eye. She matched him, her arms bracing against his, unconsciously preparing for a fight. Just like the damn match at the Sports Festival, she had more stubbornness than common sense. She was also now suitably pissed, and Katsuki forgot how that made her more
determined. He thought briefly about what she'd do if he just straight up lit his Quirk up in a public space, let loose enough to scare her into letting him go. That was the impulsive, mulish side of him. He firmly told himself to reign that part in, knowing the consequences. He could lose his hero's license, and he wasn't quite that desperate yet. Like Katsuki was going to set off an explosion in a public shopping mall. He wasn't that stupid.

He rolled his shoulders, head tilting to the side as he regarded Ochako with narrowed, burning eyes.

“I’m not gonna fucking get rid of you, am I?”

She responded with a smile that was mostly teeth.

"You're welcome to try, but I did throw a bunch of boulders at you to try to prove a point in a sport festival."

Katsuki glowered, but didn't try to push through her stance. He backed off slowly, shrugging out of her hold like her touch burned him.

“Kirishima’s my friend.” Ochako continued when she saw he wasn't immediately leaving. “And so is Deku,” Katsuki flinched at the name. She ignored the reaction. “I wouldn’t be a good friend to them if I didn’t try to keep you from doing something risky.”

“Like I mean anything to Deku.” Katsuki growled. That’d been the purpose of avoiding the nerd, after all. He shouldn’t mean anything to him.

Ochako all but rolled her eyes in exasperation.

“Sit down, please? I’m trying to be nice to you, but as usual you make it stupidly difficult.”

She took a seat on the edge of the fountain, gesturing at the empty space beside her. Katsuki after a moment of glaring silence, took it. He slouched over his knees, restless energy still jittering down his arms and legs, urging him to go, go, go. This wasn't going the way he wanted it to, and he wasn't really sure why. He blamed Kirishima, for sending someone so stubborn after him.

“That’s better,” Ochako breathed, her fingertips meeting instinctively between her knees as she carefully did not look him in the eye. Katsuki wondered if she knew that she did that- pressed the pads on her fingers together to ‘release’ the tension in her body as much as her own Quirk. Ochako’s shoulders lowered, and when she looked at him it was like she was trying to peel back a layer of armour and see the soft inner workings inside.

“Do I have something on my face?” He said snidely.

“Only your face.” She said, saccharine and pointed. "I was just thinking that I’ve never seen you look this stressed before.” Ochako admitted, brown eyes trained on his face. Katsuki couldn’t hold that stare, not with that question hovering between them. The bustle of the mall seemed both quiet and too loud.

“Yeah, well. I’m better at hiding it than most.” Exhaling through his nose, he cupped the back of his neck so that his head was hunched between his knees. This had been stupid, he’d been stupid. He was always just… stupid. He should've just kept running, kept focused on the mission.
What mission?

To get Deku back, even if he hadn't really planned beyond that. He would've figured it out on the way, probably.

“I can understand why you’re stressed, you know. I care about Deku, too.” Ochako said, seeming to read his mind. She tried to catch his eye, but he turned to glare into the fountain instead. The view was better.

“Who says that this is about Deku?!” He snapped, bristling. He couldn’t be that obvious, surely.

Ochako’s voice was placid, calm. She had one hand fisted suddenly and viciously in the hood of his sweater, dragging him back to sitting beside her on the lip of the fountain. Her expression never once flickered.

“Who says that it isn’t?”

She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, releasing her hold on him and smoothing out the edge of his hood with care. Her voice was neutral as she stared out into the crowd of civilians shuffling back and forth, unaware or uncaring of the chaos in another district. It didn’t affect them, and because it didn’t they were in a bubble of false tranquility. Hosu might be on fire, but here it was just another day. How people lived like that, Katsuki would never understand. It drove him nuts.

“You and Deku are really alike, you know.” Ochako said, as if she were discussing the weather. She ignored the way Katsuki’s expression turned thunderous. “Both of you constantly want to do something, be it to help or to hurt. Neither of you ever sit still. Both of you don’t give up easily, either. Or let go.” She smiled, and there was a sad note to it. “I think it’s the one trait I like about you, you know.” Ochako sighed to herself, looking a little regretful. “I wish sometimes I had the same willpower.”

This was new. Katsuki didn’t make it a habit to hang out with Round-Face, or even Deku (especially not Deku), but he didn’t know her to be cowardly. She’d chased him here, after all, even when he’d been running like a lunatic through crowded streets. She had to be kidding. He wasn’t anything like anyone in UA. He’d made sure of it. People tried to be friends with you if they had like interests.

“I’m nothing like Deku. The nerd always used to cry when we were kids, even over stupid things. Once, I caught him crying because he saw a pigeon that was too fat to fly.” He smirked at the unexpected memory, hazy and golden. He’d thought he’d forgotten about it. The smile slipped form his face, his hands flexing against his thighs.

“The Deku I knew as a kid’s gone. The old Deku would’ve never have run away from an opportunity to learn at UA.” He snorted at his own foolishness, his desire for things to be the same and yet different. "Did you know? I fucking vouched for him to be here, to attend school. Shouldn't have. Don't know why I did, it's not like I thought he'd go right back to crying at me and begging to go play hide and seek." Maybe that was why he was still chasing after him, because a part of Katsuki still bitterly wanted to be wrong. He wanted Deku to be the same kid, and he was kidding himself. Fuck, was he really this far into his own damn trauma?
“I don’t think Deku now would’ve left UA- not without a good reason.” Ochako denied, quietly. She gave him a considering look. “I think the Deku I know, would’ve only left if it was to dive headfirst into danger, if he thought he could protect someone.” Even more quietly, she added “I think you know that, somewhere inside. And I think that’s why I saw you headed to the train station, towards Hosu. I don't think he's the same person you know; Bakugou, but I don't think he's as different as you think."

"You don't know what I think." Katsuki bit out, not wanting to hear this. She'd only get his hopes up, and the guilt would disappear, and Katsuki didn't deserve that. He'd ruined Deku's life, and he had to live with that. He'd changed him in a way that was irreversible, and that made more sense than Deku surviving being taken and kidnapped and tortured for ten fucking years.

Katsuki had fallen deathly silent, a living statue. He was breathed back to life when Ochako spoke again, breaking his rampant thoughts.

“I don’t want to stop you, y’know? I want to go with you. I don't want to let him go either.”

Her words blindsided Katsuki, because in truth he’d never really thought about Ochako agreeing with anything he said or did. Seeing his dumbfounded expression, she cracked a wide, relieved smile.

“What? I’m not allowed to be equally reckless and stupid? Did you really think you're the only one that cares for him? Shut up, I know you do." She interrupted the protest hovering at his lips. Ochako shrugged. “The adults have their hands full with Hosu, and I’m thinking the League is only going to get more dangerous as time goes on. UA can’t alert the media to their presence without directly risking Deku’s safety and the reputation of the school. So I say, this needs a subtler touch. But we'll need to work together to bring him home.”

“Why’s that?” Katsuki asked, frankly mystified at the turn this conversation had taken. Ochako only barely managed to keep from rolling her eyes in exasperation.

“Because we’re going to be outnumbered in this fight, and there’s no way in hell your friends or mine are going to let us do this alone.”

As if to highlight her point, Ochako saw something behind Katsuki. She lifted her gaze, suddenly fighting back laughter as a decorative plant moved to poorly hide Mina’s bubblegum-pink figure. Denki was beside her, crouched by the pot and trying to look ‘nonchalant’ about it.

Katsuki turned, his expression of confusion morphing into exasperation as he caught sight of who had decided to follow them.

“Did Shitty-Hair just straight up message the entire school group chat?!”

“It’d appear that way.” Ochako said, a smile splitting across her face as she spotted Momo and Jirou just coming in to the mall’s entrance. They spotted her and waved, Momo looking rushed with a few strands of hair falling free from her ponytail.
Katsuki let out a wordless noise of embarrassment and annoyance, burying his face in his hands.

“I’m gonna kill him. I’m actually gonna murder his dumb ass.”

Ochako could see Momo pausing, turning her head and gesturing towards someone in a universal hand-wave of ‘keep up!’ A red, spiked haircut was moving through the crowd.

“Well, you’ll get to tell him that to his face.” Ochako giggled.

Katsuki huffed in exasperation. Really, he wasn’t a basket case. It wasn’t like he’d… Ok. He’d been going to do something stupid. Still. He didn’t need to be babysat by a fucking patrol. He really was going to murder Eijirou the second his heart stopped trying to twist itself into knots at the back of his throat, stupidly relieved and hopeful that he wasn’t alone.

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Toshinori’s life had been from the start not an easy one to live.

He’d recalled the day he realized that he might not outlive his partners, his friends. It’d been a long time ago, when he’d been paired with Nighteye. Back then, Toshinori had accepted it, a price to pay for taking on the mantle of Symbol of Peace for everyone.

He hadn’t thought about what it might be like to experience that, from the other side. Shouta was gone. Taken, was a more accurate term. He’d been pulled into the vortex that’d materialised above the sky like a dark cloud, and Toshinori had been too busy trying to fend off the rock monster’s attack that he had been unable to do a thing about it. The anger he’d felt over it, the helplessness was only matched by the terror that he had to tell Hizashi what had happened. Toshinori had never considered the price of loving more than one person, was twice the pain should something happen to them.

He’d shifted back to his true form in the safety of the nurse’s care, and buried his head in his hands so his fingers were white-knuckled in his hair. A wordless emotion rose from somewhere deep inside of him, close enough to rage that he tasted copper at the back of his mouth. Or maybe that was the blood filling his lungs, making him cough and choke as his body began to suffer the aftereffects of the fight.

He spent what felt like hours lying down in an impersonal hospital cot, hacking and wheezing between bouts of half-mad grief. The image of Shouta’s determined expression as he clung to the little girl with his capture weapon blended with the last time he’d seen his sensei. Nana would be ashamed of him. Toshinori was ashamed on her behalf. He’d done the unthinkable, what Gran Torino warned him against time and time again. He’d let himself get attached.

As it turned out, this was not the only loss.
Hizashi didn’t come to him until Toshinori sensed it was much, much later. The moon was beginning to peek out through the hospital window when he slipped in. Toshinori could admit that at first he barely noticed the man, bandaged and subdued with his usual extreme hairstyle let go so that Hizashi’s long blonde hair hung limp around his face. He looked, well, Bad. Still, he tried to smile his trademark smile as he came in, cradling a gift shop candle and a thermos of what was probably soup. There was something guilty in the way he stood by the doorframe, as if wanting permission to come near. Toshinori’s already dulled senses twinged with fear.

Likewise, Hizashi’s hesitation melted as he scanned the room, finding hide nor hair of Shouta’s trademark unkempt presence. They stared at each other in silence, dread in both of their gazes as to what the other had to say.

“Izuku-“

“Shouta-“

They both fell silent, neither wanting to finish the sentence. When Toshinori spoke again, his voice was like rusted nails.

“What happened, Hizashi?”

The man’s shoulders crumpled inwards. His eyes were bright, rimmed red from earlier crying. He’d always cried easily.

“Stain woke up.” He said quietly, and Toshinori felt a shiver of real fear trail down his spine. Izuku wasn’t hurt, was he? Wasn’t-“I was distracted, trying to defend the kids. I didn’t see the Noumu.”

It was worse, then. Toshinori felt a sick pain in his chest, and he struggled to breathe. Izuku had been taken for real this time, against his will in the end. His eyes shut as a roaring voice in his head screamed that this was all his fault.

“Shouta… He was taken too. He was trying to recover Eri, and got wrapped up in the League’s escape plan.”

A choked noise left Hizashi, and he swayed where he was standing in a way that made Toshinori wish he could stand to support him.

“That’s not possible. We- Why didn’t you go after him?”

The accusation made Toshinori flinch. It was and echo of what he’d been asking himself most of the night. More than anything, he wanted Hizashi to sit down, to stop looking like he was one bad piece of news away from running from the hospital to find Shouta.

“I couldn’t. I was… I had to protect the civilians from the other villain. I didn’t see in time and –”

“We have to go after him.” Hizashi had never had perfect control over his Quirk when he was very upset, and the edge of it came out now and rattled edges of Toshinori’s bed. He felt the vibration,
dangerously high and just out of his hearing range. The tight feeling in his chest just got tighter.  

“I can’t.”  

“You’re All Might! What do you mean you can’t?!” Hizashi snapped, his voice breaking on ‘can’t’. His voice was rising, and Toshinori wondered if Hizashi would bring this hospital crumbling down. “If you can’t beat the League of Villains, then who can?!”

What good am I? I can’t even save the people I love!

“My time limit is up!” Toshinori snarled, his heart hammering in his throat as he shouted over his partner’s accusations. The outburst made Hizashi fall silent, shocked and quiet. Toshinori’s hands were fisted in the sheets over him, Nana’s face mingling with Shouta’s mingling with Izuku’s behind his eyelids. He couldn’t look up from his hands. “My time limit is up, Hizashi! I’ve got maybe a minute left of my other form left to give, and if I use it then that’s it! All Might is as good as dead and I can’t save anyone!”

“Then what good are you?!” The shout was deafening, though Hizashi’s Quirk didn’t come through. “I couldn’t save Izuku, but I’m just an ordinary hero! My Quirk isn’t even that helpful! This wasn’t- This wasn’t supposed to happen! You’re supposed to be able to save anyone!”

Hizashi immediately sank his teeth into his lower lip, realization of what he just said twisting his face from fear to horror. Toshinori’s vision was blurring, and he realized with some distant sort of shock that he might be crying. “Fuck. Fuck, Toshi, I’m-“

“It’s fine.” Toshinori said, because Hizashi’s words were true and he hated himself for it as much as Hizashi probably hated him right now. He wasn’t sure if the man heard him, his voice certainly wasn’t very loud. He didn’t think he could amplify it if he tried.

“It’s not, and I shouldn’t have. I-I mean… Shouta’s my best friend. B-but that doesn’t make what I said right and I’m s-sorry-“

“Hizashi.” Toshinori said, a single clear thought entering his head. “I need you to leave. Please. We’ll talk about this when I’m out of the hospital, and when you don’t have a concussion.”

Hizashi hovered, clearly unsure and dripping black guilt. Toshinori wouldn’t look at him, his thoughts locked on a memory that was only painful to remember.

After a moment of silence that seemed to stretch far longer than it should have, Hizashi placed the gifts he’d brought on Toshinori’s bedside. He left without a word, leaving Toshinori to a private, empty hospital room.

Rule number one of having a Quirk like One For All?

"Don't hold people close to you, Toshi. You can't."

Gran Torino’s voice came to Toshinori, from a few months after Nana had died. He could remember
the wood grain of the man's table, pressed against his cheek. He held a photograph in the memory, of Nana and him and Gran all together. In the memory, the corner of it was damp.

"You'll just end up disappointing them when they find out you're human after all."
Chapter Summary

All For One: On the outside, I may seem like a villain. But on the inside? A father figure.

...No, nope. Definitely a villain.

Chapter Notes

Happy Holidays!

Warnings in this chapter for light torture (As in nothing graphic).

Izuku couldn’t remember much after he’d found Tsubasa. When he tried to, the images became grainy, snippets of a dream he never fully recalled. He could make out the blur of his reflection in puddles as he ran through them, remember the feeling of cold sweat sticking to the back of his shirt. He could remember the dull, gnawing horror inside that screamed he’d seen something he’d never be able to forget.

He remembered Shigaraki finding him, and dragging him to see his Sensei. Being thrown into a dark room had made Izuku's terror spill over into a shriek.

Then he'd been left alone, just him and All For One and a stranger in a lab coat.

Izuku could remember All For One's voice, how it hadn’t been anything like how he’d imagined a villain’s voice would be. He’d still been a kid, and his only experience with villains had been people who admittedly looked like they fit into the trope. All For One had been hidden away behind a medical curtain in a dark room, the only thing permeable being his voice.

His voice hadn’t sounded evil. Even to a child that’d been sick on terror and guilt, it’d seemed kind. That was the trick of it, Izuku soon learned. Villains like All For One survived because they didn’t sound evil. They sounded, well, normal. Logical. To a child that craved a kind ear, they sounded like a parent.

“I’m so glad to meet you finally, Izuku Midoriya. Forgive my appearance or lack thereof, I’m afraid
I’ve been dealing with some illness lately. How are you, my boy? I’m sorry if Tomura’s been hard on you, he has so much on his shoulders. We had to be sure you see, if you were as special as I’d hoped.”

Blank. He couldn’t remember what he’d said in response, only vague feelings and the concept of doubting relief. He couldn’t cry, hadn’t been able to for some time now, but All For One’s kindness had made his chest squeeze in a way that reminded him of crying. Special? He wasn’t anything special. If Shigaraki were to be believed, he was nothing but a burden.

“I sense you’re in some pain. My Quirk seems to think you’re in turmoil. Perhaps I might alleviate some of that. Would you come sit? My assistant will be able to tend to you and explain what brings you to me.”

There was a man, someone Izuku thought was familiar strangely enough. Then again, there’d been a weird feeling of Deja-vu happening to him all of today. The man had a lab coat, green goggles hiding his eyes and expression. He pulled a chair up for Izuku, and it was plush and soft in a way that only expensive chairs were. Izuku sank into it, feeling like he was being swallowed up in the dark.

His Quirk began to try and pick apart the darkness, straining to see something that might give him a hint as to what this man wanted him for. Izuku couldn’t see beyond the beige curtain, and aside from his voice there was very little to go on. Oddly enough despite the divider, he couldn’t shake the feeling that All For One knew exactly what he was doing, and where he was looking. The feeling was unsettling, even though Izuku didn’t have much to be unsettled about. He was shocked when the assistant moved away, only to come back and offer him a cup of tea.

He’d never been offered anything before by Shigaraki, not without it being a reward or a trap. Izuku stared at the proffered cup blankly, until the man took it as refusal and set it aside. Izuku watched as he sat himself across from him, and something about the motion made a dull memory light up behind his eyelids. The man’s introduction confirmed his realization.

“Izuku Midoriya, you’ve met me before. My name is Shin, I was your doctor when you were diagnosed as Quirkless.”

He was the doctor that had told Izuku and his mom that he didn’t have a Quirk, that he would never grow up to be a hero. This man had been working for the League, for Shigaraki and everyone else who’d ever hurt him.

The tentative safety Izuku felt in this situation vanished. He leaned back in his chair, curling up as small as he could allow himself to be. He was suddenly four years old again, crying for his mom.
Mr. Shin held up a placating hand. His expression seemed genuinely mournful, which startled Izuku.

“Allow me to apologize for the lie I told you and your mother that day. If you would allow me to explain, it was an act of protection on my part that lead me to believe the nature of your Quirk should be concealed.” The man adjusted his glasses, and when Izuku didn’t respond took it as a cue to continue. “You see Midoriya, I’m a man of science. And much like your Quirk, I’m fascinated with the world around me and how it works. I think you can understand that interest.”

Izuku could understand that, as much as he didn’t want to agree to anything this man said. His Quirk made everyone around him a puzzle most days, and when he didn’t have the pieces to solve it the mystery could drive him to distraction.

“What my research has suggested to me is that there is a malleable stage in children with their Quirks. There’s a time when the connection between their body and their Quirk is still flexible, much like when we develop new muscles progress is easily gained and easily lost. Sometimes though, Quirks can hurt children, because their bodies aren’t adjusted yet and they’re pushing too hard.”

That made sense, Izuku wasn’t sure what all of this had to him, though.

The smooth, charismatic voice of the man behind the medical curtain spoke then.

“My Quirk grants me the ability to take another’s Quirk and use it. However, it can only absorb so many powers, before the mind starts to be overloaded. This is where the nature of your Quirk comes in.”

Mr. Shin drew from the inside of his labcoat a series of files. Izuku flinched as he made out the image attached to the first one. Fyrefly’s portrait stared up at him blankly, as if accusing him for her death.

“I-I didn’t mean to-“ Words rushed to the surface, justifications. Shigaraki had been so mad, it only made sense that his boss would be equally furious. Mr. Shin shook his head, a comforting smile on his face as he reached out to stop Izuku’s excuses with a hand on his knee.

“My boy, we know you didn’t mean to kill her. It was an accident, an experiment gone wrong, and for that I take responsibility. Do you know why though, we wanted Fyrefly to be convinced to work under us?”

Izuku should his head, mouth clamping shut. He wasn’t supposed to ask questions, and questions directed at him were usually traps.

“Fyrefly was a hero that as a child experienced immense struggle in learning to control her Quirk. She suffered through most of her young life with accidental injuries, and was even once briefly in conflict with her parents because they felt her Quirk was a danger to herself, to the point where she was facing a possible future of eventually suffering from blindness due to the intensity of the light her Quirk gave off at full power. It took years of careful teaching and control, so that she could use her power to serve law enforcement. As a child, she’d pass out before she reached that damage point.
“We theorize that part of this ‘limiter’ is due to an overload, an inability the body has to process our own Quirks. We call this a ‘threshold’, it’s a barrier our own brains put on our bodies, so that we don’t break ourselves using our powers. This limits strength Quirks, or fire Quirks so that we don’t cause permanent damage to ourselves.”

“What does that have to do with me?” Izuku asked hesitantly. Mr. Shin answered warmly, apparently spurred on by his grudging curiosity.

“Because your Quirk by its very nature sees how Quirks work! With enough time and information, we’ve learned that you can guess the nature of someone’s Quirk, rationalize it, and guess what the person might do with it given their personality type. Your Quirk is a gift of the rarest sort, Midoriya. It is the gift of observation, knowledge, and truth.”

Truth.

Magne had told him that, a long time ago. Izuku startled at the memory, having thought he’d forgotten it. He could see looking at Mr. Shin now that everything the man said was true, or at least he felt it was true. Izuku couldn’t see any signs of deceit- the man genuinely thought he’d somehow be integral to his research. The question was ‘how?’.

