Oddments

by RHJunior

Summary

A place for the one-shots and partial story ideas that may flourish into full works... or that others may wish to adopt (Hey, it's fanfic. Feel free to steal my ideas for your own. Take two! They're small!)
Harry's Horcrux

You're a Horcrux, Harry.

Harry’s breath caught in his throat as the fateful sentence echoed in his mind. No… it couldn’t be. Clue… the voice in his head, the not-so-imaginary friend of his childhood— was Voldemort? No, was a piece of Voldemort, a chunk of the evil man’s soul stuck inside Harry’s skull, Oh Merlin, get it out get it out GET IT OUT--!

STOP IT! Clue yelled, his voice in Harry’s head so loud Harry clapped his hands over his ears in reflex, nearly cracking himself in the skull with the pommel of Griffindor’s sword. Calm down Harry! Even if you could get me out, clawing the scalp off your own skull isn’t the way to do it. So stop hurting yourself. The stern voice waited for several moments while Harry got his breathing back under control. Good. Now, before we go any further, let’s get one thing straight: I AM NOT, NOR AM I A PART OR EXTENSION OF, LORD VOLDEMORT.

“You’re-- you’re a piece of his soul, you told me yourself,” Harry said.

Yes. Harry got the mental impression of someone resisting the urge to gag. But I am absolutely, positively NOT HIM. I am NOT. The revulsion was visceral. It gave Harry pause.

“But you’re part of his soul--”

Your finger is part of you. If you sever a finger and stick it in a jar, is it still alive? Is it still ‘you’?

“Well…no,” said Harry, reluctantly.

Of course not. I quit being even a part of Tom Riddle, or Voldemort, or whatever he’s calling himself today, the moment he cut me loose. And I’d like to hope that after all these years I’ve shown I’m nothing like him.

Harry swallowed and nodded. It was true. He was nothing like the cold, ruthless thing that Harry had confronted growing out of Quirrel's head, or the vicious and arrogant spectre that had inhabited the diary. The voice in his head he’d long ago dubbed “Clue” had been a constant companion, and had shown himself to be of good conscience and a loyal friend… if a bit obnoxious and snarky. Well, VERY obnoxious and snarky-- and rude. And opinionated…

I can hear you thinking, kid, Clue said sarcastically. If you wanna insult me, turn down the volume.

Sorry. Harry mumbled. But you really are different from, well, HIM. He shifted his stance. “...Why?”

Clue chuckled. Because Voldemort didn’t just make Horcruxes, he said. He refined the technique into a self-improvement method.

Harry scowled in puzzlement. Think about it, lad, think about it! Clue said. His voice in Harry’s head was high and urgent, the way it always sounded when he was imparting something extremely vital. Put yourself in Riddle’s shoes. You’re an evil wizard. You’re willing to do anything to make yourself more powerful, more indestructible. You’ve decided you’re going to make yourself immortal by tearing out pieces of your soul. What parts of your soul are you going to want to tear out first?
Realization stole over Harry. <Ah, the light dawns, does it?> Clue said, his dry tones returning to normal. <That’s right. Since you’re cutting out chunks of yourself anyway, you’re going to want to get rid of any weaknesses. Or anything you see as weak. Things like-->

“Compassion,” Harry said, his throat thick. “Mercy.”

<...Honesty, decency, charity, temperance, so on and so forth.> Clue finished for him. <Oh, and things like doubt, fear, sadness...> at Harry’s mental noise of query he clarified. <We have a word for people who don’t feel any fear, never have any doubt, don’t feel sadness, Harry. They’re called sociopaths. The so-called ‘negative’ emotions, the ones everybody today runs around trying to never let themselves feel, those are as important to your mental health, to your moral conscience as the so-called ‘positive’ feelings. Never being afraid sounds good till you realize you’re not afraid of anything, not even making the wrong decisions. Never feeling sad means never feeling sorry for your actions.>

“Never feeling angry?” Harry prompted.

<Means you’re angry at nothing, not even injustice.> Clue said. <Though old Riddle-boy seemed fine with holding onto wrath. Indiscriminate rage is one of the more pleasurable vices.>

“So what you’re saying is, you were his… his conscience?” Harry ventured.