“I told you that my Quirk has the ability to take Quirks from others. It also however has the ability to gift those Quirks to those I deem worthy. However, the body’s limit is still in place for these individuals- there comes a point where their body places a barrier on itself.

Tomura is my disciple, and I wish to gift him with the ability of All For One, in time. However, he will need as many abilities accessible to him as possible if he wishes to carry out our vision. He won’t have the luxury I’ve had of slowly accumulating Quirks, storing them, and allowing my body to adjust to their presence. So I’ve hand-picked you Midoriya, to be an important part of this legacy.”

The shadowed figure beyond the other side of the curtain sat up then, gesturing for Mr. Shin to aid him. The doctor stood, adjusting thick green spectacles before reaching to draw back the curtain.

Izuku held back a gasp.

All For One’s body was a patchwork quilt of burns and scar tissue. Worse than Dabi, worse than anyone Izuku had ever seen. Where his eyes should be was mottled skin, but it felt like he was staring directly at him. Izuku flinched, nearly taking a step backwards until some residual reminder from his mom about ‘manners’ stopped him.

“it’s a terrible sight, isn’t it?” All For One said, echoing Izuku’s thoughts. He didn’t sound angry by the boy’s reaction, maybe darkly amused. “This is the reality of what Quirks can do to people, if left undisciplined. My Quirk has over time damaged my body, to the point that the regeneration Quirk
I've collected could only do so much.” He lifted his arms, spreading them widely. “I ask you, how much of your life has been negatively affected by the presence of Quirks? When you were thought to be Quirkless you were bullied, when you discovered you had one it crippled you with too much information too quickly. Similarly, I’ve watched the world fall to pieces, become more and more divided everyday due to the presence of Quirks. But, what if we could stop it?”

“I-I don’t understand.” Izuku admitted, more than a little thrown by all of this. Sure, when he was very young and maybe a bit upset, he’d thought about it. What would it have been like to grow up normally? What would’ve happened if he hadn’t been bullied for being Quirkless? If he’d been Quirkless, maybe he wouldn’t have been kidnapped. But… there were people who helped others with Quirks. Heroes like All Might, or Present Mic or Thirteen or Mrs. Joke. They were heroes! Would they be needed if there were no Quirks to begin with?

Would he have hurt (killed) Fyrefly if neither of them had Quirks from the start?

“I know you’re not a villain, Izuku.” All For One’s voice was soft, nearly parental. Izuku wasn’t sure why it made the back of his eyes burn. Maybe it was because he was the only one to acknowledge how unfair his life was. “I know you never wanted this life, and I’m deeply sorry for taking you away from your family. But I wanted to save you from a life of harassment, of danger. Your Quirk is special, it has the potential to enable me, enable Tomura, to stop it all.”

Izuku didn’t think Shigaraki was a hero. In fact, the thought of Tomura being called a hero made anger seethe at the back of his throat, and Izuku was rarely angry like that. Yet… Tomura respected All For One, perhaps even loved him from the way he spoke about him. All For One, despite his appearance… didn’t seem like a villain.


Izuku was afraid of making demands, but even so he bared his teeth and stood his ground. He couldn’t do that, not again.

All For One smiled, and it was a kind expression. A wave of relief washed over Izuku as he spoke.

“You won’t have to kill anyone, my boy. All I ask from you is the chance to use your Quirk, your body, as the unique vessel it can be.”

“Your Quirk allows you to store and compartmentalize much more information than the human brain would normally be able to hold.” Mr. Shin explained. “My theory is that it’s not just visual or audio memory, but kinetic as well. As a result, I think your Quirk could bypass the ‘Quirk Threshold’ limit if given some adjustments. If we’re correct, when using other Quirks stored in you, you could avoid going into Quirk Shock much longer than the average person. If done correctly, you wouldn’t activate these Quirks unless you consciously ‘unlocked’ them from your long-term memory storage. Sort of like an inventory in a video game, your body would not acknowledge the Quirks and their presence until you ‘equipped’ yourself with them.”
That sounded sort of cool, actually. It’d be sort of like having a secret power storage, like a special attack. Izuku considered it, mulling the idea over in his mind.

“What would you have to do to make it work?” He asked, because he got the feeling his Quirk wouldn’t be able to just do this organically. Mr. Shin turned to rummage in a file cabinet, putting back the files on Fyrefly in the process. He finally pulled out another, thicker stack of paper, thumbing through it until he found the right page. This he handed to Izuku, who took it to find that it was a diagram of the brain. He couldn’t read all of the words, some of the characters beyond his limited comprehension. Yet he got a sense that it was a chart, the pictures outlining a section of the brain in bright yellow highlighter.

“It’d involve a minor surgery, which I would put you under for. In order for this procedure to work, you won’t remember this surgery until you consciously thought about a Quirk you’d already collected and activated it. You wouldn’t want to activate all of the Quirks at once, and you wouldn’t want to accidentally activate one without realizing it. We’d use a combination of hypnosis and physical alteration to ensure that this won’t happen. You won’t activate the Quirks until the word is spoken.”

Izuku balked at the idea of surgery, honestly afraid. He didn’t like the idea of someone like the doctor rifling through his brain, even if his procedure seemed detailed and organized. There was something else he didn’t like.

“You mentioned that to do this, I’d have to take Quirks from others?”

“Yes. Luckily for the world, artificial Quirks have yet to be created. It’s beyond science as it stands right now.” Mr. Shin confirmed. “However, I can tell you that the process of Quirk extraction is physically painless. Emotionally distressing, but no lasting physical damage will occur. It could also be seen as a blessing- whoever you choose will have time to adjust to being Quirkless, before we take this process to a larger scale. We’d also allow you to choose who you would like to collect Quirks from, within reason.”

Larger scale.

Izuku shivered, feeling all kinds of uncertain about all of this. But no one was going to get hurt in theory, and he could control which Quirks he collected. He could collect from villains, or from people who hurt others with their Quirks. He’d have these Quirks under lock and key as well, at least until Tomura was ready to accept the Quirks onto his own person.

“There’s one more thing I’d like to offer to sweeten the deal.” All For One mentioned. “After this event, you’d be able to live a Quirkless life at home with your mother. We’d recognize you as a member of our League, and protect your family from all harm. You could go home without headaches, without mental overload, without a Quirk that burdens you. You could show those in your neighbourhood the path to living healthy, Quirkless lives.”

The offer froze something in Izuku’s chest, making it tight. Until this point, he’d given up on his
dream of seeing his mom ever again. The idea had been laughable, and at the worst of times something cruel to taunt him. He’d tried to bury that longing, stuff it in the back of his mind where it couldn’t cut him. What All For One was offering... it was better than that. He could be important to his community, could help others in a way that didn’t involve having a flashy Quirk. He could make a difference. He wouldn’t even have to hurt anyone.

It was something Izuku could’ve never imagined he could allow himself to want.

His hands came to cover his mouth, as if to stifle the longing climbing its way up his throat.

“I’ll do it.”

All For One held out a hand, offering it to shake. Izuku took it, the hand warm despite the chill in the room. Though All For One had no eyes, there was no missing the satisfaction written on his face.

“Welcome aboard, Izuku Midoriya.”

****

It was three days after the attack on Hosu when Shinsou Hitoshi got a text from an unknown number on his phone.

He’d been lying on his bed, an arm over his face so he didn’t have to look at the posters plastered to his ceiling and walls. He’d learned of Aizawa-Sensei’s disappearance yesterday, and the news along with the cancellation of school had lead him down a path of despair he didn’t often fall into.

First Midoriya, then his favourite teacher and hero. It felt like he might be just a little cursed. Everyone he cared about lately had gone missing, and there wasn’t even schoolwork to take his mind off of the coincidence of it. School had been cancelled for at least a week, and Hitoshi really wasn’t used to not doing anything. Just once, he wished that UA wasn’t as much in the spotlight as it was. With all of the recent events, reporters had been lined up around the gate, clamoring to get a piece from Principal Nedzu or one of the teachers about how they felt or what their opinions were or ‘do you have confidence that Eraserhead will be found?’

No one cared about Midoriya, he was old news now. They’d forgotten him as soon as Noumu had swarmed a city and injured half a dozen civilians.

His foster parents had even gotten the younger kids to leave him alone, clearly worried that he was one bad day away from doing something weird and out of character like picking up a musical language or heaven forbid, jogging. To be fair, he had suddenly picked a sitcom series and had been binge watching all day today whilst feeling more than a little useless.
What he wanted was to do something concrete, but if he was caught so much as considering going to find some answers solo, he risked immediate expulsion. UA had released a statement, politely telling its students that in under no circumstances were they to try taking matters into their own hands.

Hitoshi thought he might go insane, just a little bit. What was the point of being heroes in training (well in his case a hopeful hero in training) if they couldn’t even apply their training in the real world?

This was all to say that he lunged at his phone when it chimed, both surprised and a little hopeful. He didn’t have many people on his phone, and if Midoriya was texting him then he would have to act, right?

It wasn’t Midoriya. Hitoshi frowned, reading the text and feeling both disappointment and bewilderment.

*Hi, this is Shouto Todoroki. I’m Midoriya’s friend, and I think you are too? I’m texting because I think you know about why Midoriya went missing.*

- Shouto

Hitoshi felt unease twisting in his gut. He wasn’t about to just spill Midoriya’s secrets, not to someone he didn’t know very well. He’d only had limited interactions with Todoroki, and the boy had always seemed like an aloof prick. He’d learned his lesson last time, if the world knew what Midoriya was then they would not take it well.

*I don’t know what you’re talking about, sorry.*

-Shinsou

Almost as soon as he’d sent the text, the text bubble on Todoroki’s end began typing. Shinsou held his breath, feeling exasperation and irritation settle into his chest. He thought about just blocking the boy, but was admittedly a little curious. Selfishly, he wanted a reason to dislike the boy, if only because he was another competitor for a spot in 1-A.

*Midoriya was taken by a Noumu in the fight at Hosu. I was there. Please, I think he’s in danger, and I don’t know who else to talk to about it.*

-Shouto

His words made Shinsou pause. He knew that Midoriya’s life with the League hadn’t been idyllic, far from it. Dread washed over him, his typing faster as he sat up in his bed and curled against the
You sure he was taken? He didn’t go willingly?

-Shinsou

Why would he go willingly? He was taken.

-Shouto

The panic set in, coiling tightly inside of him. Shinsou was on his feet, already scrambling to find his jacket amongst the organized hangers sitting in his closet. As he did so, he typed.

Go to the cat café at this address-

He added the link, double checking it was the café two blocks from his house.

There’s something you should know, but if what you’re saying’s true then Midoriya’s in danger and we need to help him.

-Shinsou

I’m on my way. A cat café? Really?

-Shouto

I work there part-time. The boss will give us a private room so we’re not overheard. Don’t judge.

-Shinsou

He didn’t tell Todoroki that part of the reason he chose the cat café was because Hitoshi had the feeling he was going to need all the furry support he could get to get the full story out. He had a bad feeling threatening to crawl its way out of his skin, and it was only getting worse.
Cabin Fever

Chapter Summary

Aizawa: "I've only had Eri for a day and a half but if anything happened to her I'd kill everyone in this room and then myself."

Chapter Notes

Hi, yes, hello!

Warnings in this chapter for non graphic torture, right at the beginning!!

Thank you for reading, and for all your kind kudos and comments <3 I start second semester of my last year of college come Monday, and I'm ready to kick some ass after a nice, long holiday :) I hope your new year brings you good things!

Shouta woke woozy from pain, slow and sluggish. The feeling for a moment brought him back to USJ, and he wondered if he was still in a body cast. He automatically checked for his students, and found instead only a medical room and concrete walls. He was strapped into a hospital bed, the binds cutting into his wrists.

He was thrown by the yawning, blank gap of how he’d gotten to this bed, when before he’d been tied to a chair. He could feel rather than see that there was blood matted in his long hair, so that gave him a clue to where those memories went. He checked automatically from broken bones, running his tongue on the inside of his mouth. He still had all his teeth and no broken fingers or toes, though his nose felt swollen. There was a copper taste in the back of his throat, but it was old. His face was probably bruised, but he could still see, so it probably wasn’t too bad.

There was a small sound to his left, almost a sigh. He turned, and found Eri seated in a dentist’s chair. She was staring at him calmly, dressed in a pale blue medical gown. She wasn’t crying or flinching, despite the fact that an IV was taped to the crook of her elbow. In fact, she had very little expression at all on her face, beyond interest when she saw that he’d woken up.

She must have seen the confusion written on his face, because she was prompt to speak. Her voice was high, softer than when she’d been screaming at him at Hosu. This close, Shouta could see that she was probably no older than eight.
“You tried to fight Chisaki when he wanted to take blood from you. You head-butted him in the face, but he hit you until you stopped moving. He doesn’t like it when you fight him, you should be more careful next time. He took your blood anyway.”

Now that she mentioned it, Shouta could feel an IV also strapped to the crook of his elbow. He exhaled through his nose, wincing when it hurt.

“That sounds like me.” He kept his voice light and soft, very aware of how he must seem to her if she saw all that. Shouta had never reacted well to medical procedures to begin with, and he was trained at this point to be as resistant as possible to all demands of villains. He wouldn’t be surprised if she was a little afraid of him, given that she had nothing to compare him to in terms of heroes. “How long have I been out?” He asked.

Eri had her knees curled close to her chin, so that her cheek could rest on her kneecaps. Her long white hair seemed to swallow her, unbrushed and wild in a way children left to their own devices often were.

“Probably about eight hours. You’ve been here though for almost three days. He keeps hitting you, and you keep forgetting.” Her pale brows knit together in concern. “You should stop that, or you’re going to have to be taken apart and put back together again. I hate when he does that.”

“Does he do that often?” Shouta’s tone was light, but inside there was something cold and reptilian rearing its head. The way Eri so casually spoke about her treatment here was sending alarm bells ringing through his head.

She didn’t answer, her gaze sliding away from him and towards the door as if she heard something. Sure enough, Shouta could soon make out the sound of footsteps approaching. Eri uncurled her legs, back straightening. She did not look at him as her hands curled together in her lap.

“He’s coming. I’m not supposed to talk to you without permission. Let him take blood from you, or he’ll have to take you apart again. Don’t upset him.” She fell quiet, and soon enough Overhaul opened the door.

The first thing Shouta noticed about the villain was the amount of layers he wore. Over a shirt he wore a sweater, and over that sweater a medical gown. He had gloves on his hands, the thick latex kind. The witch doctor’s mask on his face never seemed to leave him.

Overhaul’s gaze met his own, and though Shouta couldn’t see the man’s mouth he got the impression the man was smiling.

“Good, you’re awake. I was beginning to wonder if that concussion was worse than I’d estimated.” He gestured to a table on wheels, where there was a bottle of water with a drinking straw, and some juice boxes. “You must be thirsty. Do you prefer water, or orange juice? Keeps the blood sugars up.”

Shouta didn’t bother to deign him with a reply, and Overhaul sighed as if he were a naughty child refusing to eat dinner. The villain selected water, holding the straw to Shouta’s lips. Shouta drank, if only because he got the impression that if he fought the next step would be a saline drip.
The water was cold, and refreshing, and quickly he realized how thirsty he was. Shouta drank deeply, until the bottle was emptied and taken away. He felt he could probably down another without a problem. Overhaul however seemed to be entirely clinical in his care, and didn’t offer another. Instead he turned, looking over a vitals monitor strapped to Eri. It beeped steadily, showing her heartbeat and oxygen levels as steady.

Overhaul spoke as he took the arm with the IV in it, preparing methodically to take blood.

“I take it my daughter hasn’t been boring you with chatter, has she? I’m afraid she’s been misbehaving lately. It’s a phase I’m hoping she’ll soon grow out of.”

Shouta watched in silence as the man capped vial after vial of the girl’s blood, drawing about five before finally releasing her arm. Eri’s face had paled, but her vitals remained steady. The hand that was free was bunched in the skirt of her medical gown.

Overhaul carefully labelled each vial, placing them in a row of containers for later. That done, he turned to fully address Shouta. His gold eyes roved over the man’s body, as if he were looking at a particularly interesting specimen of insect.

“Now, I’ve already taken blood from you today, but I wanted to establish something of a relationship now that you’re awake and lucid. As I’m sure you realize, you haven’t been the best patient the past few days.”

“You haven’t been the best doctor, to be fair. Terrible bedside manner.” Shouta drawled. Overhaul’s eyes narrowed, birdlike and shrewd.

“Yes, well. I’m told I have a bit of a rough hand. But I wanted to discuss with you the nature of your Quirk one on one, and touch base. You see, I’ve collected you for study because you hold the key to possibly make things for our cause much easier.”

Quick as lightning, the man’s gloves were off. Shouta tensed, letting out a snarl of contempt as the hand whipped around to rest on Eri’s head. She let out a shriek of unbridled terror, her form blurring, coming apart at the seams for an instant.

Only an instant.

Shouta’s eyes burned, his Quirk activating without much thought. His eyes blazed red as he strained against his restraints, his face twisted in concentration.

Chisaki hummed, his hand still pressed to the girl’s head, but his Quirk deactivated.

“Good, I thought you might have that saviour instinct, being a hero and a teacher. Now, keep that activated as long as you can, while my hand rests on Eri’s head. I want to know how long you can keep your Quirk activated.”
Shouta was barely listening. His gaze was trained on Chisaki, Eri’s face a blur in the background. He could hear her breaths, fast and high. He could feel as the time stretched the pain of blood vessels beginning to strain, his eyes drying out and the urge to blink growing.

He held it for a full minute before his eyes watered and he was forced to blink. There was the sound of Eri’s terrified whimper as Chisaki’s Quirk activated again, but only for a moment. When Shouta opened his eyes again, Chisaki was already putting his gloves back on.

“Sixty seconds, not a bad start.” He reached for a clipboard, writing the information down with a pen. Shouta looked at Eri, who was in tears but doing her best not to show it. She wiped them quickly away with the back of her hands, clearly frustrated with herself. When she caught him looking, she only cried harder.

Shouta was breathing heavily, the exertion of his Quirk running through him. He tugged inefectually against his restraints, the leather biting into his skin.

Overhaul seemed pleased. He turned to Shouta, a placid expression on his face.

“I’ll be back in thirty minutes to try that again for the rest of the day. We’ll go until I feel you can’t any more without bringing permanent damage on yourself.”

“You’re a basta-”

“Please, there are children present.” Overhaul tutted. He turned then to Eri, who was still shivering. His expression didn’t shift at seeing her distress.

“Eri, you’re to go back to your room until I call you again. There’ll be someone outside to escort you. In the meantime, you can have a juice box and a piece of fruit to keep your blood sugars up.”

He handed both of these to her, which she took automatically. Her gaze wasn’t leaving Shouta’s face.

Shouta tried to convey in his face what he wanted to say, that he was going to get her out of this situation. He wasn’t sure if Eri believed, from the way she kept scrubbing at her face. She stood, leaving without a goodbye. Her head was hunched, and Shouta watched the two of them leave with simmering fury humming in his bones.

He began to look around, even as his head throbbed. He was going to find something to get out of these restraints as quickly as possible. Then, he was going to find Midoriya, and deal with Chisaki himself.
Three days was not a lot of time to come up with a rescue operation. It especially wasn’t a long amount of time when everything had to be done under the radar, in secret. Katsuki had never really been good at subtlety, and his mom was beginning to notice how much he was dodging her questions as to where he was going and what he was doing every day.

At least school had been cancelled. Small fucking mercies. Katsuki’s routine since the confrontation at the mall had been as followed: Wake up, go for a run, shower, and claim he was going over to Kirishima’s. Kirishima would claim he was going to Katsuki’s. Everyone had a buddy system, who could cover if needed. They would all meet up at Ochako’s, who lived alone. Her apartment was small and crowded, but private.

Everyone politely said nothing about the plastic dishware, or the fact that Ochako almost always served plain rice as a snack with watery, cheap tea. Even Katsuki knew to do so was unnecessary, and probably an excuse for her to tear him a new asshole.

So he drank his green tea (which still tasted like dirt to him), and ate the rice, and occasionally brought snacks under the pretense of trying to be ‘social’. It was Yayaozuru’s idea really. Ochako seemed to appreciate the effort.

Together, they brainstormed about how they could get Midoriya and their teacher back.

“We know the teachers are going to try and organize an attack, right? It makes sense, so why don’t we ride on that?” Denki proposed, rifling through a bag of chips.

“Ribbit. You mean use them as a distraction? What if we get caught by one of the teachers? Then what?” Tsuyu pressed her finger to her cheek, a habit she had when deep in thought. Denki hummed, trying to work around it.

“Disguises maybe? Like Momo could make a bunch of costumes for us!”

“You just want an excuse to wear a costume.” Ashido sighed, rolling her eyes.

“Is there anything wrong with that?” He protested, which caused a bit of an uproar in which Mina reached over to noogie him while Sero and Bakugou egged her on. This ended in Denki and Mina rolling off Ochako’s bed, wrestling on the floor while their friends cheered them on.

Kirishima sighed, darting a helpless glance towards Ochako and Tsuyu. The two girls looked like their patience was starting to wear thin, and Momo and Jirou weren’t far behind.

They’d been at this for the past three days, and the debate as to how they were going to manage to break into the League’s headquarters, when they weren’t even sure where it might be in the first place, had left them a little stumped.
“A lot of pros tend to have tracking devices of some kind on their person, it’s possible that Sensei’s got one the adults know about.” Momo had pointed this out from where she was seated daintily on the floor, sipping tea pensively from one of Ochako’s mismatched mugs.

“But then there’s the question of how do we find out his location?”

Satou was normally pretty reserved- preferring to speak seldom but to be a voice of reason. Kirishima had called him and filled him in on the details, and now he was suddenly glad he had. Satou always brought snacks, and was quick to poke holes in flawed logic. “You’d need to get a teacher on your side to find out where Sensei’s tracker is saying he is, and you won’t get that with our current plan.” He said this around an almond croissant, fingers still dusted with powdered sugar as he wrapped the table with one hand in thought. “No pro would reasonably let us do this.”

Bakugou growled, the sound low and frustrated.

“Then we need to find a way to get that information! Sneak into a meeting or find someone who can and find out where the villains are hiding!”

“We’re all risking expulsion as it is! Do you really want to add to the risk by trying to access classified information?” Yayaozuru snapped, her arms crossed over her chest and a pinched expression on her face.

Bakugou let out a wordless growl, stalking to his feet. He padded towards the kitchen, evidently looking to get away from everyone for a moment so that he could calm down.

“Well, that’s a new record for how quickly we piss someone off.” Kaminari commented dryly, glancing at Kirishima. Eijirou was busy trying not to look frustrated, staring up at the ceiling as if asking why planning with his class was like herding cats.

“He’s proposing too many risky moves; we’re going to get caught.” Momo defended hotly. Jirou took her hand, rubbing absent-minded circles into the palm without a word. “We’re not heroes. If the villains catch us, we’re going to die. I think we need to keep that in mind.”

“But if we take no risks at all, we’re not going to be able to save Midoriya.” Ochako interjected.

“Sounds like we’re at a stalemate.” Satou hummed thoughtfully. He fiddled with the plastic ends of his hoodie strings. “I don’t think we’re going to come up with a solution today, in any event.”

Ochako let out a sharp exhale, but her shoulders were slumped in a knowing resignation. Same as the last two meetings, they hadn’t been able to all agree. Because they all couldn’t agree, they couldn’t move forward. They’d talked early on, and decided this mission was too dangerous to do anything while divided.

That agreement felt hollow and frustrating, now.
“I’m sorry, but as the only student representative at this meeting it’s my duty to keep everyone safe.” Yayaozuru murmured, her head ducked low and her eyes trained on her lap. Ochako’s annoyance thawed as she saw how torn she looked, her shoulders hunched as if expecting to be yelled at. “I just… I can’t stand the thought of losing anyone. We’ve all come so close to being hurt or dying since this began. I can’t have that on my conscience.”

“It wouldn’t be your fault if one of us did get hurt, Ribbit.” Tsuyu spoke then, having been quiet and solemn throughout this entire debate. “You can’t be expected to look after all of us, not like in class. This isn’t class, this is a real mission. There’s going to be risks.”

“She’s right!” Jirou confirmed “If I decided to do something stupid and reckless, even if you knew about it, I wouldn’t blame you if I got hurt! That’s my choice.”

“But you’re still going to feel guilt.” Ochako stated, having already guessed Momo’s answer. The other girl didn’t reply, her dark eyes wide and wet.

“I feel weak.” Momo admitted wetly “But when the villains invaded UA, I could only get swept up in things. There wasn’t a plan, there wasn’t control. I almost had to watch my friends get hurt, people I was responsible for on school grounds.” Her hand tightened around Jirou’s, squeezing as if to ground herself. “I want to be brave, but I don’t think I’m brave enough for that.”

Ochako wanted to find the right words to say, but in truth it was a fear that she couldn’t identify with. On some level, she’d always been able to turn off the part of her brain that worried like Momo’s did. At least, when they were on a mission that is. She could worry all she liked before, but when fighting Ochako related more to Bakugou. This was a secret she carried, the thrill of being one with her own body in a way that couldn’t be explained. She wasn’t a brain when defending others, she was a feeling.

But Momo, she was all brain. Ochako wondered at how exhausting that must be.

“Ribbit. I’m scared too, Momo. But that doesn’t mean I’m not brave enough. It means I have to borrow bravery from others, so we can work together. Ribbit.” Tsuyu smiled an amphibious smile. “Before coming to UA, my friends were my brothers and sisters, with the exception of one middle school friend. Then suddenly, I’m surrounded by people who like me. Who love me. We love you too, but then that connection becomes scary. You don’t want to lose anyone.”

She reached for Ochako’s hand, a move that never failed to make Ochako blush and feel jittery. Her girlfriend’s words only proved to make her blush harder.

“When I get scared like that, I look to Ochako. I look to Bakugou, or Kirishima, or Ashido or Kaminari. All of you are brave, brave enough that you inspire others and call them to action. Then, I remember why I wanted to be a hero. I remember I want to be that for someone. And suddenly, Ribbit, I’m not as scared.”
“That’s beautiful. And also incredibly Gay.” Kaminari piped up from where he was lying on the floor. He had tears in the corner of his eyes. Tsuyu smiled more widely.

“Guess I’m gay, Ribbit.”

“Didn’t you know we’re only supposed to have like, one Gay per class? Can’t be too diverse. We need at least one straight person.”

“Aren’t you bi?” Satou rolled his head towards Kaminari, snorting in disbelief as he saw that the teen had contorted himself into a pile of cushions on the floor. Kaminari grinned, the expression impish. He then winked and fluttered his eyelashes in his direction.

“I prefer the term ‘dying alone’, but bi works too. Besides, Ashido’s straight, so by law there has to be like, one other person in our class at least who’s also straight.”

Ashido examined her nails in mock-irritation, but there was an amused smirk on her face.

“God Kaminari, not all straight people know each other or want to date.”

“You mean you don’t want to date Satou?” Kaminari clutched his chest, a horrified expression on his face. “What are you both going to do on Valentine’s day? Die alone with me?”

Satou threw a pillow at his face, rolling his eyes.

The group of teenagers broke into cackling giggles, the sound light and lifting. Even Momo joined in, scrubbing at her cheeks until they were red. Her smile looked a little less forced. Some of the tension had melted, like a rare sort of magic. Ochako held the memory close to her chest, tucking it away. She didn’t know if they’d get this again for a long, long while. The next time, she wanted Izuku to be there with them, laughing as well.

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Katsuki itched with the knowledge that they were running out of time. He’d never been good at being patient, but every attempt to plan made him acutely aware of just how much time was being wasted. He wanted to move, and he wasn’t entirely convinced that he wasn’t running backwards this way.

He breathed through his nose slowly, exhaling through his mouth. Automatically, he checked his phone to see when his next therapy appointment was. What he found instead was an email in which the title made him frown:

**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

The email address was from Mr. Kyokan, and though it shouldn’t have right off the bat made Katsuki uneasy it did. It took him a moment to realise why. In all of his years in and out of therapy,
of working with Kyokan through his issues, the man had never cancelled a session. In fact, Katsuki
off hand couldn’t even remember a time the man took time off due to being sick or on vacation.

The feeling of unease grew when his phone abruptly began to ring, the number lighting up and
revealing itself to be Aiko. Katsuki barely let it ring once before he was holding the phone to his ear,
greeting her gruffly. He hardly got through a hello.

“Hey, has my uncle been in contact with you recently?” Her tone was polite, but there was a tightly
strung wire in her voice that made Katsuki’s chest go tight and his blood run cold.

“No, he’s cancelled my next appointment. What’s going on?”

Aiko gasped, or maybe let out a small sob, the sound muffled by what Katsuki assumed was the
palm of her hand. Her voice was trembling.

“W-we hadn’t heard from him for a few days, so dad went to check on him. His house was empty,
but he’d left a note.”

“What? What the fuck did it say?”

“Th-That he’d be back soon and that… he was fixing something. Katsuki, you should know it
mentioned y-you.”

“Him?”

Why would Mr. Kyokan bother to mention him? Katsuki’s mouth was dry as he swallowed, his grip
sweaty and slick around his phone.

“What’s it say?”

“It’s just an address.” Aiko stuttered “We checked, but it just seems like a warehouse. Katsuki, my
uncle… he wouldn’t show it but disappearing like this is bad. His Quirk… If he’s gone there’s a
reason. I want to explain. I’m not supposed to, but I think… I think uncle needs you. I think we need
to talk. Where are you?”

This plan that he and his classmates had was a secret. It needed to stay that way. But Katsuki had
known Aiko since he’d picked up running. She’d known him at his most volatile, and stuck through
it because she claimed to enjoy his company. He’d made it clear at every turn that she could stop
being his friend. In fact, he’d actively encouraged it at certain points in his life.

Aiko had vouched for him when his mom had been afraid of his transition, and uninformed. She’d
offered to talk to his mom, to explain to her things that Katsuki didn’t have the patience or kindness
to do. She’d egged him on when he pushed himself to a new mile, a better running time. He’d been
there to bully her into asking her girlfriend out, because she’d been a (self-proclaimed) ‘useless
lesbian’ about the whole situation. He’d been a babysitter for her family before, and he hated
children. Not to mention all Mr. Kyokan had done for him.
Izuku was his first friend, and Kirishima was… something to him, to say the least. But Aiko was Katsuki’s best friend.

“…Write down the address. There’s other people here, but we can go for a walk.”

He could hear the noise of relief she made, sick with it.

“Thank you. I’ll be right there; I just have to put my sister down for a nap.”

“It’s what heroes are s’posed to do, right?” Katsuki shrugged, though Aiko couldn’t see the motion. He was bad at being comforting, but he knew the go-to lines. They felt awkward in his mouth. “It’s gonna be ok, yeah? Your uncle’s smart, smarter than most. He’s going to be fine. I’m not gonna let him be anything but alright, yeah?”

Aiko laughed, the sound wet and grateful.

“I’ll be right there.” She hung up, and Katsuki was left with a black screen and the feeling that somehow this was all connected crawling down the back of his neck like a spider. He just couldn’t see it, not yet.
At a glance, *Pretty Kitty* was the kind of café that Shouto might have associated with fourteen-year-old girls. It was very pink, the staff upon welcoming him were all dressed in varying pastel uniforms, and the café tables were shaped like love hearts. Through a window, he could see the cat room, where amongst others a fat white Persian was lounging against the pane, giving him a baleful looking through slit eyes. He blinked at it, it blinked at him. Seemingly content with the interaction, the cat turned away.

“That’s Patchouli. She’s always sassy like that.” The voice made Shouta turn, finding Shinsou seated at a café table partially obscured by a leafy potted plant. Shouto hadn’t seen him, probably because with the way the boy’s hair feathered out and upwards he also looked a bit like some sort of strange purple plant.

He was holding a laminated menu, which he set down on the table to gesture to the vacant seat across from him.

“There’s gonna be a fifteen-minute wait, but then we have the cat room booked for a full hour. Working here gets me some benefits. Might as well get something to drink, right?”

Shouto took a seat, unsure what to make of all this. He was no longer concussed, but he still felt a little like nothing was real. He didn’t know much about Shinsou, but the sullen-faced boy didn’t strike him as someone who would work here of all places.

Perhaps sensing his thoughts, Shinsou smiled. Shouto always thought the boy looked bone-tired, in a way that didn’t seem normal for someone their age. His smile only highlighted the dark circles that seemed habitual on his face.
“I have a soft spot for cats, and the owner likes me. I started working here for my second job and just never left. Anything you want’s on the house.”

Two jobs? Shouto could hardly imagine juggling one with school, given the intensity of UA’s programs. He felt a twinge of discomfort, suddenly very aware of his plain but expensive jacket and designer shoes. Despite everything negative his father’s name brought him, he’d never really had to worry about money. He glanced at the menu, trying to seek out the cheapest thing. As he looked, he chanced a question about the nature of their meeting.

“Thank you for meeting with me. I’m more than a bit confused lately, and it doesn’t seem like I’m going to be getting any answers as to Izuku’s disappearance any time soon from UA.”

“That’s probably a safe assumption.” Shinsou admitted neutrally, His face was purposefully blank, though Shouto looked for any indicator of what could be going on. Shinsou gave him nothing, merely exhaling deeply and folding his hands in front of him in a gesture that seemed oddly nervous. “This is the sort of information that would… negatively impact many people, as well as UA’s reputation.”

“If it’s that delicate, I have to ask how you know?”

Shinsou’s brows ticked together, an oddly guilty expression flickering across his face.

“I wasn’t supposed to find out. I… stumbled on it by accident, you could say. Either way, I’m not supposed to tell anyone. It’s dangerous for you to know, for your sake and Midoriya’s.”

“Why’d you agree to talk to me, then?”

“Because I think that the adults are in over their heads, and I can’t just sit back and watch it happen.”

Shinsou leaned forward, until he could speak in a hush by Shouto’s ear.

“The villains have Eraserhead. They have Midoriya. They’re going to go for All Might, if Midoriya’s theories are correct. They’re picking off top heroes one by one, and I don’t think they’re going to stop there. UA’s struggling to keep it quiet, and they won’t be able to avoid press forever.” Shouto felt a chill run down his spine. He hadn’t known Aizawa-Sensei had been taken.

Leaning back, Shinsou’s eyes narrowed.

“I don’t make friends easily; my Quirk doesn’t allow for it. But Midoriya, he didn’t care. He got me an apprenticeship with Aizawa-Sensei, ate lunch with me, and forgave me when I almost ruined his life because I was jealous. But I think all of this is getting bigger than just the pros can handle, and I think if something’s not done, then Midoriya’s going to end up the scapegoat for it. I also don’t know if I can trust the adults, but I have a pretty good idea of your character from Midoriya. I have to trust someone.”

Shouto had a half dozen questions buzzing in his head, on the tip of his tongue.
Shinsou cast a glance towards the back room, relief breaking out on his features.

Shouto turned his head, seeing an employee in a pastel-pink dress and apron gesturing. It was their turn to go inside. Shouto set down the menu, thankfully relieved of the duty of making awkward conversation over something to drink. He wanted answers, and he had the feeling that they’d be using the full hour to get them.

They entered the cat room together, a quiet place filled with dozens of reflective eyes that turned to peer at them upon entrance.

Shouto had never felt one way or the other towards cats. Personally, he didn’t hate nor particularly like them. It was clear however that the cats knew Shinsou, because a half dozen immediately hopped down from whatever perch they’d been seated on to trot over to him, mewing and yowling.

The room was filled with cat climbers, scratching posts, toys and colourful food dishes. In the centre, several bean bag chairs and cushions were laid out. Shinsou made a beeline for those, the cats weaving in and around his legs with practiced ease. They soon too took notice of Shouto, a few of the braver ones trotting forward to inspect him.

In particular, one stood out to him. It was a tabby cat, small with orange and brown splotches of colour. One gold-green eye peered up at him, while the other was very clearly gone. A scar ran along the side of the cat’s face, opposite to his own. She sat in front of him, peering up at his face with placid interest. When she opened her mouth, it was to squeak authoritatively.

“That’s Mika, she’s the little queen of this place.”

Shinsou spoke from where he was already seated in one of the bean bag chairs. In his lap was the Persian, Patchouli. She was watching the exchange with a dignified air, bottlebrush tail flicking over Shinsou’s knee. Shinsou frowned as Shouto looked awkwardly at the cat, clearly unsure of what to do.

“She wants you to pick her up. Scoop under her legs, let her rest her front half on your shoulder.” Cautiously, Shouto followed instruction. Almost as soon as he touched her, he felt a rumbling vibration tremble through Mika’s body. She purred in approval, wriggling until sure enough she was resting on Shouto’s shoulder. Her cold, wet nose pressed against his ear lobe, so he had her purrs at full volume in his ear. Shouto carried her over as he went to sit down, uncertain but oddly pleased that he wasn’t immediately rejected by this cat he’d just met.

Sitting down, Mika immediately went to his lap and settled. Shouto instinctively rested a hand on her head, copying Shinsou’s hands as they scratched at Patchouli’s ears and ruff.

Shinsou took a deep, steadying breath. As he did, he wove his fingers into the Persian’s long, white fur. Then, he began to tell Shouto what he knew of Midoriya’s story.
“This wasn’t part of the arrangement.”

Eri startled from sleep, a loud banging noise sounding from outside of her cell. At first, she thought she might still be dreaming, her mind fuzzy. She’d gone to bed crying, and so her eyes were still sore and red.

Eraserhead had been taken apart, put back together in front of her. He’d been trying to distract Chisaki, piss him off. Eri had watched in terror as the man had spat in Chisaki’s face, headbuttiing him when he leaned forward to try and snarl curses in his face.

Eri could remember the look in Eraserhead’s eyes, the hatred and burning defiance in the man’s eyes every time Chisaki had approached him. Even tied in place, the man looked dangerous, like a panther held only by a chain around its neck.

Eraserhead had done it to keep him from drawing her blood again, and she’d been relieved and horrified when it had worked. Chisaki hadn’t taken blood from her, ruffled and enraged at the germs from being spit on and boiling with indignation. Eri had watched, screaming and screaming as the man had pressed a hand to Eraserhead’s throat, choking him even as his Quirk crackled to life.

She woke from the nightmare of it, watching someone else unravel before her, rearranged, put back together. In her dream, she’d been able to feel it like she was the one being stitched back together. Eri at first thought that she’d imagined the sound that had woken her.

“You had no right to do what you did!”

The voice wasn’t from her dream; it was from outside. She scrubbed at her face, warily getting to her feet. She quickly woke when she recognized Shigaraki’s placid voice, silkily offering platitudes.

“We didn’t have much choice. Eraserhead put himself in a position where we couldn’t leave him without also leaving behind Eri, who is a key variable in our future operations.”

“I don’t believe you. You wanted Eraserhead for your witch doctor’s experiments since the USJ incident. Don’t try to lie to an informant. I did my part, laid out the groundwork so that you could
collect Midoriya and get out of Hosu. But if you keep trying to play all the cards I’m going to lose my patience.”

Eri got the feeling she was listening to something she wasn’t supposed to hear. Her lips pressed together, a hand over her mouth to quiet her breathing. Hesitantly, she crept closer to the door. There was a crack at the underside of it, just wide enough that if she pressed her cheek to the stone floor she could see a sliver of light, and two shadows.

Shigaraki’s laugh was cold, and it made the hair on the back of Eri’s neck stand on end. It was heavy with scorn.

“You of all people have no right to accuse someone of playing on multiple sides. Are you so heavily invested in your persona at UA that you can separate yourself from it? How many years have you been playing this game for your Spider-Queen?”

The stranger’s voice was snakelike, hissing and poisonous.

“You’re going to find a convenient way to let Eraserhead ‘escape’ before your leader faces off against All Might, or I’m going to become very angry, very quickly. Is that what you want, Tomura Shigaraki? I can have not only UA on your head, but Mistresses’ followers on your hands?”

Silence. Eri strained, listening for some catch of breath or wordless anger. There was nothing, only Shigaraki’s voice speaking out in the darkness. It was deadened of all emotion.

“You know… I think I hate those that straddle the line between hero and villain more than figures like All Might. At least people like him are honest about who they are and what they stand for. How do you think your Mistress would feel if she knew how compromised you are?”

“You have two days before I bring All Might to you. Eraserhead escapes before then, or I take matters into my own hands.”

The voice said, ignoring the jibe.

There was the scrape of heavy boots on the flagstone, retreating from her cell. Eri caught sight of a heavy boot falling inches from her face. She flinched, curling further into the darkness and relative safety of her cell. A moment later, Shigaraki’s softer footsteps also retreated.

The conversation sat with Eri, curled as she was in the dark. She knew Chisaki wanted Eraserhead,
had wanted him for some time. He was never supposed to be here? Someone at UA was also with the League? The thoughts swam in her head, along with the perpetual gnawing worry that she hadn’t seen her brother yet, even though he was supposed to be here.

Where was Izuku? Was he mad at her? Was he not allowed to see her for some reason? There were questions that she didn’t have answers to, and here in her cell she’d never get them. Chisaki would never tell her.

*But do you need Chisaki?*

The thought that crossed her mind was alien, and it startled her with how foreign it felt. She shouldn’t think it, and the fact that she had made her heart stutter in her chest. Unbidden, the image of Eraserhead fighting Chisaki, kicking and spitting in his binds even though there was no escape, came to her. Was this his fault that she was thinking like this? Why did the memory fill her with a sort of burning determination, instead of terror?

*My Quirk is a curse. I hurt people with it, I can’t control it.*

But… that wasn’t entirely true, was it? She had controlled it, when she’d been at Hosu. She’d been very aware of what she was doing, the destruction and panic she singlehandedly caused. She’d been so angry, that it’d felt like her Quirk was sharpened to a knifepoint in her palms. Back then, she could’ve ripped apart the city, and felt entirely in control.

There was an echo of that anger, under all of her terror. It’d been ignited today, watching someone being taken apart trying to protect her. It was new that it’d been directed at Chisaki, iron and cold. She bit her tongue, the pain grounding her and sending an electric jolt that she knew was her Quirk sparking inside of her. It wasn’t drained, not like it usually was. Chisaki had never taken her blood today.

She looked down at her hands, the bandages wrapped tightly about her wrists. Her gaze slid to the door.

*Just the lock. You just need to rewind the lock. You could do it. You have the energy.*

She’d never done anything that small before, but she had to try.

Taking a deep breath, she crept towards the door. Placing her palms against the cold metal lock, Eri closed her eyes. Her Quirk shivered inside of her, uncoiling from the usual place she buried it in her mind. It felt a little like warm bath water, travelling from her chest out into her limbs, lungs, blood.
She gasped as she felt the horn on her head begin to shift, sprouting outwards and up.

Concentrate on the lock. Just the lock. Just the lock…

When she opened her eyes, she could see the thread of the lock’s life, its creation and sale. It was metal, molded in a factory. It’d been installed separate from the door itself, which helped her divide the two in her mind.

Just the lock… Just the lock.

The metal screws began to unwind, unravelling from their places. They fell to the floor, turning molten and hot for a moment. Eri’s Quirk jolted inside of her, increasing. She gritted her teeth, trying to keep a hold of it. She thought again of how Chisaki had smiled when he’d heard Eraserhead scream. The anger sharpened.

The lock began to change, turning less defined and liquid. It began to heat up too, something Eri hadn’t accounted for. Her hands were suddenly beginning to burn. She bit back a shriek, her fingertips scalding quickly. It only lasted a moment, the metal abruptly coming loose from the doorframe.