<Something like that,> Clue said. <“Or maybe I was the part of him that made him able to have a conscience.>

It occurred to Harry to wonder what part of Riddle’s conscience Voldemort would have wanted to tear out last. “So what part were you? His honesty? His compassion?”

<It’s not that simple, kid,> the soul-scrap replied. <Morals and virtues aren’t stuck in your head in tidy little boxes. They’re all interconnected, mish-mashed together. You can’t get one without getting little bits of the others.> He gave the equivalent of a mental shrug. <Whenever old Tommy boy decided to make a new Horcrux, he basically reached into his own head, felt around for whatever parts of himself gave him feelings he didn’t like, and yanked out a fistful to stick in one of his geegaws.>

Harry winced at the mental imagery; it was anything but pleasant. “Wait… does that mean the other Horcruxes are--” he hesitated to say ‘alive’-- “Like you too?”

<Doubtful.> Clue snorted. <In fact, let’s say ‘no way in hell.’ They’re just preserved, amputated bits. No more real life and awareness in them than a fingernail. They can seem lifelike, like a toy robot or a talking doll, but there’s nothing really there. That diary of his would have been in for one hell of a disappointment, so to speak, if it had taken over the Weasley girl’s body… a piece of a soul can’t vivify a body properly any more than you could reanimate Frankenstein with just a couple of scoops of random brain. It would have ended up a particularly talkative Inferi, shambling around and mumbling nonsense and not doing much else.>

“So how are you different?” Harry challenged. "WHY are you different?"

There was a long silence. <I don’t know.> Clue confessed. <I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about that-- I do mean A LOT of time-- and I only have guesses. I do know that I’m different. I can remember, I can learn, I can feel and think for myself, and cognito ergo sum, am I right? All I can guess is, from what little muddled memory I have of when I was created… Voldemort botched the job.>
There he is, about to kill you and make his final get-out-of-Death-free charm. He reaches in, grabs that last little wriggling bit of his conscience with one hand, and hits you with the Avada Kedavra from the other… and it all blows up in his face. And that yanked-loose scrap of himself, instead of going into whatever talisman he’d picked out, goes and gets stuck in your head like a piece of Riddle-shrapnel… along with a lot of stuff he didn’t intend. Like a lifetime’s worth of memories and knowledge.

In one way I was like that Diary: when he made it, Voldemort included a full copy of his memories up to that age. Another mental shrug. It was his first try, after all. Maybe he wanted it as a backup for if he returned without his memory, who can say. Well, if you’ve done it once, it’s easier to do twice…

So at least I THINK, what got put into you through that scar, here there came an imaginary tap on Harry’s forehead, chad little bits of everything. And back here in one corner in a little pocket, surrounded by a healthy, whole mind and soul, it… germinated. Till it healed and grew and became… me.

That’s why you were nearly five years old before you heard from me, Clue said. Before that point there wasn’t enough of a ‘me’ to speak up. I wasn’t sure I even WAS a ‘me.’ His dry, sarcastic voice in Harry’s head got somber. Figuring out what happened, sorting out what was really ‘me’ and was you and what were the garbled, mixed up pile of memories and information that came in with me--> Clue’s voice was suddenly thick with loathing. Separating myself out from the horror story that was Riddle’s past, even as I was re-filing it and putting it all in proper order and locking it away--> Harry felt him shudder. Oh, THAT was a load of fun.

Harry remembered that inaugural day; the day a stubborn, sarcastic, authoritative voice had begun faintly speaking up in little Harry Potter’s head, telling him how to pick the lock on his cupboard from the inside... “Is it… that bad in there?” Harry said.

Like being the curator at a Holocaust museum, Clue said. Be thankful I’ve locked and filed those memories away inside myself, kid. If you’d been able to access them, to re-live them as if they were your own, you would have spent your first years of life screaming. Then it would have gotten worse.

“Worse??”

You would have stopped.