It fell to the ground, and Eri winced at the loud noise it gave. She dragged her Quirk back viciously, like trying to grab a bag of squirming snakes and put them in a box. The effort hurt, and sweat was dripping down the small of her back before she managed. The horn on her head shrunk back, tucking itself back into her forehead in a way that promised a migraine later.

She fell to her knees, sucking in lungful’s of air as her entire body suddenly felt like it was turned to jelly. The remaining pieces of the lock surrounded her, neatly rendered back to chunks of metal and flecks of paint. The sight made her smile through blurry vision.

She’d done it.

I did it.

It was a long time before she could get to her feet, but she dragged herself eventually to standing. Eri wiped the sweat from her forehead, her mouth tasting like copper and salt. The thought that sat with her filled her with a delirious high, a strength that she wasn’t sure she’d felt before. She didn’t smile, but she ran her fingers along the bare hole where the door’s lock, feeling the roughened texture of the wood.
She didn’t need Chisaki.

Chisaki needed her.

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Inko Midoriya looked like she’d aged in the time that Toshinori had been away at the hospital. She hadn’t left his apartment, but when she opened the door and saw him her mouth had tightened into a tight line and her green eyes had sharpened. She looked so much like Midoriya as she looked up to him in wordless accusation, that Toshinori very nearly broke.

“Where have you been?”

She asked, because she hadn’t been told anything, because Toshinori was still keeping secrets from this woman. He felt the guilt of it like a physical weight, strangling him. There was an excuse hovering on his lips, some sort of placation about how he’d been trying to figure out what had happened at Hosu through his connections with the police force. The look she levelled at him killed that excuse before it’d passed his lips.

“I’m not stupid, Toshinori. I know you’ve been keeping secrets.” Inko’s shoulders were hunched, and her tired eyes cast towards his feet. “If you don’t start explaining, them I’m going to go home. I appreciate your hospitality all of these months, but I can’t live like this each day, not knowing if my son is being mentored or groomed as UA’s scapegoat.”

Toshinori winced. She’d seen the news reports, then. They hadn’t been kind to UA, or even to All Might lately. He took a deep breath, casting his gaze into his apartment behind her. It was clean, and utterly devoid of life. It was his house, but somewhere along the way the Midoriyas had made it a home.

Gran Torino’s voice egged him on in his ear, ever-cautious.

You mustn’t tell anyone, Toshinori. It’s too dangerous to you, to your name as a hero.

He’d grown incredibly tired of being alone lately.

“I’m sorry.” He said, and it felt like an apology for lots of things at once. Inko slumped in the doorframe, taking a wet breath. Her voice was low, nearly a growl.

“I need my son back, Toshinori. I need you to tell me what’s happened to him, what’s happened to you.”
“You're right,” Toshinori said, and before he could regret it he added “I’m going to tell you everything. Because you deserve to know. Because Midoriya is your son and I care for him just as much as you do. Because I’ve failed you, and Midoriya, and you deserve to know how and why. Because I’m doing all in my power to try and fix it.”

Inko stared up at him, searching his face for any sign of deception. Seeing none, her arms loosened themselves from the iron brace they’d had against his door. Her voice was weary, but glad.

“Then I’ll get the teapot going. Green tea?”

Toshinori’s throat felt tight. He followed Inko inside of his own home, feeling grateful and guilty at once. The truth of the Midoriya’s, their true gift was their nature to forgive. He held that forgiveness close to his chest, and prayed that all of this wouldn’t be the last time Inko Midoriya put her faith in him.

It’d been a long time since he’d come out officially to someone as All Might, since he’d had the opportunity to tell his story without someone finding out. By the time he’d finished, the tea had gone cold untouched between them.

Inko had been silent throughout it, her eyes getting wider and wider the longer he spoke. Whatever she’d expected him to speak to her about, this clearly wasn’t it.

When he’d finished speaking, Toshinori felt as if he were a husk. He spent so much time trying to hide All Might and the nature of that responsibility, that sometimes he felt like it was all he was. His hands gripped his knees, his head bowed as he apologized.

“I am truly sorry for all the pain I have caused you and your family. I’m sorry I could not save Midoriya. I know I don’t deserve forgiveness for the trouble that I have caused, and that I don’t deserve your sympathy. I claimed to want Midoriya to succeed out of the goodness of my heart, but my reasoning in many ways was selfish. I’m selfish. I hoped to gift him the Quirk of One For All because I saw within him what I thought was a likeness with myself. I see now though that I didn’t think of the cost it would have on him, or you to do so. I didn’t put him first.”

It was true. Toshinori now saw it, battered and defeated. A ball of emotion was caught in the back of his throat. He spoke through it, pressing his head nearly to the table.

“I should’ve walked away when I saw he was recovering with you. I should’ve encouraged him to pursue a normal life with you. For that, I am truly, truly sorry.”

Inko was silent, and as the minutes ticked on Toshinori felt his heart sink deeper and deeper into his chest. He didn’t dare lift his head, afraid of the expression he might see on her normally gentle face.
He jumped when he felt small hands cup his bony jaw, forcing him to meet her gaze. Inko looked at him with a mixture of softness and pain. The absence of anger threw Toshinori. He stared back, mute.

“Anyone who ever met my son would know that you don’t have to encourage him to get him to seek out a life of danger.” She said, taking a shaking breath. “And I don’t blame you for his nature, Toshinori. Even when... Even before all this, all Izuku ever wanted to be was a hero, just like All Might.” Inko’s jaw firmed then, and a familiar spark lit in her glass-green eyes. “But damn everyone who ever told you that you had to bear such a heavy secret by yourself. And damn the people who taught you that it was acceptable to pass that kind of secrecy onto a boy who already struggles to trust others.”

Ah. There was the anger.

Toshinori accepted it, let it sit on his shoulders. Inko watched his changing expressions carefully, the fury quick to fade. She sighed, moving her hands away from his face so that she could twist them in her lap. She looked unhappy, and Toshinori’s chest ached in sympathy.

“… I appreciate you telling me. I’m glad you did. And… I forgive you.”

Toshinori’s head snapped up, blinking at her in surprise. Inko gave him a small, sad smile.

“How?” He asked, because he couldn’t understand. Any parent would surely hate him for his actions, hate UA even for how they handled Midoriya’s treatment. Inko’s hands wrung themselves together.

“Because my son loves you, and because hating you won’t bring him back. I’ve had to deal with the pain of thinking my son is lost for a long, long time. I’m not so blind in my grief not to see how you and all of the teachers at UA have helped him. I didn’t even know he could read until Eraserhead emailed me.” She said this with a touch of self-reproach, shaking her head. “If you’ve failed as a mentor, then I’ve failed Izuku as a mom. The truth is Toshinori, that I no longer know who my son is. I thought I did, but he hid so much from me, trying not to hurt me I imagine.”

She laughed, but it was not a happy noise.

“Can you imagine? My son who’s been tortured hiding things from me. I can’t know him until he starts to trust people, and he decided to place much of his trust in you and in UA.”

She reached for his hand then, and her grip was like iron.

“So I need you not to break that trust, and save him. I know it’s asking for so much, too much, but—” Inko’s eyes were watering, her jaw quivering. She gritted her teeth and pushed through it, refusing to let her voice crack. Toshinori flinched as she lowered her own head. “You’re my son’s biggest hero, and you’re my hero too. Please. Save him. Save my son.”
Toshinori held Inko Midoriya’s smaller hand in between his own spindly fingers. His blue eyes burned from their sunken-in expression, his Quirk activating until he swelled to fill in his clothes. Standing in his own living room as All Might, as Toshinori, he held Inko Midoriya’s hand. He didn’t smile, but that was alright. Inko was smiling up at him, even as tears made her face red and blotchy.

“I promise on my honour as the Symbol of Peace that I will return your son to you. I’m going to save him.”
By the time Aiko had made it to Ochako’s apartment, a cold wind had begun to pick up outside. Katsuki met her down in the lobby, and watching as her dark red hair was pulled and tugged this way and that, the tie in her ponytail at risk of coming loose. She clutched her gym bag against her hip, squinting against the force of it. Her eyes and nose were still a little red- she’d been crying on the way here.

When she saw Katsuki, a relieved smile broke out across her face. He let her in, punching the passcode Ochako had given all of them from the start. He wasn’t usually one for hugs, but he had little choice when Aiko wrapped her arms around him in a bear hug, squeezing as if she were trying to ground herself.

“Thank you.” She breathed, and Katsuki had to shift uncomfortably for her to let him go. He didn’t meet her eyes as he scratched the back of his neck, clearly embarrassed.

“Don’t have to thank me. Let’s go upstairs, I can change there and then we’ll go.”

She followed him to the elevator, and together they made it back to Ochako’s apartment. To 1-A’s credit, the welcome was warm. Katsuki had told the group that Aiko was coming, and not to ask any questions.
“Yo! You’re Katsuki’s friend, right?” Kirishima stood to shake Aiko’s hand, and Katsuki hovered uncertainly as his school friend and childhood friend shook hands. Together they were oddly alike, red hair and red hair, both tall. Both smiled with all their teeth, though Aiko’s weren’t as sharklike despite the scales on her skin.

“I am! You’re Eijirou Kirishima, I saw you at the Sports’ Festival. You were really good! Katsuki talks a lot about you.” Kirishima flushed, clearly pleased with the praise and the fact that Katsuki had mentioned him.

“He mentioned me? Aw, I’m flattered!”

Katsuki, on the other hand, turned a brilliant shade of red from his neck to his hairline.

“Shut up! I don’t talk about you all the time.” Arms crossing over his chest, he spun on his heel towards the washroom. This meant he missed the way a deviant spark lit up in Aiko’s eyes. “While you two get to know each other, I’m gonna go change. If you aren’t done talkin’ while I’m out I’m leaving without you, Aiko.” He stalked off, leaving Kirishima looking after him quizzically.

“Don’t worry,” Aiko leaned closer once she was sure that Katsuki had gone “It’s all good things he talks about.” She giggled, lips pressing together. “And for it to all be positive, you know that Katsuki cares for you quite a bit, even if he has trouble admitting it to himself. He’s far softer than he looks.”

There was muffled swearing, and the sound of someone kicking the bathroom door. Ochako winced, cupping her hands so she could yell at Bakugou. “I rent this place! You break it you pay for repairs!”

“Soft, huh?” Kirishima laughed, his cheeks still two bright points of colour. “I know it’s bad when I think I understand what you mean.”

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Running was an old method of stress relief for Katsuki. There was something about it that made his usually disquiet brain turn off for an hour or so, in a way that other forms of physical activity didn’t manage. All He had to do was push himself, breathe, ignore the burn in his lungs until it went away, go, go, go, go, go.

It was a rhythm, and he could fall into step with Aiko like they’d been running together all of their lives. In many ways, they had been.

He talked as they picked up a light jog, feet pounding the pavement, the wind pushing against them and pressing his hair back from his face.

“What’s going on?”

Aiko kept stride, but her face was pinched for a reason that had nothing to do with their pace. She looked almost guilty as she exhaled through her teeth, casting a furtive glance around them.
“I’m not supposed to tell you this. Let’s just be clear- I’m really not supposed to. It’s a family secret, and if it gets out it’s going to mean my family is in danger.”

Katsuki’s brow was arched in disbelief.

“You’re not part of the Yakuza or somethin’ are you?” He half-joked, hoping that in fact his therapist and his best friend weren’t part of a gang or something equally problematic. Aiko shook her head. She wasn’t smiling.

“My sister and I luckily get our Quirks from my dad’s side of the family. I got Underwater Echolocation, while Sayuri got her Sharkbite.”

Katsuki nodded, suppressing a wince. Sayuri had been a monster when she’d been teething, able to bite through steel if determined enough. He’d been the victim more than once of narrowly avoiding losing fingers.

“The reason that we both have our dad’s Quirk is lucky. My mom’s side tends to have Quirks that are rare, and not easily defined. My mom can predict lucky numbers, predict miraculous events, tell you about the best day of your life. But the price of her Quirk is that nothing good ever surprises her.”

This was something Katsuki knew- Nagi Namase was a puzzle. Because she knew of every happy event, she never got the jolt of happiness many received from gifts, or vacations, or from their child’s first words. To someone who didn’t know what her Quirk was, they might even call her depressed. Katsuki often found it hard interacting with her, and he knew Aiko did too. He grimaced.

“My uncle,” Aiko murmured softly “At one time could predict disasters.”

Katsuki felt unease squeeze in his chest, reading in between the lines and seeing the implications. It was a cold hand, choking his breath.

“Floods, tornadoes, murders, deaths, suicide attempts, you name it. If my uncle shook your hand, he saw everything terrible that might happen to you. And for a long, long, time, it made him crazy. Like, really crazy, Katsuki.” She looked at him out of the corner of her eye, gaze very far away. “I didn’t know him, growing up. He didn’t keep in contact, and he barely called even our mom. She always said he just reached a breaking point, because he kept trying to stop the bad things from happening to people and couldn’t…and that he dropped off the map. But… he then one day came back, I apparently opened the door as a kid, and he was collapsed at our front door. I don’t remember it, but I do remember my mom crying. When my uncle came to, he said… He said someone had taken him. They made him look into someone’s future… and then they took his Quirk.”

Katsuki stopped running, jerking to a halt. It was as if the gears in his head had come to a screeching halt, trying to absorb everything that’d just been explained. He’d only known Mr. Kyokan as someone who was quiet, mild-mannered. The image that Aiko was painting, it wasn’t just unsettling. It felt inherently wrong. How could someone be born with a Quirk like that? Even worse, who could
have a Quirk that could take others?

“My uncle always said that he accepted what’d happened to him, that he was happier being Quirkless. But my mom says that my uncle’s really still trying to stop whatever he saw, that he was raving for weeks about some kind of... Global disaster, when he showed up at our door. Mom could apparently barely make sense of it. He just stopped one day though, and pushed himself through school. Mom thinks…. She’s afraid that him disappearing means he’s either cracked or that something really, really bad’s coming that he’s trying to stop.”

Aiko’s arms were crossed in front of her chest, the wind tugging at her jacket. She shivered against its bite.

“Katsuki…. I think somehow you were involved in whatever he saw. I think my uncle’s trying to lead you down a path that he hoped would stop whatever’s coming. But I don’t know if it’s even possible to stop it, if I’m being honest. That’s why I wanted to tell you, because somehow you’re connected to whatever happens. I’m sorry, I don’t think my uncle was just your therapist.”

“Then what was he?” Katsuki growled, his heart doing confusing twisting motions in his chest. Aiko flinched at the acid in his tone. She didn’t answer, and without a reply Katsuki was hyper-aware of the silence, his skin breaking out in rough gooseflesh across his neck and arms.

“Mom’s Quirk is called ‘Miracle’,” Aiko whispered “But uncle’s… his was called 'Harbinger.'”

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Don’t think about it.

Midoriya.

That voice. He knew that voice, didn’t he? He felt like it was his name, at least.

Midoriya!

Kacchan? But… How? And why? Why would someone-

Fuck, he’s not going to wake up for a while. They’ve done a number on you, haven’t they?
Well, the cursing part at least sounded like Kacchan. Although now that he focused it didn’t sound like-

There was the sound of footsteps trailing away, and Izuku slipped back into the muddy waters between awake, and asleep.

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Shouta woke to someone or something insistently pressing at his cheek. The swollen one that’d been struck when he’d fought back. It hurt, like being prodded at with a stick filled with nails.

He groaned, jerking when whoever it was hastily pressed a hand to his mouth as if to silence him. His eyes flew open, expecting Overhaul or one of his other minions. Instead he found a pair of familiar red eyes peering up at him.

Eri’s hand was clammy with sweat, like she’d been running. Shouta had never seen her about at night, and came to the quick conclusion that was because she wasn’t supposed to be. She darted a furtive glance to either side of her, voice hushed and low.

“I’m going to get you out of here, but I need you to help me find my brother.” She said this pleadingly. When she removed her hand from Shouta’s mouth, he ran his tongue over the inside of his teeth, wincing at the old copper taste.

“You escaped.” He said, half in wonderment, half in fear. He had an inkling of what would happen should Overhaul find this situation arising.

Eri seemed to hardly believe it herself, her pale brows lowering in bemusement as she replied.

“I had to… he’s going to kill you eventually, if I didn’t.”

Shouta grunted in affirmation. He’d been grimly accepting of that fact since he’d gotten here, though he’d been careful not to show as much towards Eri.

She pressed her hands together then, rubbing them together as if trying to bring some feeling into them. Her voice was very focused as she pressed her fingers to the manacles holding Shouta down.

“I’m going to try and use my Quirk, but you have to stop it if it goes too far. I’m… not very good at controlling it yet.” She said this with a note of fear, tightly controlled in the back of her mind.

Shouta watched, curious despite his racing thoughts as to just the extent of Eri’s abilities. He was a teacher, after all.
Eri touched the manacles, a look of concentration flitting across her features. There was a moment of quiet, and then the horn on Eri’s head began to glow.

Shouta was reminded in a strange way of Yaoyozuru’s Quirk. The level of necessary focus and concentration, as well as the transfer of power into making an object change its state. The light that came from Eri’s horn seemed to only grow, as did the horn itself. Under her hands, the metal of the manacles began to soften, shift.

Shouta watched, holding his breath as the manacles became for an instant molten hot, shifting back in time to when they were forged. Unfortunately, they were also right next to his skin. He grit his teeth, holding back a howl with thinly-veiled effort. It was over in an instant, but it was a flash of pain unlike anything he’d experienced before. The metal was already cooling, leaching away from his wrists to shrink into itself, turning into a cube and dislodging itself from its screws. It didn’t stop there, Shouta realized a moment too late that the cot he was seated on was also going to be affected, the seat beginning to unravel beneath him. Eri didn’t seem to notice, a look of glazed focus locked on her face.

As soon as his legs were free Shouta acted, his Quirk activating. He snuffed out Eri’s power like a candle, reaching automatically to catch her as she slumped forward. The back of her neck was sticky with sweat, and she was trembling. The look of fierce pride on her face was something to behold as she looked up at him, gripping his arms for support.

“I did it.” She whispered, holding the secret between them. Shouta recalled a memory, an image at the back of his mind that brought a small smile to his lips. He helped her to her feet, then stood on his own shaking legs.

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There wasn’t much more Hitoshi could say, eventually. Breaking the news to Shouto that Izuku Midoriya was The Ghost, an ex-villain and child soldier in a sense, had been enough of a shock that Shouto hadn’t interrupted his explanation. He’d sat there, his mismatched eyes growing progressively wider and wider, his hands stilling on Mika’s triangle head until she’d squeaked, demanding he pet her or stop wasting her time.

Finally, when the silence seemed to stretch too long and Shouto seemed like a statue, Hitoshi cracked.

“It’s true. I know it sounds like a giant lie, or some sort of prank, but I swear to you it’s the truth.”

“I believe you.” Shouto said, because he did.

It made sense. That was the strangest thing, and something that Shouto wasn’t sure how he felt about. Putting Midoriya into context like this, a lot of his behaviours suddenly had a crystal clear logic to them that made it hard to breathe. The scars on Midoriya’s arms, the wariness, the feeling that he was always telling half-truths or lies. The way Midoriya hadn’t just picked up on the abuse
Shouto suffered from his father, but empathized with it. His disappearance, and his fighting ability that didn’t match up with his education. All of this coupled with the silence that Midoriya fell into when asked about his past.

Shouto pressed a hand to his mouth, as if to hold back the nameless emotion that was boiling over inside. His head ached, a dull and twisting pain from the concussion he was still suffering from.

The thing was: Midoriya’s situation was the sort of thing that Shouto knew his father would never approve of. As in, Endeavour would have recommended that Izuku be imprisoned for his crimes (especially since allegedly, Izuku had been burning down his father’s assets as a side job). Had Shouto heard this story without knowing Midoriya, he might have agreed. Why endanger UA’s reputation for one kid? Why possibly endanger students, or break the security of the school itself?

The part of Shouto that knew Midoriya was furious that more hadn’t been done to protect Izuku. That was the part that sounded a lot like the child he still sometimes thought of himself as. It was the part that still thought of the world as black and white, All Might and Villainy two vast canyons facing each other. He hadn’t listened to that side of himself for a very long time, not since the one hero in his life had spilled a boiling hot kettle over his face.

Logically, Izuku probably wasn’t a good person. Shouto wasn’t sure he was even good, objectively. Maybe that was why he was having trouble swallowing this- they were both grey areas, trying to be something they didn’t naturally fit. Maybe grey areas called to each other. Maybe that was why Hitoshi had picked him, to talk to. Shouto looked at the boy across from him, seeing now that he was another grey area.

The realization that now Midoriya was back with the League, the people that had hurt him made him want to be physically sick. That was the part that filled Shouto with a coiling kind of terror. It horrified him that he’d befriended someone that his father would hate without question and without hesitation. The first real friend he’d made at UA, and Izuku Midoriya was a symbol of everything Endeavour worked so hard to silence in his family- Imperfection.

It must have been bad enough to show on his face, because Hitoshi spoke carefully. He sounded to Shouto as if he wasn’t sure the boy wouldn’t just stand up and leave.

“I told you because Eraserhead’s been taken too, and I think the teachers are too focused on using him as a tracker. I think we need to figure out who’s leaking information at UA in the first place, if we want to get a handle on this. Even if they save Midoriya at this rate, his record’s going to be blown wide open. It can’t not, at this stage. There’ll be a call to bring him into justice, and Midoriya will lose that hearing without proof that he wasn’t the informant selling UA out to the League. But to prove that we need evidence, and to do that means I’m risking my place at UA, and my Quirk’s already pretty scrutinized.”
Shouto could follow the path of logic, and it made his mouth go dry.

“No one questions a Todoroki, even if they’re not where they’re supposed to be.”

Hitoshi leaned forward, his voice speaking in a hush.