Harry felt like ice water had been poured into his gut and through all his veins. A baby, growing up reliving the horror show that was Tom Marvolo Riddle’s memories… the best result would have been a broken mind. The worst… a child with Voldemort’s knowledge and all human feeling burned out of it. He hastily tried to move the topic of conversation along before he got the staring horrors.

“So you grew into a whole new soul,” Harry ventured. Stuck in someone else’s body, Harry thought. A helpless passenger unable to do anything unless Harry let him. What a horrible existence.

Clue gave a negatory grunt. I… don’t know. I don’t know WHAT I am, for certain. Whether I qualify as a whole person or just a fragment of human decency or even just a really active figment of imagination. But whatever I am, I decided pretty much immediately that we were stuck in this mess together, so I might as well make the best of it. You were my responsibility-- and anyway I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself if I’d let some kid suffer… he trailed off.

Harry felt a surge of warm affection for the voice in his head, the friend, mentor and adviser that had been looking out for him so long. “Maybe we can fix this,” he said suddenly. “Riddle…
Voldemort… He figured out how to stick pieces of a soul into things. Maybe we can find a way to put you into a body of your own. A magical portrait, maybe, or a magical suit of armor… Dumbledore could help—"

<NO! No, not him,> Clue shouted inside his head so loudly Harry winced. <Not him, not ever him, Harry. We can’t trust him.>

Harry huffed. This was far from the first time the recalcitrant mental voice had expressed mistrust of the venerable Headmaster. At first Harry had just taken Clue at his word, but it was growing tiresome. “What? Why not?” Harry protested. “He’s Dumbledore—"

<Yes, he’s Dumbledore. And Dumbledore has an agenda for you. And I don’t think it’s for your good, either.>

That stopped Harry cold. Till now, Clue had been cryptic, almost as cryptic as Dumbledore himself, about what made him mistrust the man. “What do you mean?”

<HARRY, pretty much every rotten bit of your life can be traced back to Dumbledore’s interference,> Clue said. <Right from the moment he played Ding Dong Ditch with you as a baby. And some of old Tommy Boy’s memories tell me the old codger isn’t as benevolent as he lets on.>

“Old Tommy Boy might not be the best judge of character,” Harry growled, annoyed.

<Fine. Let’s review the little adventure we just went through, then. Let’s forget all the living portraits in the castle, and the ghosts, and the house elves, and the animated suits of armor, and all the OTHER pairs of eyes he’s got in Hogwarts that this giant sixty foot snake somehow avoided. Tommy Junior suspected the Castle’s defenses were blind to it thanks to Slytherin making the thing a part of the castle’s defenses, but still. Anyway, more important question: how likely is it that a hundred year old wizard— the most powerful and knowledgeable wizard of the current age— would fail to recognize the effects of a Basilisk attack? Something a schoolgirl found out in a library book? >

Harry’s mouth opened and closed. <Uh huh. Here’s some more to chew on. Why did he never evacuate the school? Not close it— evacuate it. Call in the Unspeakables and scour the castle from top to bottom while the children are all someplace safe. The last time the Chamber opened, a girl DIED, Harry. Yet instead of leaving, he decided to act like a white chick in a cheap horror movie.>

<Let’s make it more personal. Isn’t it interesting that the “traps”—Harry could almost see the fingers etching quotation marks in the air— protecting the Stone last year weren’t just weak enough for an eleven year old firstie to get past, but were all but tailor made for you, AND the ones in your circle of friends most likely to accompany you on a little misadventure? The Devils’ Snare for Neville. The flying keys for you. The chessboard for Ron. The logic puzzle for Hermione…>

“The troll for all three of us,” Harry murmured.

<–And the cerberus for anyone with a book knowledge of the legend of Orpheus,> Clue went on. <Hermione again… even if she wasn’t a bookworm with a classical name like that she was a shoo in to know it… or for that matter, anyone who held a conversation with Hagrid for more than five minutes> Clue added snarkily…< And of course a way to play a little bit of music. Like, say, someone with a wooden flute they got for Christmas?>

The wooden flute was in the pocket of Harry’s robe; he carried it with him everywhere, one of his favorite mementos. It suddenly seemed to weigh ten stone.
Harry seethed a bit at the reminder. *Snape.* Courtesy of Clue Harry had known for years that the poisonous potions master had once been a Death Eater, and had been the one most directly responsible for fingering his parents for death. He had spent the last year choking down that knowledge, chastised over and over again by Dumbledore’s words on the matter. “Dumbledore said he’d reformed, that he’d turned against--”

Clue’s snort was as loud as it was derisive. *<By their fruits shall ye judge them,>* he misquoted. *<Spending every year since his ‘reform’ terrifying children? Tormenting the orphaned son of the woman he claimed to ‘love?’ Does that sound like a reformed man to you? No, Harry, Dumbledore doesn’t keep Severus around because the greasy git has seen the Light, he keeps him around because he’s *useful.* Just like he sees YOU as *useful.>*

*<You’re a Horcrux, Harry. A weapon to use against Lord Voldemort.> The Old Coot’s scared to death the bad tempered little animated fart will find a way to get a body and return to life. If he had an inkling of an idea that I was in here, talking to you, guiding you, ‘influencing’ you-- he’d think I was taking you over like the diary nearly took over Ginny and he’d kill me in an instant, and kill you to do it. And then cry big crocodile tears over our lifeless corpse about how tragic it was but that it was for the Greater Good...>* the sarcasm in Clue’s voice could have etched glass. It almost covered the fear.

That more than anything convinced Harry that Clue was telling the truth. “So what do we do?” He leaned against a nearby wall, the Sword of Griffindor still heavy in his hand.

*<For now, we keep mum, like always,> Clue said seriously. <And we work on getting some allies. Preferably ones with skills… connections… and most importantly the sort neither the Old Coot nor Moldy Shorts would ever suspect.>* His mental voice grew thoughtful, brooding.

“Like who?” Harry said irritably.

*<Like a certain House Elf who’s going to owe us one hell of a favor,> Clue said suddenly. <Look.> Harry looked up; Just ahead, where the hallway intersected another, he saw Lucius Malfoy striding imperiously through, a very familiar gnomish figure scurrying along at his heels. <Quick, pull off your sock and get that diary out. We’re about to pull a fast one on old Luscious…>
“...So yeah, my life didn’t quite go as somebody planned,” the black-clad boy said as the train rattled along through the countryside. “Course, things rarely do. Story of my life and everyone else’s I guess. But I think you can relate, right?”

Harry’s two compartment companions said nothing. They were too busy sitting as rigidly as they possibly could, their eyes fixed on the legendary Boy-Who-Lived. He didn’t mind, well, not much. It was sort of understandable that they weren’t meeting his eyes-- he was wearing tinted spectacles after all. The fact that they were staring at his fangs was a bit more bothersome.


Harry’s smile dropped (it seemed to help; they snapped out of their fugue once his fangs disappeared behind his frowning lips.) “Yeah, I think I already explained that,” he said, miffed. “Like I said. Vampire, since I was little more than a year old. I’m going to give the long version for those in the nosebleed seats, aren’t I.”

The two had entered the car at the beginning of the trip, finding it occupied only by a lone trunk, a folded umbrella hanging in the corner, and a tow-headed, black haired boy dressed to the nines in a jet black suit and, strangely for the heavily overcast day, wearing dark glasses. They had sat down, introduced themselves, and found themselves captive of their own horrified fascination as the strange boy introduced himself and they realized who… and WHAT… he was.

“How could they let something like that happen?” the frizzy-haired girl said. She was actually sounding a bit distraught, as if something she had relied on her whole life had betrayed her. Somewhere, somehow, The Proper Authorities had failed in their duties.

She couldn’t see it but he rolled his eyes at her. “Stupidity,” he said. “I mean, what would you expect? An evil wizard murders my parents. Every magical in the British Isles is out boogying down like Belushi because this tosser’s dead-- and not just wizards, either; this guy was a real jerk to everybody, “Light,” “Dark,” or “Other.” ...Musta been something to see. Man, can those Worgen party...”