“My plan’s pretty simple. I have a hunch that the traitor’s coming in to school at night. Either their Quirk or status lets them on campus, even when security’s done for the night. But, my Quirk can convince someone that we want to study in the library. With you there, they’re not going to question it, given your dad’s influence on the school. The library’s right by the main office where a lot of the staff keep their case files and notes. We hide out for a night, and see if anyone comes looking for information.”

“And if the traitor catches us?” Shouto asked, a cold sweat beading down his neck. He must have been running warmer than usual, because Mika bolted from his lap. He watched as she shook out her fur, single eye slit towards him before she marched off to go find a nap in the cat tree at the other side of the room.

Hitoshi moved Patchouli off his own lap, the Persian less active in general. His violet eyes were sparked with determination.

“Whoever’s betraying UA tried to get me kicked out or put in jail for their efforts. If the traitor sees us, it’ll be two against one. I think we can at least get them to run.”

It wasn’t a safe plan. It wasn’t even really a sane plan. Shouto mulled on it, seeing flaw after flaw. They wouldn’t even be able to contact their sensei if they got caught. The first emergency number besides Aizawa would be Nedzu, and Shouto wasn’t sure the mouse-man wouldn’t expel them immediately after. That was if they lived through an encounter with the traitor.

Shouto sunk his teeth into his lower lip. Expulsion or death. That was the barrel he was looking down. He should just turn away, refuse. He should go home, see his father, pretend this conversation never happened. He wasn’t a hero, at least not yet. No one would blame him for leaving this to the professionals. It would be an act of hastiness that could cost him his entire career, and if his father got his hands on him after that, his wellbeing.

Izuku had risked everything though, to help Shouto past the wall of ice he’d built around his heart. He’d risked broken bones, to fight him fair and square. A hero like Endeavour wouldn’t risk it, not if it meant putting his future in jeopardy.

Shouto didn’t want to be his father, did he?

But then, what did his kind of hero look like?
The answer was simple, so simple to a question that raised more variables than answered them. Shouto wanted to be a hero that was there.

“We’re going to die if we screw this up.”

Hitoshi grinned, and the smile was slow and catlike, strangely reminiscent of Aizawa.

“We won’t screw up, then.”

He held out his hand, and Shouto took it.

"From now on," Hitoshi said with all the solemnity of a priest "We're Crime Buds."

"...We're not calling ourselves that." Shouto retorted. He had to fight back a smile, despite his worries.
[First Year at UA- Shouta Aizawa]

“I did it. I did it!”

That would always bring back a memory.

“We have a new kid entering our class. He transferred late, as he just moved here. Please give a warm welcome, everyone, to Hizashi Yamada.”

Shouta didn’t lift his head from the comfortable resting place that was his desk. He was taking a mindful minute. A restful half hour. Something like that. A new student was hardly something to get worked up about, despite what his classmates seemed to think. There was a buzzing chatter, people interested in whoever was standing at the front of the classroom. New meat always drew attention.

Mr. Nedzu continued speaking, his usual jovial tone breaking over the noise of several teenagers trying to assess a stranger.

“Hizashi, do you want to introduce yourself to people?”
There was a shuffling noise, a breath of uncertainty. The new kid was shy, apparently? Shouta could understand, even if he didn’t really see the point of it. There was no reason to being shy here, where competition was at the forefront of most people’s minds. The new kid wasn’t going to last long if he couldn’t even talk.

At least, Shouta had assumed it was shyness that made him silent. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

“YO! I’M HIZASHI YAMADA, AND I’M EXCITED TO MEET ALL OF YOU! I’M REALLY HAPPY TO BE HE-”

The sound was deafening. It ripped through the classroom, causing most people to scream or clap their hands hastily over their ears. Shouta wasn’t prepared for it, he was hit squarely with a noise level that threw him from his half sleep and pressed him into his chair. He threw his head back, Quirk activating automatically and finding the source of the culprit.

Shouta locked eyes with the new student, scowling thunderously as the kid’s voice suddenly cut off to little more than a whisper. Hizashi Yamada clapped a hand over his mouth, face turning an interesting shade of pink. He had gold eyes, and they found Shouta’s burning hatred and widened.

At a glance, Yamada was tall and thin, with longer hair spiked up into a Mohawk. A triangular pair of sunglasses sat on the bridge of his nose, slightly askew. They gave him a somewhat goofy appearance, between that and the way his uniform was clearly too big for him.

He was looking at Shouta like a deer caught in the headlights, clearly surprised that his Quirk had been silenced so abruptly. Shouta was used to that sort of look. He didn’t care, he’d been woken from his nap.

Shouta didn’t blink, his eyes burning as he growled without introduction.

“We’re not supposed to just casually use our Quirks in class.”

Yamada’s voice came as a rough whisper, though his smile soon returned.

“I can’t control my Quirk very well when I’m too excited. I’m sorry! I’ve never met someone who could just turn it off like that, though. That’s so cool!”

Now that, wasn’t a normal reaction.

Shouta blinked, his Quirk deactivating and his hair drifting back down around his face. Awkwardly, he averted his gaze from the new kid, unused to the glowing, happy look on the kid’s face.

Most people used their abilities without much of a second thought in their everyday lives. Their reaction to Shouta’s Quirk was usually confusion, followed by fear or anger that something so
integral had been stripped away. For many people, their Quirks were what they were. Why he wasn’t angry, Shouta didn’t know. It seemed illogical.

Yamada didn’t even look particularly peeved. Instead, he seemed thrilled. He quickly looked over to Mr. Nedzu, practically vibrating with excitement.

“Can I pick who I sit next to?”

That was how Shouta accidentally found himself with possibly the most annoying friend on the face of the planet.

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Shouta soon learned many things about Hizashi Yamada, more than he truthfully wanted to know. Hizashi talked incessantly, about everything and anything. When he wasn’t talking, Shouta soon learned, he was really just thinking about what to say next.

He learned that Hizashi was adopted, that his moms were both deaf. He also learned in a roundabout way that this was why Hizashi had been adopted in the first place. His Quirk didn’t affect them. Shouta also pieced together, though Hizashi never said it directly, that his Quirk had been the reason his parents had abandoned him at an orphanage as a baby. He’d been one of the unlucky few children that had come into their Quirk incredibly young—only a year after he’d been born.

Hizashi was happy-go-lucky. He had many siblings at his new house. He liked to talk about them, and seemed to like kids in general. He claimed he liked having the noise around him, which didn’t surprise Shouta much. Everywhere Hizashi went, noise seemed to follow.

Shouta had tried to avoid his new classmate at first, but apparently having a Quirk that was often a nuisance meant that Shouta’s own powers were something of a marvel to Hizashi. The boy followed him everywhere, and because he followed him everywhere, Hizashi quickly became fast friends with Nemuri. Nemuri also liked to follow Shouta around, but not out of curiosity. No, there was just nothing she liked more than to bully Shouta with self-care and love.

“You need to eat something more than just jelly packets and Coca-Cola.”

This statement was of course, illogical and just plain annoying. Shouta made sure Nemuri was aware of this, scowling at her while sipping at his jelly pack.

She shook her head in exasperation, casting a pleading glance towards Hizashi.

“Can you convince him? Because I’ve tried just about everything.”
Hizashi shrugged his lanky shoulders, currently in the middle of devouring some sort of sandwich wish was made of mostly cheese and lunch meat. He spoke around a mouthful of bread.

“I’ve never really been picky ‘bout food. Eat whatever you can find is my philosophy.”

“Wise words to live by.” Nemuri said dryly, clearly exasperated at her friend’s dietary habits.

It was a hot day, and sweat was already clinging to the back of Shouta’s neck. His long, dark hair only made it worse, until he was pulling it back and up. As he did, he kept an eye on Hizashi, who was leading them down a paved road towards his house. They were going to work on a project all together.

“Remind me again how many siblings you have?”

Nemuri asked, clearly curious and looking for a way out of the dietary conversation. Hizashi chattered about many things, and he loved talking about his brothers and sisters the most. There were many- his parents fostered as many as their larger house out past the city allowed.

“There’s seven of us in total- Me, Shida, Daichi, Ena, Misako, Nobu and Jackson. My moms are named Moira and Cho. Jackson’s still not entirely fluent with Japanese though, and Cho’s deaf while Moira’s hard of hearing. But don’t worry, I’ll sign and translate if need be.” He smiled a warm smile, and Shouta was truthfully a little surprised. It sounded like a chaotic sort of household, but it fit Hizashi’s chaotic presence.

He wondered why he’d never asked about Hizashi’s parents until now. What kind of friend did that make him?

The irony that he’d come to acknowledge Hizashi as a friend was equally surprising. Somehow, the loud boy had wormed himself into Shouta’s trusted few.

The house itself was cute, and very clearly owned by two middle-aged women. Garden boxes lined the windows, filled with herbs that smelled strongly in the summer air. On the door was a sign, proudly declaring the value of ‘Love and Family’ in English that Shouta roughly translated in his head. The house itself was a hybrid of Japanese and American culture as they went inside, shoes lined tightly at the door, but various English quotes framed throughout the house.

Nemuri and Shouta entered behind Hizashi, both of them realizing after a moment that the reason their friend didn’t call out that he was home was there was no one there to witness it. Instead, Hizashi made a beeline for the kitchen, signing even as he greeted his moms.

“I’m home!”

Two women smiled as they rounded the door frame, one mixing something in a bowl while the other
was writing on a notepad. Both smiled as he and Nemuri entered the kitchen, the woman mixing setting down her bowl to reach for a hand towel. She was probably Cho, given her features and long, dark hair. Moira was blonde, with curly, frizzy hair that seemed larger than the rest of her. Cho’s voice was stilted in the way that someone who had never heard their own voice tended to be.

She signed as she spoke, and Shouta thought her delicate hands looked almost like they were dancing.

“Who are your friends, Hizashi?”

“Shouta and Nemuri! They’re from UA.” Hizashi answered easily, pointing to each of them as he finger-spelled their names. Cho’s soft features brightened further, and she leaned against the back of the chair that Moira was seated on, running a hand through her wife’s hair.

“Well, they’re both welcome for dinner if they’re staying for long. It’s nice to meet you both.”

Moira nodded, adjusting the rounded glasses on the end of her nose. Her hand reached up to clasp her wife’s, the other signing as she spoke. Her voice was clearer, though it was accented heavily.

“We’re happy to have you here.”

Shouta realized that apparently Hizashi’s magnetism was learned. He already liked both Cho and Moira, and only a few words had been spoken. Kindness apparently, could be understood universally.

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That summer would become in Shouta’s mind the Summer he spent at the Yamada’s. Partly, because his own family life was in a word chaotic. His parents weren’t bad people. In truth, they did their best. It didn’t change the fact that they were divorced, and didn’t like each other very much at this point. He didn’t doubt that both of them loved him, but that didn’t stop family dinners from being awkward, or visits from being lined with tension.

So Shouta escaped to the family that was all warmth and smiles, to two moms who never seemed cross with each other or tired or too stressed out. It was almost instinctive, like he was looking for sunlight to grow under. Even Hizashi’s siblings were kinder, more considerate, softer than the majority of his family. Somehow, he didn’t mind that everyone was loud, by virtue of being uncertain of the language, or deaf, or hard of hearing.

It was all fine, because Hizashi was there, encouraging Shouta to be a part of it. He was a beacon that Shouta could look towards if he found himself lost in the chaos.

Shouta found that he fit, though he wasn’t sure when he’d been invited. Even when he couldn’t stand the noise, there were plenty of nooks and crannies in the Yamada house to hide. Moira didn’t mind him borrowing her books, practicing his English carefully while doing so. Cho never snapped
at him for taking snacks out of the fridge, and even made him some if he asked.

Most of all, Hizashi offered him anything that he owned without thought or hesitation. Blankets, cups of tea or coffee, all of it was given freely. Shouta had never met a family before that gave so readily. The practice seemed alien to him, but he didn’t hate it.

He didn’t hate it at all.

It was fine, until it wasn’t.

Shouta had become complacent in the routine. On weekends, he went to Hizashi’s place, no need to call ahead after months of the same thing every week. He’d text his mom, then his dad in a separate messenger chat. Both of them would tell him to get to whatever home he was due to go to by a certain amount of time or days.

He knew the way, to Hizashi’s, had walked it with ease around eleven AM, not really thinking about much beyond that he wanted to show Hizashi a new comic he’d bought (it was about Labrynth, the Hero with an optical illusion Quirk that could build mazes around his enemies). The weather had been nice, a gentle breeze tugging at his hair.

His hand hovered over the door bell, trusting already that Hizashi would be listening for it. Except on instinct, something made Shouta pause. Something was displaced, and Shouta was sensitive to change. He listened, cocking his head to the side.

Muffled through the door, nearly imperceptible, was the sound of shouting. It took only a moment to realize it was Cho, and that her voice was rising. Moira’s joined a moment later, high-pitched and desperate. A squeezing anxiety crept up the back of Shouta’s throat. He didn’t think much beyond that, his hand going to the doorknob and letting himself in.

It was a mistake, he realized that almost immediately. Cho and Moira weren’t in danger; they were arguing over something. Something to do with Hizashi, if Shouta was hearing correctly. He felt something in his chest tighten, the rareness of this incident tilting the familiar polished floors on an angle. As if he was afraid of being caught out, her crept forward on silent feet. It was in an odd way, an echo of how he used to sneak in on his own parents fighting.

Cho’s voice was the easiest to identify, partly because her volume was less controlled and she was speaking Japanese. Shouta didn’t even have to strain to listen.

“-You can’t keep doing this, Hizashi! Sneaking out all night, leaving the window open where anyone can just come in to our home.-“

“We’re worried about you, hun. You don’t seem happy here, and we want you to know that you can trust us.” That was Moira, her Japanese a little more broken than usual.
Shouta hadn’t known that Hizashi was going out at night. He hadn’t known that Hizashi could even get *angry*, though perhaps that was a bit foolish.

Silence, but there was angry movement. Shouta realized that Hizashi was probably signing without speaking. He crept closer, his fingers closing around the doorframe, white-knuckle gripped.

“That’s not *true*!” Cho cried, clearly distraught by what Hizashi signed to them. She sounded close to tears, from frustration or sadness, Shouta wasn’t sure. More silence, followed by Moira snapping in a curt voice.

“You need to apologize to your mom for that, Hizashi. You know that isn’t fair, and that we’ve been more than fair with the house rules—”

“You’ve been given the opportunity to go to UA, I j-just, *we*, don’t want you to waste it away—“

“You don’t get to tell me what to do!”

Shouts stumbled, the floor boards suddenly humming with vibration. He felt his ears ring dully, and realized that it was Hizashi’s Quirk. He didn’t hear or see any of Hizashi’s other siblings, and the slow knowledge that his ears were in danger here trickled into his mind.

Of course- if someone struggled to control their Quirk, it would be heightened when emotions were running hot. Logical.

Shouta didn’t move. He couldn’t help how he crept closer, eyes wide as he peered around the corner of the room.

The three were standing in the middle of the living room, Hizashi with his back to the wide window opening up to the backyard. His gold eyes were uncharacteristically hard, hands clenched tightly at his sides. Cho and Moira had their backs to Shouta, and the two were braced against the force of Hizashi’s Quirk.

“You’re NOT my parents! It’s none of your business what I do! MY PARENTS THREW ME AWAY LIKE I WAS NOTHING!”

“Hizashi!” Moira cried, her voice high and strained against her child’s shout.

Shouta had the sinking realization that he was in danger of losing his hearing, if this got any worse. The vibration was deafening, and he grit his teeth and plugged his hands to his ears, trying to stifle it. How Moira was managing to stand so close, he didn’t know. Her hearing ear had to be in pain by now.

*He’s going to bring this house down… I have to stop him.*

Hizashi’s voice had become stripped and raw, like he’d been screaming for a long time. It rose, and
the floorboards began to shudder beneath Shouta’s feet.

“STOP PRETENDING YOU CARE! STOP PRETENDING LIKE YOU DON’T HATE ME!”

Shouta activated his Quirk, and made himself be brave.

*Plus Ultra, even when your friend’s probably going to never invite you back to his house again.*

He couldn’t afford to think on what Hizashi might feel about him intruding, just then. Shouta rounded the corner, silencing Hizashi’s voice and his Quirk with a red-eyed stare.

The silence was deafening. Hizashi’s voice was snuffed out like a candle, leaving behind it only scattered papers from the coffee table falling to the floor, his adopted parents kneeling on the carpet. Hizashi himself seemed frozen, and if it weren’t for the shocked tear tracks running down his face Shouta might have been worried he’d turned to stone. Hizashi’s gaze was on him, and Shouta couldn’t read what was on his face but it was ghastly and desperate at once.

Shouta never wanted to see that sort of expression on Hizashi’s face, not as long as he lived. It looked unnatural, and frightened, and his friend seemed in that moment much younger and older than he was.

It felt like he was trying to speak through molasses. Shouta swallowed, tried again. This time he found his voice.

“Zahshi-”

His friend abruptly moved, pushing past Shouta and picking up speed as he fled to his room. Shouta felt rooted to the ground, staring blankly into the living room and its mess. His eyes burned from his Quirk, and though he’d never consider himself a scaredy cat his hands shook.

The truth was, he’d never realized that Hizashi’s Quirk was far scarier than most people thought. He'd never thought of Hizashi, as terrifying at all.

For the first time in his life, Shouta wasn’t sure he could read a situation.
When We Were Young (Part Two)

Chapter Summary

y'all, likely after reading this @ Me:

"I can't BELIEVE you've DONE this"

Cho fixed him some tea, while Moira fussed in a way that was deliberately trying to seem casual. Both of them seemed shaken, but not so shaken that this had been the first time something like this had happened. There was a routine, as there often was in situations of high tension. Shouta watched them work in silence, staring into his tea cup until it was filled. His mind kept replaying the look on Hizashi’s face, over and over, burned into his brain.

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to blink it away.

“I’m sorry you had to see that.” Moira’s voice cut through the fog. She sounded earnest, and as she dried her hands on a tea towel Shouta noticed she accidentally wrung it. He lifted his gaze, seeing the woman sitting across from him. Her hair tie had come loose, wild blonde curls falling across her face. The lines around her mouth and eyes were prominent now.

Shouta could see a crusted trickle of blood at her neck.

“Is your ear okay?” He asked, concerned. Moira’s lips tightened, but she didn’t seem angry. She was deliberately blasé as she waved his worry away.

“It’s not important- I’m losing the hearing in that one anyway over time. Are you alright? Do you need me to call someone for you?” Shouta was aware that this didn’t in fact, answer his question. He didn’t probe, fingers trailing across the warm brim of his tea cup. He took a sip, and it was hotter than he expected. He burned his tongue.

“…Is this why Hizashi’s with you? I mean-“ adopted? Hung on Shouta’s lips. It felt rude to say, but the abrupt thought wouldn't leave him alone. He felt like he suddenly knew very little about Hizashi, and it was sending his entire perspective off kilter. Shouta needed facts.

“… It’s not my business to go into this too much, but yes. If I’m being honest, Hizashi ended up with us because living with hearing parents has resulted in very unfair situations for him when he was a child. He’s part of a rare group of people who developed their Quirk only a year into their life. We’ve been working on it with him, but I’m afraid his Quirk is very much tied to his emotional state.” She pressed a hand to her forehead, as if trying to rub away the lines that had formed there. "We have good stretches and... very bad ones."

The idea of a baby having such an ability made Shouta’s eyes widen. Quirks were hard enough to control as children. Often as a child, he’d accidentally taken someone's abilities away, and not realize he’d done it. It'd been hard to make friends with that alone.
He couldn’t imagine… well, he couldn’t imagine how any of this was for Hizashi. There were times he disliked his own Quirk- He’d hated how other kids were afraid of it, how people judged. Sometimes, it was bad enough that people treated him like a pariah. No one liked to be stripped of something they viewed as an integral part of themselves.

But, it’d never been so bad that he’d been afraid of not having a space to live at the end of the day... and Shouta had never accidentally hurt someone.

Cho came to sit beside her wife, her face pained. She signed, and Moira translated quietly.

“Hizashi came to us only two years ago. Until that point, he’d been couch hopping or living on his own. His education has suffered, as has his ability to function in society. We thought he was getting better, what with making friends and going to school, but… He still has barriers up. There are things he won't talk to us about.”

Shouta realized that Hizashi rarely gave away anything personal about himself. He knew his friend was lactose intolerant, that he liked spicy food, all superficial things. Yet he’d never once heard Hizashi talk about his childhood. Shouta felt at once like an awful friend. He’d never asked, and in truth he’d never thought to ask Hizashi about his past.

Why hadn’t he noticed that his friend had never told him anything about himself?

“Can I go see him?” Shouta asked abruptly, rare anger with himself surging up inside. Moira and Cho exchanged glances, and Shouta could see the worry in it. He hastened to comfort them. “My Quirk can stop him, and he needs to know that I don’t hate him or anything stupid like that. It’s not logical to think that, but Hizashi isn’t um, logical most of the time and I... I need to let him know.”

Moira smiled a little, and Cho signed.

“I can give you that one, at least. Our son is rarely logical.”

“You’re a good friend to our son, Shouta.” Moira said. Shouta felt the tips of his ears redden at the compliment. He tucked his chin into the lip of his sweater, instinctively trying to hide his embarrassment. He took another sip of his tea, even though he couldn’t taste it, his tastebuds burnt.

When he made his way up the stairs, he could see Cho and Moira still clasping hands at the kitchen table. Thumbs moving back and forth, back and forth over knuckles.

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Hizashi’s room was dark when Shouta knocked on the door. The curtains had been closed, and the first though Shouta had was that his friend may have decided to just go to sleep. If he had, Shouta probably wouldn’t have blamed him- he napped when faced with conflict, too.

Hizashi was actually curled up next to the bed, on the carpet. His elbows were braced against his
knees, and he scrubbed at his face hastily when Shouta opened the door. His eyes were red-rimmed, behind his glasses. In the dark it was hard to tell, but Shouta suspected Hizashi had been wiping his tears on his sweater sleeves instead of finding a tissue.