“Of course the Dark Tosser’s flunkies are out there too. So some genius,” he said with considerable scorn, “gets the idea to put me someplace “safe.” By playing Ding Dong Ditch and dumping me on a doorstep. In the dead of night. On HALLOWEEN NIGHT AT MIDNIGHT. IN THE MIDDLE OF A MONSTER JAMBOREE.” This was obviously a sore point; his voice had grown, somehow without shouting, to a volume that made the window shake, and there was a faint red glow briefly visible through his tinted spectacles. His two cabinmates shrank back against their seats.

His voice instantly dropped from the alarming timbre it had started to take back to normal. “And of course, one of Da’s more troublesome ghouls--- a guy whose brain hadn’t quite made the transition with the rest of him—it happens; the metamorphosis sometimes pickles their brains and they go psycho, what’re you gonna do— decides to slip his leash while he and Mama are out celebrating, and go looking for a snack. And looky looky, Baby in a Basket, his favorite.” He smirked and ran his fingers through his hair, briefly revealing the jagged scar that ran from his brow and up under the hairline, where a white streak grew through his hairline. “Mom and Pop caught up with him just as he’s sinking his choppers into my noggin.

“Someone up there must’ve been looking after me though, because when his teeth broke my scalp the Soul Curse the Dark Tosser infected me with burst out of my head and latched onto his face.”
snickered, teeth gleaming. “Dad lets me replay the memory in his pensieve sometimes. Nearly peed myself laughing the first time I saw it.” He pantomimed someone rolling on the ground clawing at his face. “Aaaaagh get it off get it off !!”

The redhead… Ron, that was his name, sort of huffed, as if he didn’t know whether he wanted to laugh or scream. Harry decided to let it slide. “Aaanyway, scratch one rebel ghoul. Of course I was messed up pretty bad, so Mom and Pop did the only thing they could do to save me—” he shrugged and tapped one overlong canine.

“And now you’re a vampire,” Ron repeated.

“Vampire Prince, actually,” Harold corrected him. “Prince Hadrian “call me Harry” Orlock-Potter of Old Wallachia.” He grinned, his fangs gleaming. “Mom was a soft touch, and she had been pining for a baby….” he shrugged and smiled. “So it all worked out. They swept me away to the old country and adopted me.

“Then they did a little digging and found out who I was… and wasn’t THAT a hair-pulling fiasco, my Dad always says. The Grand Mugwump of the Wizarding World was fit to be tied.” He chuckled. “Of course Dad says MOM was fit to be tied when she found out who was responsible for dumping me on a doorstep… or fit to tie the one responsible in a knot, one or the other.”

“Oh course after all the Kung Fu fighting was done, the Ministry of Magic and my Dad had a compromise. My family keeps me, and we make a few trade concessions to amend for the ‘international mishap’— but I attend wizarding school here in Great Britain.” Harry shrugged. “A bit petty of them, but better than a feud.”

“So, a Prince,” Hermione said carefully. “Of what exactly?”

“Pretty much every so-called ‘Dark’ creature in Moldava, Wallachia and Transylvania,” Harry said, waving his hand in a circle. “See, Old Wallachia is sort of like a sanctuary for ‘Dark’ or ‘Undecided’ magical races. The High Count— that’s my Dad— is sort of like the Minister of Magic, except for werewolves, vampires, hags, that sort of thing…. Even some creatures in neither camp.”

“Oh really?” Hermione sounded interested in spite of herself.

“Ignore, Old Wallachia’s crawling with ‘Dark’ or semi-Dark or Neutral or Dark-but-not-quite types… but we prefer the term ‘Nightside,’ by the way. Remember that if you visit. It’s only polite.”

“And why’s that?” said Hermione, making a mental note to tell her parents to never, never, never EVER arrange for one of their little junkets anywhere in, near, or approximate to “Old Wallachia.”

Harry smiled cheerily and shifted in his seat to a more comfortable position, obviously happy to expound on the topic. “You see, most of the creatures and stuff that Wizards label ‘Dark’… It really doesn’t apply. Look, you got genuine Dark types like You-know-what-a-wanker-he-is. People and beings who are just evil and do horrible things because they like to and want to… or they have “dark urges” and don’t even try to resist them.

“But wizards don’t stop there. They call any being or creature Dark who’s the least bit dangerous, or just happens to give one of their politicians the heebie-jeebies. They call vampires “Dark” or “borderline Dark” because we drink blood to live. But do they call a lion “Dark” because it eats meat? Or a mosquito, for that matter? Yeah, hinkypunks grab people by the leg and drown them. They’re animals, ambush predators; they do that to anything that wades into their pools! Does that make a crocodile “Dark?” Or a hippo?”
“A hippo?” Ron interrupted, his voice full of derision. He'd seen one of those things at a Muggle zoo once on a family outing; the groundskeeper had fed it a watermelon. He couldn't imagine a less intimidating looking animal outside a flobberworm.

Harry gave him a wide, toothy grin. “Most dangerous animal in Africa,” he said. “It kills more humans than any other… ten times the number of people are killed by hippos than by crocodiles. Stay clear of the hippos, man, they got it in for you.”

“Bizarre,” Ron said, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah, but any wizard who labeled the fat goofy looking things ‘Dark’ would be laughed out of the Wizengamot, wouldn’t they?”

Ron chuckled. “Probably,”

“Yeah, well, they labeled us vampires as ‘Dark’ because we drink blood and because of a few bad eggs.” Harry’s smile faded away. “Wizards and Muggles eat mutton and roast chicken, and that’s just normal. I drink lamb’s blood and chicken’s blood fresh from the butcher, and I’m a monster. How’s that fair?”

“And, you know, sometimes some ‘Dark’ creatures just sort of happen,” he went on. “Like ghosts. Or zombies. Or ghasts… go to sleep someplace with a lot of magic boiling around, kakk it in the middle of the night and wake up as a specter. Or fall in a cursed pool, climb out as a swamp monster. Or end up like werewolves, who are just poor unlucky tossers with a disease. Those guys need someone to throw their weight behind ‘em’, so that’s what the vampire clans do.” He grinned again. “Wizards think they’re all that, but a thousand-year-old vampire aristocracy isn’t so easy to push around.”

“When you say Dark, you should mean genuinely evil-- not just complicated or inconvenient.

“aAAaanyway, enough vampire politics. Guess I spend too much time listening to Count Dad rant about his job.”

“What happened to the guy--”

“Ghoul.”

“The ghoul that attacked you?” Ron couldn’t help asking.

“Beheaded.” His tone was blithe and his smile feral enough to give sharks nightmares. “Beheaded, burned and buried in salt. We gotta police ourselves hard if we want to keep living peacefully with all the Dayside types, so Pop pop doesn’t put up with Nightside creatures going off the rails. And he’s big on preventing recidivism.” His face lit up. “Hey, you wanna see the Soul Curse that came outta my head?” He reached under his cloak and fished around under his shirt collar. “They gave it to me as a memento.”

“Really?” Ron leaned forward, curious.

Hermione leaned in the opposite direction. She preferred her knowledge to come out of books, not come leaping out of the shadows at her in person. “No, that’s not really--”

“Here, check it out!” Harry held up what looked like an unbreakable glass vial on a chain. Inside something black and liquid writhed around in a nauseating fashion. “Gen-u-wine chunk-o-Dark-Wizard. Patent pending. Watch what it does when you squeeze it.” He clutched the bottle in his fist. The black thing inside thrashed wildly and let out a high, thin, ear-piercing scream.
Before either saucer-eyed child could express their appreciation of the vampire princes’ choice in mementos, he looked over at the door, his ears perked up. “Oh, hey, the snack lady’s coming! You guys want anything? My treat!”

Childish gluttony is a marvelous equalizer. Several minutes and more than a few galleons later, the three were all sitting in the midst of a pile of wrappers and feeling FAR more copacetic. Even Hermione, who had the shadow of two overweening dentist parents hanging over her, had finally been persuaded into indulging. “Really, Hermione,” Harry said as she dithered over whether to try a cauldron cake or a chocolate frog. “You think wizards haven’t figured out how to enchant candy to prevent tooth decay?”

“How?” Hermione had asked skeptically.

“Cross my heart and hope to put a stake in it,” Harry said. “Trust me, vampires are kind of big on dental hygiene.” He tapped one fang by way of explanation.