Shouta had never been very good at emotional situations. He stood in the doorway, scrubbing at the back of his neck with one hand and feeling like an intruder to someone else’s pain. But this was Hizashi, and Hizashi was better at reading Shouta than Shouta himself was. The boy saw him and wordlessly nudged across the carpet, offering in silence a spot for Shouta to sit, should he choose to. Hizashi didn’t look at him, choosing instead to stare silently towards his bedroom window. It was probably embarrassing, to be seen like this.

Relieved, Shouta took the offer. He slid beside his friend, onto a carpet he’d been spending days stretched out on, reading or playing mindless games. In the dark, Hizashi’s bright pop posters seemed to cast dark shadows across his face. Shouta recognized some of the bands, but many of them were from America. He still wasn’t the greatest at English, and so couldn’t read the titles.

They sat together in silence, until Hizashi seemed unable to bear it.

“Please don’t tell Nemuri about this.” He implored. Shouta stared up at the ceiling, his voice quiet and assured.

“I wouldn’t.”

More silence. Shouta was better at playing the waiting game than Hizashi, and he got the feeling that his friend needed to control this conversation. Sure enough, Hizashi soon spoke again.

“I’m… I’m sorry I almost hurt you. I’m sorry you had to… had to stop my Quirk.” He said it with no pause for breath, stuttering over his words. “You shouldn’t have had to do that.” He kept making himself smaller, trying to disappear into the carpet. It made Shouta sad, and oddly frustrated. His friend shouldn’t look like that—hunched and silent and sad.

“A hero helps those who are in need.” Shouta replied, quoting one of the first lessons Nedzu had taught the class. He peered through his dark hair at Hizashi, trying to see past the jumble of skinny elbows and knees his friend had turned into. His friend’s mouth was pinched, disbelieving. “I’d appreciate some sort of explanation if I can ask, though. If only because I didn’t realize you’ve been this upset, and I feel like sort of a bad friend.”

Hizashi made a long, drawn out sigh.

“You’re not a bad friend. I’m the shit friend if anything, because I didn’t say something. I, uh, didn’t really want anyone to know.” He sucked in a breath through his teeth, uncurling his hands slowly from the fists they’d made on his knees. “The truth is, before I came here… I’d run away from my last Foster Home. They were planning on sending me away again and I… couldn’t face that. So, I thought I might as well try things out on my own. I lived on the streets for… probably half a year.”
As Hizashi told him falteringly bits and pieces of what it was like living on his own, Shouta felt a mounting anger. Because Hizashi's story wasn't happy, and it wasn't even mediocre. It was the sort of story that made Shouta's knuckles turn white and his teeth clench. It was a story of a kid that no one noticed unless he was yelling.

“Eventually I couldn’t make enough money. No one wants to hire a kid for anything. I had to steal to get by and… I got caught.” Hizashi smiled, but it wasn’t a happy smile. “I was given an ultimatum, a correctional facility or… I could give one more family a chance. Moira and Cho took me in, and they asked me what I wanted to do with my life.” Hizashi’s hazel eyes flicked towards his bedroom window, lost and muted. “I told them I wanted to make a change, and they suggested UA. It feels like a dream. A really, really good dream. But…it still doesn’t feel real. Not exactly. Someone like me being a hero? I can’t even control my Quirk most of the time!” He laughed, the sound thin and bitter. “I hurt people with my voice. I’m ungrateful. Ungrateful and selfish and difficult and all the things that make foster kids… unwanted.”

“Hizashi, stop talking.” Hizashi shut his mouth, cheeks turning a light pink. Shouta was glaring up at him now, his brows furrowed in the way they did when he was about to dig his heels in. He looked almost mad, but the way he suddenly reached out, pulling Hizashi into a hug that was tight and brutal and anything but mad.

“I don’t care what people have told you- You can learn to control your Quirk. I’m going to make sure you can, because your Quirk is strong and I believe it can help people. I know it can because you want to help people.”

“But—”

“Did you make it into class 1-A?” Shouta asked, interrupting his friend’s excuse. Hizashi blinked slowly, a deer caught in the headlights of his friend’s stare. He stared anywhere but Shouta’s eyes as he replied.

“Y-Yes?”

“You believe Nedzu knows what he’s doing as a teacher?”

“Of course! B-but Mr. Nedzu hasn’t seen me like this. No one at school has.”

“No one until now.” Shouta pointed out, making Hizashi look at him like he’d grown two heads. Shouta shrugged, tucking a lock of dark hair behind one ear. He leaned his chin against his own knees, gazing up at Hizashi. The simple statement seemed to make Hizashi falter, considering the before unseen truth. Uncertainty melted into cautious relief.

“I guess… I guess you’re right. And…you didn’t just run away, either.”

Shouta snorted derisively. Though it wasn’t exactly true, his next words brought a fragile grin to Hizashi’s face.

“I’ve seen you in worse states, honestly. Like that time you accidentally drank a latte with milk and you couldn’t leave the bathroom for two days? Or the time you got stuck in a child’s swing at the park trying to be cool. Or when you and Nemuri thought there was a stray cat outside her house and you went to look for it in the dark and it turned out to be a very angry raccoon—”

Hizashi pressed his hand to Shouta’s mouth, openly snickering now. His face was beet red from embarrassment.
“Yeah, yeah. Okay, I get it. I’m usually an idiot. You don’t have to rub it in.” He looked a little more like himself, though, and Shouta counted that as a win.

Slowly, Hizashi unwound himself from the tight ball he had made himself to be. His knees popped as he stretched them out, shaking his ankles. His warm fondness for Shouta melted as he turned his gaze back towards his window, a thoughtful look crossing his features.

“Y’know, sometimes I really do wonder if this whole ‘hero’ thing is the answer to crime. Seems like a lot of people still don’t get the saving they need.” Hizashi’s hands came to scratch at the back of his neck, hazel eyes flattening in colour to something hard and distant. “Every day I go to UA, and it feels like a dream come true! It really, really does, but… No one in our class is like me. No one is like the people I’ve met in foster care. It’s like I’m playing a part, like I’m an actor.”

“You’re pretty convincing then- it takes a lot to make me believe anyone is as earnest as you are most of the time.”

Hizashi said nothing at this, only seeming to consider Shouta’s words and fall back into his contemplative slump. Shouta took this as a cue to edge closer, bumping his shoulder against Hizashi’s. Before he could second guess himself, he rested his head against the crook of Hizashi’s neck. Shouta didn’t know much about comforting others, but he knew he always felt better when weighed down by something anchoring.

“The truth is; I think you’re right. I don’t know if heroes are the answer to today’s problems. But I do know that even if heroes don’t show up, villains still will. There’s always going to be people who try to take advantage of others, and if no one stops them, then I don’t think the world would be a very nice place. If you have things in this world that you want to protect, then you do everything you can to preserve them. So I’m not going to let you drop the hero program, and I’m not going to let you sulk. Tomorrow, we’re going to try and work with your Quirk, and we’re going to be great heroes that kick ass at the Sports’ Festival. That is what ‘Plus Ultra’ is to me.”

Shouta’s eyes slipped closed then, and when Hizashi didn’t shrug him away he allowed his breath to even out. He didn’t entirely mean to fall asleep, but it happened. He’d used his Quirk after all, and that tended to make him tired. Hizashi was warm, and still, and the sound of his friends breathing soothed Shouta more than he cared to admit.

He was just on the edge of gone when he felt tentative fingers run their way through his long hair, teasing out the split ends and knots. Shouta was asleep, but in the pale light of his bedroom, Hizashi spoke to him anyway.

“Y’know… I’d do anything to protect you, too.”

The light seemed to stretch across them, setting Hizashi’s hazel eyes into a gold glow. With his free arm, he lifted his hand, and drew a star on the condensation of the window. It rested there a moment, and then seemed to glow before fading away.

The Spider had given him a home, a life, so much more. She had found him the perfect parents, the perfect school. That, would come with a debt. Hizashi didn’t know what it would be, but even as a child he knew it would be heavy. In that sense, asking for one more favour was just the tip of the
iceberg.

“I want to protect him.” Hizashi whispered into the darkness, knowing who was listening. “I want to protect my family, and my life here. Whatever it takes, I’ll give.”

Against the window pane, the glistening line of a spider’s web twitched. Hizashi watched it, and pretended not to feel a crawling sensation down the back of his spine.
When Izuku woke, it was with the feeling that he had been sleeping for a long, long time. His eyes opened slowly, sandpaper feeling in the back of his throat making him cough.

He was lying in a bed, plain sheets clean and warm compared to the chill in the room. A window was open; curtains being tugged in the early evening air. He breathed in the smell, trying to remember when exactly he had fallen asleep.

“I got you some breakfast.”

The voice that spoke from the corner chair was familiar, quiet. Izuku sat up, realizing that at some point he’d changed into plain sweatpants and a white t-shirt. When had he done that? He turned towards the voice, disoriented.

Tomura was offering him a greasy brown paper bag, the contents of it smelling decidedly like McDonalds. It made Izuku’s mouth water, though he was still confused and tired. He knew Tomura, somehow. He recognized him, but there was a gap, a feeling of displacement. Izuku searched for the answers, prodding at the curious blank spot in his mind like he was prodding at a loose tooth.

“You’ve been asleep for a few days, the doctor said you’d be a little confused when you woke up.” Tomura stood, approaching slowly with the food. Izuku felt no fear, feeling nothing, really, at all. He took the food as it was offered, and as he did a thought crept into his head as to just what, Tomura was. He squinted, the memory feeling like the first tangible thing since he’d woken up.

“You’re my… brother?”

Tomura smiled, scarred face lighting with the recognition.
“There we go,” He said “It’s all coming back to you, isn’t it?”

It was, the pieces coming together slowly. Izuku came to realize that there was a bandage wrapped tightly about his head. He reached up to touch it, feeling the texture of it. More images flickered, vague but quickly coming together.

His name was Izuku. He was also **Ghost**, a villain that worked with the League of Villains. He was a vessel, a key in the organization’s plans. He’d been in an accident, and gotten hurt. Tomura Shigaraki was his brother.

Izuku would trust him with his life.

“All Might’s coming, isn’t he?”

Tomura’s grin only grew, until it stretched catlike across his face. He clapped a gloved hand on Izuku’s shoulder, squeezing tightly.

“It’s good to have you back, brother. Now, once you eat, what do you say we see just what you can do, now that you’ve woken up.”

Izuku felt a warmth building in his hands, almost like he was trapped in a sun ray. He glanced down, the glow emanated from his fingertips green like Fyrefly’s Quirk. He lifted his head, and his eyes glowed like radiation was trapped behind them.

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UA was eerie after hours. Maybe it was the size of the campus, now devoid of life, but it yawned and stretched like a maze that Shouto felt like he was intruding upon. Maybe that was just his nerves. Or maybe, it was the way he was tucked under a library desk, waiting tensely for the sun to set and for the last UA’s staff to leave. The position was giving his neck a cramp, seated in a jumbled pile of limbs, hardly daring to breathe.

If Shinsou was as tense as he was, then he didn’t show it. Shouto watched with some envy as his newfound crime partner casually flipped through the pages of some sort of autobiography under the desk across from him. He arguably had just as much to lose as Shouto if he was caught sneaking around the school, possibly more. How was he not even stressed? Or maybe he was, and just really good at hiding it. One thing that Shouto could admit, was that Shinsou had a good poker face.

Perhaps sensing his stare, Shinsou looked up from said book. He shot a cocky smile in Shouto’s direction, making Shouto’s suspicion lean more towards overconfidence. He swallowed back the fear that this wasn’t going to work, that they were both going to get caught.

He was doing this for Midoriya, he reminded himself. He owed his friend this much, at least. They
needed to know who the informant was, if UA wanted to get ahead of the League.

Slowly, the last rays of sunlight drained from the sky. One by one, the school lights were dimmed, and the sound of the cleaning robots came, and went. Shouto counted down the time, keeping himself grounded through breathing exercises.

Finally, after what seemed to be days but was only a few hours, Shinsou spoke.

“You ready to go to the staff room?”

As ready as he’d ever be. Shouto nodded, and uncurled himself from his hiding place with relief. Hopefully, his father bought the lie that he had a school project to work on with a classmate. Hopefully, he didn’t pay too much attention to the fact that classes hadn’t been in session for several days.

They picked their way carefully through the now empty hallways, both of them keeping an ear out for the sound of footsteps or mechanical whirring. Everyone was supposed to be gone by now, but one couldn’t be too careful. Shouto half expected to bump into one of their teachers, or worse, the principal. All that they found however were more empty hallways, and soon in spite of himself Shouto felt some of his anxiety melt away.

Shinsou walked easily beside him, clearly less worried. And why would he be? So long as he could get someone to talk to him, he could very well brainwash them and have them forget he was ever here in the first place. His Quirk maybe hadn’t thrived in the face of UA’s entrance tests, but here? On a stakeout mission? Shouto was the one at a disadvantage. He couldn’t use his Quirk, not without damaging school property or setting off a fire alarm.

As they walked, Shinsou apparently thought it was safe enough to strike up conversation. He’d had a thoughtful look on his face for a while now, and Shouto had gotten the prickling sensation of a question hovering between them. Shinsou’s flat gaze slid towards Shouto, his voice loud in the utter silence of the school.

“You’re willing to risk quite a bit for Midoriya, aren’t you?”

The question was probing, and Shouto swallowed back the temptation to hunch his shoulders, put up a wall against it. He kept his tone deliberately neutral.

“Is that really so surprising? He’s my friend.”

“I guess I didn’t really picture you being the ‘friendly’ type, given what I’ve heard and seen.”

Ah. The Sports Festival. Shouto wondered if his attitude then would continue to haunt him. He felt a wave of shame wash over him.

“Midoriya didn’t really give me much of a choice, something I think you can probably relate to.” Shinsou’s wry smile confirmed Shouto’s suspicions.
“Yeah, he does have that effect on people I’ll admit.” He frowned “But you’ve got a lot to lose being his friend. You think your dad would be happy knowing you were friends with the guy who keeps lighting his assets on fire?”

A sour taste crawled up the back of Shouto’s mouth. No, his father definitely wouldn’t be happy. He deliberately didn’t think about just what his dad would do, if he were to find out.

“Frankly, I don’t really give a shit what my old man wants.” The rare curse made Shinsou’s brows rise, and something pleased lit his features.

“Ah, so you hate your Daddy Dearest like most sane people. Cool, I don’t have to walk on eggshells then.”

“Is there a point you’re trying to make?” Shouto snapped, already uncomfortable with this topic. His feelings towards his father were complicated to say the least, and even if Shinsou didn’t know it he was treading dangerously close to a wound that Shouto so often refused to acknowledge. The old hurt flared up, a broken bone that refused to heal.

Shinsou lifted his hands in supplication, clearly not interested in starting a fight.

“Easy, I’m not gonna pry.” No. No one ever did, did they? No one wanted to know the truth about Endeavour. “What I’m getting at is it seems like this is a pretty big step for UA’s golden child to take, at least for just a friend.”

“You’re also here.”

Shinsou snorted, the sound incredulous.

“Yeah, because I don’t have much to lose. Midoriya’s made my life infinitely better, and I owe him for that more than I can really say. He’s given me a second chance.”

A second chance, huh? Shouto thought about what Midoriya did for him, how he’d looked at him and seen him, and how that’d made something thaw in Shouto’s chest. If he lingereded too much on it, it made his very bones ache, his eyes burn.

“Me too. Not in the same way, but… Midoriya also gave me a second chance.”

Shouto could see that Shinsou didn’t entirely believe him. Really, he didn’t blame him. What could a Todoroki ever lack? He came from a wealthy family, an ‘honourable’ one that did good for society. It was always the same, the looks of skepticism should he ever voice something was out of place. Well, almost always. That was why Midoriya was so important. At least, that was what made the most sense to Shouto, who had never really felt a tie to anyone before in his life that wasn’t his own siblings.

Mercifully, Shinsou’s line of questioning was cut short by their arrival to the staff office. The window revealed it was dark inside, computers all turned off, all according to plan.

“Okay, so we’re going to go inside and hide in the supply closet, and see if our traitor comes by.” Shinsou reached for the door handle, only to frown as it rattled, unmoving.
They quickly realized their next problem, and Shouto cursed himself that he hadn’t thought about it. The door was locked. Of course it was locked, and if Shouto tampered with it their traitor would know someone was inside.

“We’re idiots.” He hissed.

Shinsou’s brows furrowed in deep thought. He began to root through his pockets, frowning when he turned up nothing.

“Do you have a paperclip? Or a pin?”

“What are you going to do?” But Shouto’s brain was already putting together the pieces. He began to rifle through his own pockets, curiosity flitting across his features. “You can pick locks?” He found a pin finally, the one he used to hold his tie neatly in place to his uniform. Shinsou took it, turning it over in his hands as if weighing how well it would work. Seemingly satisfied, he crouched in front of the lock, beginning to work away in front of Shouto’s stunned eyes.

“When you’re a foster kid, you learn things.” Shinsou said. His head was tilted in concentration, like a dog listening for some sort of sound.

It only took a few minutes before the lock gave way, clicking open. Shinsou opened the door with a triumphant grin. He handed the pin back to Shouto.

“I can’t do anything complicated, but UA cheaped out- this lock is less tricky than a pair of handcuffs.” He winked “Bet you’re glad I came along, aren’t you?” He held up his fist to bump, grin not wavering even when Shouto didn’t take it. “I can show you how to do it if we have time later. Crime buds!”

Shouto decided that he did not want to know why Shinsou knew what picking handcuffs was like. He also decided that maybe, maybe, this stupid plan might just work after all.

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The supply closet was small, and dark, and Shouto’s knees were uncomfortably near Shinsou’s face as they hid in it. A sliver of light from the crack in the middle of the twin metal doors was the only thing that gave any sort of light for seeing. In it, Shouto could just make out Shinsou’s eyes peering out, searching for any sign of movement. They waited in silence, neither of them wanting to breathe too deeply in case someone come in.

It was in this silence that Shouto mentally addressed the underlying flaw in this plan: that neither of them were necessarily strong enough to take a pro hero on in a fight. They had one shot, and if whoever was behind this knew what Shinsou’s Quirk was, then they had very little chance at all.

“It’s going to be fine.” Shinsou whispered, half speaking to himself. “We’re just going to find out who it is, and then we’ll tell principal Nedzu.”
The sound of the latch clicking on the front door made both of them fall silent, their faces pressed close to the sliver in the filing cabinet door. Shouto felt his pulse quicken in his chest, a thought occurring that made his blood run cold:

There was no way to lock the door from the inside.

A pool of light spilled from the school’s hallway. There was no time to fix the mistake, only sit and wait and pray that whoever was coming into the staff room hadn’t noticed. Shouto felt a sour taste rise in the back of his mouth, real fear beginning to settle in even as a shadow streamed across the dormant computers and desks in front of them.

The shadow got bigger as whoever was there stepped into the room. They were slow in a way that made the hair on the back of Shouto’s arms rise- the person suspicious. In the dark, he saw Shinsou’s eyes narrow in concentration.

Heavy footsteps came forward, fluorescent lights flicking on and momentarily blinding Shouto. When he could see again, he could make out a familiar lanky figure stepping into the middle of the room.

Shinsou made a sound, barely perceptible but as loud to Shouto as the beating of his own heart. It was a man, and though his hair was tied into a loose ponytail, there was no mistaking the leather jacket or boots.

Is that-

“Is there someone there?” Present Mic’s voice held a playful note to it, like he was chiding a student for playing a prank against him. It didn’t match his expression, eyes narrowed behind his gold sunglasses. He had a hand on the inside of his jacket, and Shouto’s panic spiked. A gun.

Shouto’s mind was reeling, but Hizashi Yamada was still carrying the easygoing tone he was known for.

“If this is a student, you won’t be in trouble! I’m just wondering why you’re here, when school’s out. Catching up on overdue homework? Came to ask someone a question?” He half-chuckled at his own little joke, but his hand didn’t move an inch from his jacket pocket. Present Mic wasn’t facing the filing cabinet, but he was looking under desks, eyes flicking across the dark computer screens. He didn’t seem to be convinced he was alone, despite the silence.

Shouto was very aware of how quickly Shinsou was breathing, like he was trying to reign in some great outburst. His eyes were slitted in cold fury, his hands knuckle-white against his knees.
Slowly, some of the tension in Present Mic’s shoulders loosened. He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, casting a disappointed look at the lock on the front door.

“So some security measure.” He muttered, half to himself. His gaze landed on a computer, brows drawing together as he drew a careful seat facing away from the filing cabinet. The sound of clattering keys filled the staff office, the computer lighting up as Shouto watched his teacher fill out his password. There was the sound of the computer’s fan whirring to life.

Shouto pressed his shoulders against the back of the filing cabinet, his eyes closing for a moment as he struggled to take in what he was seeing. His English teacher of all people? He hadn’t been sure who he’d suspected, if anyone, but Present Mic was probably on the bottom of the list.

Yet, it all made a weird amount of sense, in a way that made Shouto want to kick himself. Yamada had access to everyone’s files like any teacher, but he was closer to Aizawa, closer than most. He reported on all of them at the Sports Festival, needed to know their strengths and weaknesses intimately. He’d also been there when Stain had been apprehended, and there when Izuku had been taken. Maybe Stain hadn’t woken up. The horrible thought snaked into Shouto’s mind, thinking about the wall he’d come up against over that evening. Maybe, he’d been knocked out because he’d seen something he shouldn’t have.

The betrayal sent anger through Shouto, shockingly heated. He hadn’t been close to Present Mic, but he was their teacher. He’d been everything an adult in a learning position should be: Caring, open, and (until recently) honest. Shouto could admit that maybe, once or twice, he’d thought that Present Mic was the most natural at his job.

*He’s a spy, that’s why he was so good at it.*

Shouto felt Shinsou shift beside him, and he reached out instinctively to grab his friend’s wrist. The movement brushed against the metal cabinet, and the noise scraped loudly. Shouto winced, he and Shinsou going rigid as all typing stopped.