“I thought vampires only drank blood,” Ron said around a mouthful of licorice wand.

Harry shook his head. “Nah, we eat regular food too. Doesn’t do much for us though… well, except for certain things with the right essence of vitality. Milk, orange juice, chocolate...” He popped a chocolate frog in his mouth. “Fact is, chocolate acts like a blood substitute for us. Cuts the cravings.”

Hermione scowled. “Oh now you’re just pulling our legs.”

Harry nodded. “Why do you think the ancient Aztecs valued it so highly? They used it to buy off the vampires, that’s what. And why do you think reports of vampire sightings dropped off so much after the eighteen hundreds?”

“Most of the books I read attribute it to the rise of photography,” Hermione said cynically.

“More like the invention of milk chocolate,” Harry said. “Milton Hershey is a national hero in Old Wallachia.”

“But milk chocolate was invented by Daniel Peter and Henri Nestle’,” Hermione said. It was an odd bit of trivia to know, but Hermione read everything. Even candy bar wrappers.

Harry actually shuddered. “Brr. Don’t mention Nestle’,” he said. “If you knew what that evil old goat and his company get up to, you’d never touch a Nestle’ bar again. Lord knows I won’t.”

Hermione gaped at him. Harry clarified. “Poisoned babies, water tables drained, third world slave labor… and that’s just the muggle-side stuff. You really don’t want to know what that warlock and his company get up to when the doors are locked and the werewolf guards chase the muggle employees out. It ain’t just the chocolate in his factory that’s Dark.”

Hermione continued to stare at him. An evil chocolate factory? What?? “Oh, company,” Harry said, derailing her already stalled-out train of thought. Harry waved his hand and the compartment door slid open on its own; outside stood a round-faced boy, his hand just raised to knock. “Yes? Can we
help you?"

The boy paused, stammered, and started again. “Uh, hullo. I’m Neville… L-Longbottom. Have any of you seen a toad? Mine wandered off...” his voice faded out as he caught glimpse of Harry’s smiling face for the first time. His eyes went round as he took in the fangs.

Ron shook his head. “No, I’m afraid not,” Hermione said.

“Can’t say I have, either,” Harry said. “Wait- I just thought of something, hold on, let me ask--” there was a large umbrella hanging from the rail next to him; he leaned over and poked at it. “Hello, wake up! Got a question--”

It was a close bet as to which of the other three screamed the highest when the “umbrella” moved, squirmed, and opened up its webbed wings. A furred, foxlike head with enormous lamplike eyes made its appearance, its toothy maw gaping wide as it yawned. The three children screamed and all but climbed up the walls of the compartment; it looked like Neville wanted to bolt down the corridor but was too frozen in terror to leave the doorway. The creature squawked, discomfited by the sudden noise.

“What???” Harry looked up to see his classmates standing on their seats and doing their best to climb up the walls with their buttocks. “Oh, honestly, what’s all this?”

“That’s what I wanna know, mate,” Ron said, pointing at what was now obviously an enormous bat hanging upside down from the luggage rack.

“I thought it was an umbrella,” Hermione said weakly.

Harry snorted in amusement. “Sorry, I should’ve said something, I guess-- this is Lurch, my pet bat. A giant golden-crowned flying fox, to be precise.” There was a touch of pride in his voice.

“I-it it’s nearly as big as a real fox,” Neville squeaked.

“Hence the term “giant”,” Harry quipped. “Oh calm down you lot, Lurch is harmless.”

“Do tell,” Ron said dryly as he carefully lowered himself back down to his seat.

“He’s a fruit bat, Ron," Harry snorted. "He’s only a threat to you if you’re a banana.”

“I must say he’s rather intimidating all the same,” Hermione said with a nervous laugh as she carefully sat down. “But why on earth are you bringing him to school?”

“He’s my pet,” Harry said as if that explained everything. “Besides, I needed something to deliver my mail and owls aren’t my thing. I’m used to using bats back home. Better night delivery rates.” He grinned toothily at his own joke.

“But why a great brute like that?” Ron said. Lurch snorted and blew a raspberry.