A horrible silence permeated the air, one that was only broken by the sound of a chair being pushed back. Shouto could just make out the file that was open on the computer as Present Mic stepped away- Izuku’s face staring blankly at him as if to ask him why he was here. It was only for a moment, before their teacher was blocking the view, quickly approaching.

Shouto felt panic rise up in him, his Quirk making one half of him cold and the other half begin to burn. This had been stupid, he realized. So, So stupid. He couldn’t use his abilities, not without destroying this office and setting off the fire alarm. If he did that, Yamada might still get away, and they’d be on the hook for endangering themselves. Do nothing, and they might actually die. To Shinsou at least, that outcome might be preferable. UA was all he had.

*Shit. Shit, SHIT-*
Shinsou moved, faster than Shouto thought was capable. His voice was an inarticulate, strangled yell as he pushed through the door. He was wielding a textbook from the filing cabinet like a baseball bat.

“You BASTARD!” He howled, and Shouto watched in mute horror as he spilled out of the filing cabinet. Shinsou’s strike hit home, catching Yamada by surprise. Their teacher yelped as a textbook clapped him across the face, knocking his glasses askew and sending them to shatter on the floor.

“You little-” Present Mic began, a snarl twisting his face. Then he was caught in Shinsou’s Quirk, his limbs going slack and his face smoothing over into glossy compliance. He stood a puppet with his strings cut, swaying in place as Shinsou panted in front of him.

Shouto was still half out of the filing cabinet, his heart thundering in his ears. He stared at his caught teacher, hardly believing that what he’d seen had just happened. Present Mic wasn’t moving, staring dreamily ahead, awaiting orders from Shinsou. Shouto watched his friend’s chest heave, his face a mask of swirling emotions, ugly and pained. He thought for a panicked moment that Shinsou might hit their teacher, go after him again with the textbook still clutched in his hands.

Instead, Shinsou tossed the textbook on the floor. He reached into the small bag he’d brought, and Shouto’s eyes widened as he produced a set of plastic zipties. Shinsou tossed them at Present Mic’s feet, his voice hard.

“Take a seat on the chair, and tie your hands and feet so that you can’t get out.” A bitter smile crossed Shinsou’s face, an echo of the same smile he’d held at the Sports Festival. “Then you’re going to tell us everything, from what you were after here, to who you work for.”

With unquestioning compliance, Present Mic knelt and grabbed the zip ties.

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It was in fact a gun that was in Present Mic’s pocket. Shouto took it from him once he’d regained his wits, emptying the cartridge carefully before tossing it far away in the corner of the room. The thought of how close they’d been to getting shot was not something he wanted to linger on.

Hizashi didn’t fight him, merely watched as if he were an observer in a dream. It was weird, seeing their normally energetic teacher seem so docile.

By contrast, Shinsou had entered a state of almost mania. He kept running his hands through his hair, spitting out questions like vitriol.

“How long have you been a double agent in UA?”

“A long time, since I was a student here.”

“What did your boss want from the student files?”
“Information on Izuku’s rehabilitation here, what his mental frame was like before he was taken back with the League.”

“Why did you try to pin me as the traitor? Did you want me to quit? Did you think people would believe it was me because of my Quirk?”

Present Mic blinked slowly towards Shinsou, his tone soft and distant.

“It had little to do with you. I knew you were adopted, and knew you had a Quirk that most would view as unfavourable. I took a gamble, hoping your anger would paint you into a corner. I was hoping to keep the pro heroes from looking critically at their own staff at UA.” Yamada blinked slowly, his words devoid of emotion. “You were… merely a means to an end.”

This made Shinsou snarl, making to reach for Yamada. Shouto stopped him, holding him back with a solid arm. This wasn’t what they were here for. He turned his mismatched gaze to their teacher, his voice dangerously cold.

“Why does the League want Izuku Midoriya back so badly? What is his purpose in their plans?”

“I don’t know.” Present Mic answered simply. “I don’t work for them. I merely act as a liason between them and my boss.” He tilted his head to the side, seeming to think on it. “All I know is that Izuku holds information that the League needs in order to complete their real goal- to kill All Might.”

It was what Shouto had feared, then. He felt his heart in his mouth, and he struggled to breathe around it as the weight of what they’d been told set in.

“Who do you work for, then?”

Present Mic for the first time held a flicker of emotion in his face. It was the faintest facial twitch, but Shoutou grit his teeth as he replied for him.

“He’s trying to fight my hold. He really doesn’t want us to know.” Shinsou’s voice was whiplike as he ordered Yamada.

“Tell us who you work for.”

“She… goes by many names. But the one she’s used lately is The Spider.” Hizashi’s words were halting, like he was grinding them out through a garburator. Shouto noticed some tension had entered his shoulders.

“Who is she? What does she want?”

“A… collector. She makes a living from… gathering information on others... and then she collects people she can use.” Yamada’s gold eyes flicked to Shinsou “She’s not just interested in Izuku. She also is quite interested in you… and the Todoroki family.”

“Why?” Shouto was puzzled. He’d never heard of anyone called ‘The Spider’.

“Secrets.” Yamada answered simply. “She loves a good secret, and loves knowing what makes a person… malleable. Both of you have secrets… and strong Quirks.” The faintest smile echoed on
Hizashi’s face. “You’re both... outcasts. That’s also appealing to her... and if you weren’t strong, you wouldn’t have been able to catch me.”

Shinsou snorted. His tone was filled with revulsion as he kicked at the discarded textbook on the floor.

“So what, then? What did she offer you, to betray UA like this? All Might? To betray Aizawa? He told me, you know. About you two.” Shinsou’s eyes were filled with bitter hurt. “He told me you were together. It’s your fault he was taken by the League too, I’d bet.”

Hizashi’s head slowly shook in denial. A look of confusion floated across his face, a passing dark cloud.

“No… Everything I did… everything I do… it’s to protect him. To keep him safe. I don’t… want to betray All Might either… I… I care about them both.”

“You have a funny way of showing it.” Shouto growled, the magnitude of the betrayal setting in. “Breaking in here, stealing information on their students, setting up All Might to die.”

“I didn’t know All Might when I made the deal.” Present Mic said, and there was a note of helplessness in his voice. “I didn’t know… the truth about him. And by the time I did… it was too late. I had to stop it… so I made more and more deals… and soon I…”

“You came here alone to try and get the information so you could keep your boss happy, only to get your ass kicked by two of your students.” Shinsou’s smile was cruel as he spoke, a spark of triumph in his eyes. “And this ends now, because we’re going to call Nedzu and tell him everything.”

“Your plan was better than I would’ve expected.” Yamada said slowly. His gold eyes drifted, seeming to look behind them. “But I’m afraid… I’m not alone.”

Shouto felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. He whirled about, only to see a hand fist itself in Shinsou’s hair, a knee dig itself into his kidneys.

“One thing about pro heroes, kiddies,” Soundless said gleefully as they flung Shinsou’s limp body directly into Shouto. “They’re trained that even in a hostage situation, to distract until help arrives.”

The two of them went sprawling, pain exploding across Shouto’s head as he connected with the linoleum floor. His vision swam as he opened his eyes, watching as a cloaked figure stalked towards them. Shouto couldn’t hear their footsteps, couldn’t even exactly look at them. It was like every time he tried, a chalkboard eraser glossed over his mind. He jumped as a hand fist itself in his shirt, even though he knew they’d been coming. He had no time to prepare as a fist dug into his stomach, stealing his breath.

“Rule number two-” Soundless said cheerily “-Is to always watch your blind spot.”
“So let me get this straight- we’re going to a warehouse because your therapist-”

“My uncle.” Aiko supplied, making Momo’s brows furrow as she scrambled to absorb all of the information being thrown around. She started again.

“Right. Your therapist, who is also her uncle, left you a cryptic note because he believes that Izuku-”

“And The League.” Aiko piped.

“And, The League, may inadvertently bring about the end of heroes as we know it. And your uncle felt that a group of teenagers-”

“Pro heroes in training!” Kaminari helpfully supplied. Momo rolled her eyes.

“Fine, pro heroes in training, were the best hope we had of stopping it.”

Momo had her hands burrowed under her armpits, the air cool as they walked as a group along the quiet harbour. She was deeply unhappy with all of this news.

When Katsuki had come back to Ochako’s apartment, explained to them what he’d pieced together, they’d all made the agreement that they should go as a group. Momo however had been stewing over his story, trying to find the thread of logic under what seemed like a completely ridiculous premise.

“You know this all sounds bananas, right? Like, actually bananas. Let me see that note.”

“How do you think I feel?” Katsuki snapped. He’d been uneasy the entire time they’d gathered their things to go to the warehouse, almost looking over his shoulder. It was rare to see him, well, frightened. Angry was normal, restless, yeah, but scared?
He tossed the note that Aiko had found on her bedside table, addressed in stilted penmanship to Katsuki. Momo hastily unfolded the paper, grey eyes scanning words that she'd already heard read aloud to them at Ochako's apartment:

*Katsuki,*

_There’s a lot that I’m afraid I haven’t explained very well to you, and a lot I kept from you about me. Please know that my intention was to keep you and your friends as safe as possible._

_I’m sure that Aiko will probably tell you that I had a Quirk, a very long time ago. The League found out I had it, and they forced me to peer into a specific person’s future, in the hopes that they could find the secret to achieving their goals. Please understand that at the time I was a very fragile man, and had already in many ways been pushed to my limit. I had very little control of my Quirk, and ended up handing them a key that I regret to this day._

_It lead to the capture of your best friend, and your eventual arrival to my office. Though I no longer have my Quirk, I knew immediately who you were, and what your importance to Midoriya was. Believe me when I say that though I could not in good conscience tell you everything when you were a child, I had your interests at heart when I decided to guide you towards a healthier mindset towards yourself and your classmates._

_I believe in you. You’ve come so far, and I say this with the possible weight of the future on my shoulders that I believe you are the only one who will be able to stop what is coming. When I looked into the future, there was only one thing that could defeat the League in every possibility: Izuku Midoriya. If Midoriya met All Might and befriended him, then in every timeline I could see the disaster was averted._

_The League took Midoriya out of the equation. But I kept one secret from the League, a secret that held a slim possibility of their plans failing. You._

_Go to the storage locker on the east District, the number's written below. Find the truth._

_When you have it, you'll know who you must give it to._

_To Aiko- I love you. Be careful._

"He really likes talking in riddles, huh?” Kirishima piped up from behind Momo, where he'd been reading the letter over her shoulder. He'd been the one to convince her that this whole side trip was even a good idea, something he was annoyingly good at. Now he looked less sure of his decision, zipping up his sweater against the chill that was trying to seep into everyone's bones. “Dude, it’s going to be alright, yeah? So your therapist ended up being some weird oracle man with an elaborate side agenda. He’s probably still a good person, right?”

Katsuki levelled Kirishima with a glare, red eyes narrowing dangerously. His hands hadn’t moved from their tightly-clenched position at his sides. Despite the cold, he was still in a tank top and running shorts. If he was bothered, he didn't notice, his own Quirk acting up enough to keep him warm.
“It’s not his fucking intentions I’m angry with.” He growled, scrubbing at his upper arms as if he wanted to rid himself of a crawling sensation. He wouldn’t say what he was angry about, though Momo privately could guess. Katsuki didn’t like putting his trust in anyone. When he did, betrayal hit harder.

“This place is creepy.” Saitou commented, shivering as he looked out across the dock. He wasn’t wrong, the weather having turned colder and rainy. The dock was a grey space, absent of any visible life save for crying seagulls. The salt-spattered warehouses ahead seemed equally desolate, forgotten time pieces left to rest. Saitou’s brows were pinched, gazing uneasily about lest an adult see a pack of children headed towards said warehouses.

“Which one of these is it again?”

“Fifty-two A.” Aiko said, gaze casting about until she found the building. She pointed, and together the group walked towards it.

The building was closed with a metal door, locked with a big metal padlock. It hit all of them that this was someone’s storage unit again.

“You sure you want to do this? It’s technically breaking and entering.” Momo tried one last time to dissuade the group, though her heart was already invested in this. Even she could admit that it felt like they were on the precipice of understanding a puzzle piece.

By way of answering, Katsuki gripped the lock, and blasted it open in a controlled burst. It fell away, scorching the pavement before sputtering into a dead, melted heap of metal. He pulled open the door, and the group stepped inside.

The storage unit was large, but it was immediately clear that it hadn’t been accessed in a long time. There was a stale smell, and Ashido sneezed as the dust all hit them. The room was filled with filing cabinets, metal boxes all left in neatly packed stacks. It was almost underwhelming, seeing that there wasn’t something more dramatic inside.

“So this is someone’s office papers? Ugh, lame.” Ashido voiced what everyone was thinking, hand still over her mouth to keep the dust out.

Katsuki apparently wasn’t so sure. He stalked forward, wrenching open a file cabinet at random. Inside, a series of manila envelopes stared back up at him. He selected one, rifling through the papers, searching.

“So we know what we’re looking for?” Despite her worries, Momo was the next to try helping. She also opened a filing cabinet, and was surprised to find that she recognized some of the names on the tax receipts she was rifling through. They were company names, and a connection soon pieced itself together.
“This is… This storage unit belongs to the Todoroki family?” She asked in disbelief. “Retco, Moshi, Candel… they’re all storage assets that belong to-”

“Endeavour.” Katsuki supplied. This meant something to him, apparently. He had a thoughtful look on his face, the file he’d opened splayed between his hands. He lifted his head, looking around critically. “Deku was helping set fires to Endeavour’s corporate buildings for a while, right? But the pros didn’t know why, only that they didn’t think it was tied to the League entirely…”

“You think they were looking for something?” Momo understood what Katsuki was getting at almost immediately.

By way of answer, Katsuki crept further into the storage unit, making his way to the back. He squatted down, apparently finding something of interest. When he stood, he was holding a medium-sized cardboard box. On it was scrawled a name, in childlike writing.

“That doesn’t look like it belongs here.” Kirishima grinned, helping Katsuki bring it to the middle of the storage container. Everyone circled around, reading the name.

“Fuyumi Todoroki. Isn’t that Shouto’s older sister?” Ashido asked.

Katsuki pried open the box, everyone’s expression becoming confused.

Inside was what could only be described as a collection of childhood memories, stacks of photo albums carefully organized. Beside them was an old video camera, the lens cracked. Katsuki carefully took it out, turning it around to see that the memory card was still inside.

“This was what my uncle wanted us to find? I don’t understand.” Aiko took out a photo album, flipping it open. Her frown was dissatisfied as she did. “It looks like just a bunch of old family photos.”

Ochako looked over Aiko’s shoulder, seeing that indeed that was what was in the photo albums. Images of Shouto’s sister, smiling up at the camera, posing with her mom. She was still a child, gripping her mom’s skirt. As Aiko flipped pages however, Ochako looked perplexed.

“Hey, how many siblings does Shouto have?”

“As far as I know, just two.” Momo replied. “A brother, Natsuo, and his sister.”

Ochako pointed at figure in one of the photos, a group picture that was apparently before Shouto had been born. His mom, heavily pregnant, was standing beside Enji Todoroki. Though she seemed tired, there was a smile on her face as she held hands with two of her children. The white-haired Natsuo was grinning up at the camera, but Fuyumi was looking adoringly at the kid at her shoulder. A boy with dark red hair peered at the camera, his blue eyes seeming to look beyond at the photographer. He wasn’t smiling.
“Who’s that, then?”

Momo looked at the photo, her frown deepening in disbelief.

“That… doesn’t make sense. I’ve talked to Shouto, and he’s never mentioned he had another brother.”

“It’s definitely Endeavour’s kid.” Ashido pointed out. She pointed at the colour of his hair. “He’s even got his dad’s eyes! He’s the spitting image.”

Katsuki’s expression had become unreadable, like he was thinking very deeply about something. Kirishima noticed, brow quirking in silent question. Katsuki shook his head, but his expression was uneasy.

“What is it?”

“…Something I saw at the Sports Festival. Shouto doesn’t have a good relationship with his old man. I overheard something Half-n’-Half said to Deku, and it put me on edge.”

“What do you mean?” Aiko asked. Katsuki pursed his lips, red eyes narrowing.

“Not really my place to say.” He admitted at last. “But I think… someone wanted to make sure this other Todoroki was wiped clean from the family name.”

He looked at the video camera in his hands, thumbing the cracked lens. A bad feeling had settled into Bakugou’s gut, and it was becoming sour the longer he thought on it.

“What if Deku was trying to find evidence of this kid existing? What if this camera filmed something?”

“Something?” Momo pressed.

“…Something incriminating. That Endeavour did.”

Momo sucked in a careful breath. The implications were beginning to set in.

“Are you saying Endeavour—”

“I’m not saying anything just yet. We don’t know what’s on this camera, though. I think this is the key my therapist was trying to have us find.” Katsuki looked at the photograph, at the child staring up at them as if to accuse them of some crime.

“Somehow,” He muttered “I got a bad feeling that this mystery Todoroki- or whatever happened to him- is part of all of this.”

“So what do we do about that?” Ashido asked, crossing her arms with a huff.
“…Maybe we trade the card?” Kirishima’s suggestion made all of their heads turn towards him. Eijirou reddened at the attention, trying to explain. “Whoever was burning down all of Endeavour’s assets clearly wants this memory card, right? What if we can get them on our side? They might know enough about the League to help us get Deku out.”

“That’s a pretty big ‘if’.” Momo criticised, not unkindly. “We don’t know who the person is, and even if we did how do we know their intentions are any better than the League’s? How do we let them know we even have the memory card without making ourselves a target?”

“We stick to the original plan.” Katsuki said. “We go in a disguise, try and figure out where the villains are hiding. When we have their location, we can find whoever wants this card.” He smiled, and the smile etched closer to being demonic than good. “And then, we blackmail them into working for us.”

****

“Welcome back. You’re looking spiffy.”

Dabi greeted Izuku from a sprawled lounge on the sofa, waving him over. Izuku smiled, adjusting the tie into a neat knot at the base of his throat. It felt good to not be in hospital clothes any more, and in truth he felt better than he had in a long time. He smiled, flexing his hands and feeling the familiar ache from a long nap.

“Feeling better.” He said, taking a seat next to Dabi. He could feel the man’s gaze on him, lingering on the scar along Izuku’s newly-shorn head. A haircut had been necessary, apparently. Thankfully, Kurogiri had tried to make it fashionable, leaving some still on top to style.

“They brought you up to speed, then?” Dabi commented softly, his tone neutral. Izuku frowned, green eyes flicking to his teammate. He searched his memory for what he knew of Dabi, his Quirk busily filling in blanks. Despite Dabi’s calm, there was an air of tension in the man’s shoulders, discomfort. He wasn’t exactly looking at Izuku, instead choosing his shoulder or scar to fixate on.

“I’m ready for tonight. You?”

“Always ready.” Dabi answered, a lazy smile painting his features. “Interested to see how strong you are now, kid.”

“I mean; I’ve always been strong. It’s just hard for me to remember… sometimes.” That was true—Izuku’s memory was bad. Something about an old injury, and his recent head injury. He couldn’t remember lots of stuff, but that was okay. He was home, and that’s what mattered.

“Just remember to guard your face.” Dabi replied, “Don’t want a repeat of when I trained you a bit in hand to hand.”

The memory was hazy, but Izuku was pleased that he could recall it. It made him smile, remembering how proud he’d been despite his ultimate loss.
“I had a sprained wrist to be fair. Still managed to knock you off your feet, once.”

Dabi chuckled. “That you did.” He admitted, reaching over to pat Izuku’s shoulder. “Just keep in mind All Might hits a lot harder than I do.”

He got to his feet, hands in the pocket of his leather jacket. He revealed a playing card, turning it over in his fingers before sliding across the bar towards Izuku.

“Here’s what I know about the bastard. As a token of good luck.” Dabi’s smile faded, something more serious burning underneath. “Be careful, kid.”

He walked away, and Izuku reached out to turn up the playing card. All Might’s image had been carefully glued to it, with a descriptor on the bottom:

*Symbol Of Peace.*

Under weaknesses, there was a single written line:

*No known weaknesses.*

The weirdness of the interaction with Dabi made Izuku unsettled. As far as he knew, he couldn’t remember a time where Dabi seemed almost… uncomfortable around him. Now he was offering help? Mr. Mercenary himself?

The memory of the hand to hand combat came back to Izuku, the memory feeling less crystal than before. He had a sprained wrist, that much he could recall. Dabi had been knocked off of his feet.

*Why had his wrist been sprained, though?*

There was a frustrating blankness that answered, followed by a sharp pain in Izuku’s skull. He winced, licking his lips and pressing his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose. After a moment, it vanished.

Izuku stared at the playing card, and felt an empty sort of echo in his mind that was disturbing and strange. For the first time, his Quirk gave him nothing. Instead, it gave him an equally confusing piece of information.

All Might *did* have a weakness. Dabi’s card was wrong.

*Weakness: old injury in side. Time limit.*

Izuku had never met All Might. At least, not as far as he knew. Yet his Quirk echoed in his ears, repeating the words until he wrenched himself into a purposefully blank mindset. Izuku put the playing card into his breast pocket, staring in confusion at his own hands. His Quirk was never
wrong. But his Quirk wasn’t *omniscient*. So *where* had the information come from?

Nothing. No information, just a blank wall that made the hair on the back of Izuku’s neck stand on end.

That’s when the fire alarm went off, sending off the sprinkler system and dousing Izuku and presumably everyone else in cold water. He jerked, head raising as the distant sound of gunshots in the basement made Izuku forget about his momentary panic.

A black void melted into existence, two golden eyes opening to reveal Kurogiri standing before Izuku. He seemed harried, as harried as Kurogiri could *be*, anyway. The distraction was almost welcome.

“It’s Eraserhead and the girl Overhaul is so invested in. They’re trying to escape.”

Izuku clucked his tongue, getting to his feet. He reached into the pool of Quirks simmering in his bloodstream, finding one he was happy with. His body began to harden, steel spike emerging from his palms into two long, barbed shanks.

“Aw, we can’t have that, can we?” Izuku’s head tilted, a cruel smile lighting up his features. Metalgrind’s Quirk was certainly strong, strong enough that it made his body feel heavier. His Quirk took it into account, adjusting his own expected speed time. His skin took on a silver hue, eyes turning stone-dark. “After all, Eraserhead shouldn’t miss the show. All Might’s due here soon enough, and it’ll be like a faculty reunion. And the *girl*...” Izuku trailed off, his Quirk supplying what he knew of Eri’s Quirk, it’s potential. “Well. Overhaul’s not the only one with plans for her.”

Kurogiri chuckled.

“I’ll let Shigaraki know you’re on it, then.” His lantern-gold eyes squinted with pleasure, already swirling out of existence. “This might be good training practice. After all, you still need to adjust to your Quirks.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Izuku purred. A pro hero chase, in a territory he knew better than the back of his hand.

He could hardly wait.
Enter The Fight

Chapter Summary

No joke exactly this time but I had a headcanon that Nedzu has only a very limited understanding of how humans work. Like, he has an idea?? but his body is this weird fusion between rat and human and it's made this individual that doesn't really get sick much, doesn't get injured easily, and survives mostly off of crackers and tea.

I also headcanon that most scarily, his teeth when he smiles fully are neither human nor rat. They're carnivorous in nature. Anyway, I love this local cryptid.

Chapter Notes

This chapter took a while but WHEW I actually really like the pacing I managed with it.

Anywho, This is the unofficial part 1 of the 'Final Battle' So to speak. There will probably (though don't hold me accountable for it) about 4 more chapters total for part one of this story. Though I'm definitely looking into writing a sequel, it's weird to think this half is nearly done.

Thank you for your patience! and I hope you enjoy! I love to read all of your comments and cherish every Kudo as always~

Setting off the fire alarm had two functions. The first was that it created panic, which meant that Overhaul’s minions were scrambling and not paying much attention to who was coming or going. The second was that Shouta had set fire to Chisaki’s lab equipment, which hopefully would distract Chisaki himself.

It was a gamble, but Shouta didn’t have much time to think of something better. There was a sharp pain that kept running up the side of his temple, and every time he moved his head too quickly his vision would burn white at the edges. He was running on empty, and he still had to get Eri back to his colleagues before he could pass out.

They had to get out of this villain lair first, though, which was proving more difficult than Shouta would like. Every few feet he had to duck into some corridor or shadow, holding his breath as a lackey scrambled to find him or Eri. The little girl clung to his back like a spider monkey, and when people she recognized passed, her breaths grew harsh in his ear. They were both on eggshells, and
any fear he showed would fuel hers.

If only the damn place wasn’t filled with rabbit holes and dead end passage ways. Like a maze, it seemed that there were halls that lead nowhere, doors that lead to placed they’d walked before.

*Who even designs a place like this?*

Shouta thought, not without bitterness. He kept to the right, counting the amount of times he made turns and trying to keep track of any potential exits up to the upper levels.

The sound of something metallic dragging across the floor made the hair on the back of his arms stand on end. Shouta drew up short, a bloody taste creeping in the back of his mouth as he tried to pinpoint the noise.

Peering over his shoulder, it was Eri who saw the shadows ahead move. Shouta ducked automatically when he heard her tiny gasp, and not a moment too late. He felt the movement air as something weighted was flung where they’d just been standing: A net.

A ‘tsk’ing sound came from the person who had thrown it. Shouta felt a cold chill run down his spine as the voice spoke out in the darkness. He set himself in a defensive position, searching for the source of the weapon.

On his shoulders, he felt Eri go tense.

“Damn. You’re faster than I’d like.”

The voice was familiar. Shouta’s eyes widened.

“M-Midoriya?”

The figure moved out from the shadows, and Shouta’s bad feeling was confirmed. Izuku Midoriya appeared, but it was not exactly the Midoriya he’d taught. This Midoriya was grinning a tombstone smile at him, dressed in a suit that was as sharp as the haircut he was sporting. Shouta’s eyes were drawn to the scar that traced one side of his head, feeling a cold sort of fear set in. He’d never seen Izuku’s eyes look at anyone the way they were looking at him now- Cold and calculating, lifeless. There was nothing human about it. The hair on Shouta’s arms began to stand on end.

Midoriya was carrying his staff, twirling it idly as he tilted his head to one side in curiosity.

“Now that’s a name I haven’t used in a while. I wonder how you know it?” Izuku’s grin didn’t falter as he moved with a speed that Shouta struggled to match. “You see, I tend to go by Ghost lately, Mr. Eraserhead!”
Midoriya was suddenly inches from Shouta’s face, the whirl of his staff coming hard and fast. Shouta bent, hoping to god that Eri was holding onto him tightly as he tucked low and rolled. So far, he’d only been able to act on instinct, and those two instincts he had seemed to be in direct conflict: Not hurting Midoriya, and keeping himself and Eri alive.

“Midoriya, *I need* you to listen to me. I’m not entirely sure what’s going on but I don’t think you’re in your right mind.”

The laugh that came from Midoriya was high and sharp. There was something strange with his eyes, a glow that was new and electric. Shouta tracked it automatically, using it to see Midoriya in the darkness as the boy slunk into shadow.

“I’m going to have to ask Tomura, seems I’m still a little concussed. The heroes think I’m on their side.”

Then Izuku did something that was strange and horrifying. In the dark of the hall, his eyes became twin green lanterns. The glow began to run down his arms in crackling electricity, and only years of expecting things to go pear-shaped made Shouta desperately tuck and roll.

There was a blinding flash of light, the likes of which hurt Shouta’s eyes even though they were closed. Heat, radiant and deadly. Then there was a carved, singed trail beside them, leading to Midoriya’s outstretched palm. The new power was echoingly familiar.

Realization hit Shouta, memory of the *Starlight Hero* and her sudden and tragic death. He choked on his breath, his chest squeezing tightly.

“It can’t be…”

Midoriya giggled, grin stretching across his face.

“*Can’t it? You’ve been working the case of Murdered heroes since it began, after all. You figured it out yet, Eraserhead?*”

The glow surged in Midoriya’s palms again, and this time Shouta activated his Quirk. Fyrefly’s Quirk stuttered to a halt, but Shouta didn’t have time to celebrate. Metalgrind’s Quirk surged up Midoriya’s boots and legs, covering his body in hard steel. The wall behind them crumbled under Izuku’s punch, which Shouta dodged by a breath.

He felt Eri’s grip slip with the movement, but Shouta couldn’t turn his back to check on her. Midoriya was still punching, slower but incredibly strong. Each strike that connected with the wall made a metallic ‘*BANG*’. Shouta could only act like a shield between him and Eri, pain jarring up his arms every time he redirected a strike.
They were running out of room to dodge though, and Shouta was running out of time and hope that he would win this fight.

“Eri, run!” Shouta barked, tasting blood in the back of his mouth. He couldn’t turn around to see if she listened to him. He could do nothing but block, and dodge, and hope like hell that one of Midoriya’s fists didn’t connect with his-

Midoriya made a feint for his stomach, and went for his face. Shouta couldn’t dodge in time. His teeth clacked together, agony exploding across his temple. The force of the punch sent him flying.

Through ringing ears, Shouta had the distant realization that Eri was screaming.

The screaming seemed to double. Or was it just that another person had started screaming with her?

*Open your eyes.*

*Open your eyes, dammit!*

He couldn’t quite manage it. His limbs felt too heavy, and there was a queasy sensation that Shouta suspected meant he’d black out soon. His eyes opened a crack, neon pain creating a haze around his vision. What he saw didn’t quite make sense.

Eri’s hands were gripped around Midoriya’s waist, hugging him tightly to her. She must have moved when Midoriya was focused on finishing Shouta off. Her fingers were knitted claw-like into the fabric of his sweater. The horn on her head had sprouted, glowing rainbow-white and banishing the darkness in the hall.

Midoriya was screaming. Shouta could see that now. The boy’s entire body was arched away from Eri, his eyes staring blankly at nothing as his hair began to grow, the scar on his head obscuring as he was flung back to a previous state of existence.

The metal receded from Midoriya’s body, the green glow fading from his eyes. Shouta tried to get up to his elbows, but his arms felt like water.

Eri was climbing up onto Izuku’s back, still screaming between gritted teeth. Izuku bucked, trying to fight her off but sinking to his knees. Eri’s hands clasped around his shoulders, climbing up to his hair, to his eyes. Her hands covered his vision, like she was playing hide and seek. Izuku’s screaming reached a new pitch, his entire body shaking like he’d been immersed in hot coals.

He was beginning to shrink, and that’s when Shouta knew that Eri was trying, failing, to keep control of her Quirk. In that moment, she was her power, not quite a girl, not quite this other ability that she kept hidden inside of her.
He couldn’t help in that moment but see Hizashi, screaming at his parents and unable to hold back his Quirk.

Shouta could feel blood beginning to pool at the corner of his eyes. He used his one last time, staring at Eri and begging himself to just stay awake a little longer.

*Open your eyes.
Open…*

Midoriya flung Eri across the hall.

****

*Wake up…
Dammit! WAKE UP!*

“Kacchan?”

*Izuku opened his eyes to darkness.*

*Where was he?*

*He knew, somehow. He was in the basement. In the dark place he had hidden from All For One as a child. The cages. The water.*

*Why was Kacchan here?*

*You need to wake up, that’s why I’m fucking here!*

*Izuku knew the voice, but he could find no trace of Kacchan anywhere. As far as he could hear or see, there was just black water up to his shins. There was just the distant sound of water dripping, just the cold iron of rusted cages as far as the eye could see.*

*No, that wasn’t quite true. There was something here. It wasn’t Kacchan, though. Midoriya knew that much. Kacchan didn’t cry, at least not like that.*

*“Where are you?”*

*He asked, turning his head away from the crying. Away from that memory.*

*Kacchan’s voice came from that dark hallway, unfortunately.*
You know how to wake up. You know how to find me.

A chill had settled into Izuku’s bones. He wrapped his arms across his chest, peering into the gilded dark water. The crying got louder, turning into wails that made the hair on the back of Izuku’s neck stand on end.

You know how to find me.

Kacchan said, voice beginning to fade. Izuku felt his throat close in a panic, afraid of being alone in the dark, alone with the crying. Afraid of Kacchan leaving again, leaving him behind.

“Kacchan- wait!”

Something was moving in the dark, leathery wings stretched out in the darkness. Tsubasa screamed, and Izuku felt cold sweat slick down his palms. He was dragged by invisible hands down into the water, back into the darkness. Drowning.

****

“Remember, this is fight is going to be about speed, not trying to capture every single villain. We’re here to extract pro hero Eraserhead, student Izuku Midoriya, and any civilians that we may find. We’ll split into two groups, retrieval and support. First will be led by All Might, the other will have both I and Best Jeanist taking charge.”

Detective Naomasa spoke to the cluster of pro heroes that had gathered at the police station in preparation for the ambush of the League of Villain’s headquarters. The rain painted him as a shadow in his dark police uniform, speaking to other shades before him.

Yagi, standing tall as All Might, was a power unto his own. Though not everyone knew why All Might was as invested in this mission as he was, there was no mistaking the solemnity in which he’d come tonight. The absence of a smile on his face made him less like the comic book hero he so often personified, something more dangerous.

Surrounding him were the other pros that had been able to make it to this mission- Best Jeanist, Edgeshot, Kamui Woods amidst others were all prepared to bring the League to justice. This was no longer a distant, nebulous problem: Eraserhead had been captured, and that spelled a threat to all heroes.
Yagi could barely keep himself from trying to comfort Hizashi, who had shown up late looking grim and sleepless. He wasn’t sure if he could offer words of comfort, given that he wasn’t sure that Hizashi didn’t blame him. The ache of their last conversation yawned between them, and Yagi wasn’t sure what he could say. There were a lot of things he wanted to say (I’m sorry. I promise to you we’ll find Shouta together. My time as All Might is running out and I don’t know what to do about it) but nothing seemed adequate.

There was also the upcoming fight weighing on Yagi’s mind. All For One was here, Yagi was sure of it. Somewhere, so was Deku. The cold fear and knowledge that All For One likely knew how much that terrified him lingered in the back of Yagi’s throat. Part of him was carrying the anger a parent had for their lost child. The other part of him was the child, still crying for his mentor.

Inko may have steered him out of a pit of despair, but her kind words couldn’t be expected to fix everything. He’d been bequeathed a fight that had been going on for far longer than All Might had been born into being, longer than even his mentor had been alive. He had to end it, even if time ran out for him.

“This is an ambush mission, so I want everyone who isn’t acquainted with our targets for collection to look at the photos I’ve provided.”

Naomasa handed out images then Izuku and Shouta. Yagi could hardly stand to look at the images as they were passed to him- Midoriya’s stare seemed to be asking him a thousand questions. “There’s a good chance that both Midoriya and Aizawa will likely be used as bait- so approach each individual with caution should you find them. Any questions?” Naomasa looked out expectantly towards the crowd, but no one spoke. After a beat of silence, the police officer nodded tightly.

“Then let’s begin.”

****

It was clear they were expected, even as rubble and dust cleared from the air. All Might’s gaze scanned frantically for a head of green hair amidst the villains on the defence before them: Shigaraki Tomura held in place by Kamui Woods, pinned to the bar in a hold that had to hurt his ribs. This close, All Might could finally get a sense of the villain that had brought his students so much fear. Shigaraki was thin, ghost-pale, his hair silver and his face scarred under disembodied hands. Red eyes peered out from behind one such hand, bright with a glee that made the hair on the back of Yagi’s arms rise.

This is a trap.

“Well, well. Looks like we guessed correctly about what time you’d show up.” Shigaraki’s voice
was drawling, lazy in a way that made all of the heroes tense. Though there were more heroes than villains in the disheveled bar they’d entered, it didn’t feel like they had the upper hand just yet. Four villains, only four, were in front of them- Himiko Toga, a man that All Might didn’t know, Shigaraki, and the void-villain: Kurogiri.

Himiko Toga giggled, her mouth stretched in a fanged grin even as Gran Torino held her in his targets.

“You even got the numbers right, boss. That information we got seems to be pretty good. Now I just wonder who it is they’re looking for?”

The mention of the traitor made something in Yagi crack. He stepped forward, not a trace of a smile on his face.

“Where are Izuku Midoriya and Eraserhead?”

The grin didn’t waver from Shigaraki’s face.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” He sang. The sound of wood creaking as Kamui tightened his grip was sharp in the air. “Unfortunately, I will say your detainment methods here might not have been the best first choice.” Shigaraki’s eyes darted to the stranger in a dark coat.

That was all the warning anyone got. In the next moment, the stranger was lit up with a blue flame. A fire Quirk. Kamui swore, shrinking back automatically. Not the end of the world, fire needed oxygen after all. Gran Torino moved, his Quirk propelling him in a tight ring around the villain in an attempt to suck the air out from around him.

It was all the villains needed. In the light of the blue flame, the chaos as each hero braced themselves, an inky blackness spilled out of each villain’s mouth. Like oil, it flowed out and onto the ground, birthing creatures that seemed to be made from the darkness.

Noumu.

****

Sorry kid, nothing personal.

Shouto groaned. He woke with the distinct feeling that he was not where he was supposed be. There was a deep, bone-thick coldness that made him shudder. It was raining. Even his teeth were cold, though there was something crammed in his mouth that tasted sour and bad.

It made the hand that was hesitantly shaking him feel burning hot. For a moment, Shouto’s first
thought was that it was his father, but his father didn’t do anything gently. A spike of panic hit him as he realized he’d also been tied to what felt like a park bench, plastic zip-tie cutting into his wrists.

The last memory he had was of his English teacher pointing a gun at him. Well, him and-

*Shit. Hitoshi!*

Shouto’s eyes opened, and his vision swam before it focused on an image in the dark that made him hope and despair at once.

He was alive.

Present Mic hadn’t killed him. Leaning against him, Hitoshi was also tied in place, unconscious. Breathing, though, Shouto was relieved to see. There was a nasty purple bruise spreading across Hitoshi’s forehead, blending into his hair.

The person shaking him was none other than Iida, looking very confused and scared, holding an umbrella over the two of them. Craning his neck around, Shouto saw that they were in fact on a park bench, tucked away in backyard of UA.

Iida was not the only one there. Beside him, Principal Nedzu was wearing an unusually somber expression whilst holding his own toylike umbrella. Sensing his confusion, Iida hurried to explain.

“Todoroki? I got your text- What *happened*? I had to get Principal Nedzu to let me into the school.”

“I *am* curious as to how you two managed to sneak onto the campus.” Nedzu piped up then. Though his tone was still professional, there was an air of tension about him. “It’s a dangerous time to be breaking school rules, you know.”

Iida was standing away, but quickly got closer to remove the gag from Shouto’s mouth. It turned out to be a cloth, which explained the ache and raspy dryness that Shouto could taste. He licked his lips, trying to catch his bearings. He had texted Iida? *When?*

The knowledge that he had no idea how much time had passed made Shouto’s throat constrict tightly.

“Yamada,” He rasped, trying to collect his thoughts. Words felt like water right now, running through his fingers. Shouto suspected it was the head injury, which was beginning to make his ears ring in and out.

Nedzu’s expression sharpened, his tail swishing in a way that meant he was agitated. He came forward, nearly Shouto’s height when Shouto was sitting. His paw felt strange, too handlike to be an
animal’s but too animalike to be comforting. It brushed Shouto’s head, checking for injuries. Soon he found it, a lump swelling just behind Shouto’s ear that made the boy hiss in pain.

“You’ve suffered multiple head injuries in a very short time. I’m worried that this is becoming an alarming habit of yours, Todoroki. I’ve been told head injuries are bad for people, too many you could die you know.”

There was a concerning element to how Principal Nedzu casually admitting that he didn't get concussions exactly like a regular person. Shouto decided there wasn't time to question it.

“Present Mic is the traitor.” Shouto shrugged away the Principal’s hand, struggling to get to his feet. The ground lurched alarmingly, and he was forced to sit back down.

Iida’s spine went stiffer than usual. His jaw was a tightened line.

“Present Mic? You’re sure?”

“He’s the one that jumped us. Him and some sort of accomplice?” The memory was hazy. Shouto wasn’t even really sure how he was still alive, frankly. The last memory he had was of Present Mic pointing a gun at his face. That was etched into his mind like a photograph, the smell of sweat and the feeling of terror crawling up his spine.

Then there was the accomplice that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. That was harder to remember, a blurred smudge in Shouto’s memory. Shouto was struggling to recall the person’s face, and he wasn’t sure if it was the head injury or the person’s Quirk. He hadn’t been able to see them, even when he’d been staring right at them. “They had some kind of stealth Quirk. I can’t tell you what they look like.”

“Todoroki. Please don’t tell me that you and Hitoshi went looking for the UA traitor and put yourselves in direct danger.” Principal Nedzu very rarely sounded angry. However, Shouto could detect a dangerous note in his question. He scrubbed at his face, struggling to get his thoughts in order. They were losing time, that much he knew. There was no way to know how long he’d been unconscious for.

“We screwed up.” He admitted “But I don’t have time to explain. Where are the pros?”

“That’s classified information-” Nedzu began, but Shouto snarled in an unexpected moment of impatience.

“You don’t get it. My classmates were thinking of going to the Villain raid too. No one knows that Present Mic’s the traitor, and I know he’s likely a part of the raid team. You know as well as I do that the police are likely already at the League’s hideout, so you can’t call someone to stop us either.”

Iida sucked in a breath of alarm. He’d been kept out of the loop, partly because of his brother, partly because of what had happened with the Stain incident. He looked hurt, but Shouto didn’t have time to comfort him. He carefully pushed Hitoshi so that the unconscious boy was leaning against the bench instead of on his shoulder.
“I have to go.” Shouto repeated. “It’s a setup, the Villains know you’re coming. They’re going to kill All Might.”

“All Might is-”

“They think they can do it. I’m certain of it.” Shouto finalized, refusing to say how he knew. He wouldn’t betray Midoriya, or Hitoshi.

He met Principal Nedzu’s gaze, trying to bore into him the knowledge that he would go, no matter what he might think. Every ounce of him in that moment would have given everything for just a shred of his father’s overconfidence or intimidation.

The Principal met his gaze evenly, paw tightening on the handle of his umbrella as he weighed the options. After a long stretch of silence that felt like years to Shouto, he replied.

“You class is very brave, and very foolish. I’m getting the feeling that after this year, retirement might seem like a more tempting option for me.”

He turned to Iida, ears twitching decisively.

“You are faster than I am. You’re to take Shouto where your classmates are meeting up, and you are to order them to not engage in the fight unless forced to under pain of immediate expulsion. If a villain engages with you, you are to run and find a pro hero. Do you understand?”

Shouto felt impossible hope swelling in his chest. He could have cried in relief.

Iida sputtered, clearly about to mention the rules that’d previously been in place. Nedzu held up his hand.

“I am hereby giving class 1-A conditional hero licenses. Don’t make me regret that decision. I will take Hitoshi to the nearest hospital, and accompany him until he wakes up. When all of you return, because you better, we will discuss upcoming school regulations and rules that will be set in place.”

“Thank you.” Shouto murmured, head bowed as he clutched his knees in a white-knuckle grip. Nedzu shook his head as he looked down at his waterlogged figure.

“Remember that fire and water do not mix. Your Quirk will need more power than usual to use. Iida, remember that water makes the roads slipperier. You’re prone to hydroplaning.” Nedzu sighed through his mousy teeth, seeming to consider his words carefully. “Be careful. All of you now represent not only UA, but heroes.”

Shouto could feel the weight settle on his shoulders. Despite this, he stood and this time didn’t sway.
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