“And most other creepy crawlies,” Harry said. “It’s a vampire thing. Though I’m generally better with snakes for some reason… okay you said “Check my boot?” Lurch squeaked. “All right then…”

“You can talk to him?”

“Any of the smaller bats and there was a danger one of your owls might mistake him for a snack,” Harry said. He turned to Lurch. “So how about it? Seen any toads lately?” Lurch made a series of squeaking, chirping and grunting noises. “He sneaked in while I was at the loo?” Lurch nodded.

“Check my boot?”

“And most other creepy crawlies,” Harry said. “It’s a vampire thing. Though I’m generally better with snakes for some reason… okay you said “Check my boot?” Lurch squeaked. “All right then…”
Harry reached over and grabbed a pair of rubber wellingtons that had been on the floor next to the bat’s head. First one, then the other, was tipped up over the floor; with a thump and a croak an enormous toad with a rather wall-eyed expression on what passed for its face made its appearance.

“Trevor!” Neville said happily. He scooped the toad up, his relief obvious.

Harry shrugged. “Sorry about that, Longbottom,” he said with an apologetic smile. “It’s a vampire thing. We kind of attract creepy crawlies for some reason— toads, snakes, bats—” Lurch squeaked—“bugs, rats… it’s a good thing we can talk to ‘em, tell ‘em to bugger off when we don’t want them scurrying around our feet.”

Ron “hmmed” and poked at the scruffy rat sleeping in his pocket. “Doesn’t seem to be working on Scabbers,” he noted. “Probably too lazy to care.”

Harry stared at the rat for a long moment, frowning. Then he shrugged and looked away with a shrugs. “Eh, rodents gonna rodent,” he said dismissively. “Not like I’m trying to command him or anything.”

“Heh. Too bad you can’t command Trevor to stop wandering off,” Neville said, the corner of his mouth twitching into a smile.

Harry sat up straight. “What? You doubt my power, mortal?” he said in mock outrage. “I am Hadrian Orlock-Potter, first childe of Count Orlock, and prince of Old Wallachia! All the creeping things of the earth are mine to command!”

“He’s more of a hopping thing of the earth, though,” Ron said, rubbing his chin in pretend skepticism.

“Hah! I’ll show you all. Give me the toad!” Neville dropped Trevor into Harry’s outstretched hands. Harry whipped off his tinted glasses; Hermione stifled a gasp as he revealed his eyes for the first time. The irises were a beautiful, almost gem-like green, but the sclera were a brilliant, bloody red. Harry held the toad up to eye level and glared into its eyes. Trevor stared back with all the sharpness of a stunned herring.

“Behold, I shall now exercise the arts of the mind, the powers of Occlumency and Legilimency, to make this creature into your obedient servant!” His eye-glow actually grew sharper and brighter. “Obey me, Trever the Toad, Obey me!”

Trevor looked, if anything, decidedly unimpressed.

Hermione smothered her giggles. “Is that really even going to work?” she asked.

“Of course,” Harry said without breaking the gaze he had sort of locked with Trevor. “It is now a battle of wills between us. But in the end, the more powerful of our two minds shall overcome….” he trailed off into silence. The silence stretched for half a minute. Then a minute. Then a minute and a half…

“Harry?” Ron said worriedly.

Harry puffed out his cheeks. “Brrroooooarrrrrrk,” he said.

All three children folded up laughing. Even Harry was bent double, his facade cracking when Hermione slid out of her seat and hit the floor. “Sorry, Longbottom,” he said, handing the toad back. “Looks like your frog is stuck on factory setting.” He gave Trevor a mock kowtow. “All Hail Hypnotoad...”
Neville grinned. He WAS a vampire (and wasn’t Gran going to have a tizzy about that!) and strange even without that, and Neville wasn’t quite sure he understood some of the jokes he was making, but… he hesitated, then stuck out his hand. “Call me Neville.”

Harry shook it and gave him a glistening grin. “Harry.” He waved at the compartment. “Come on in and take a seat. Have a chocolate frog… at least they won’t hop too fast to catch.”

“Hah, hah…”

“Want a candied fruit, Lurch?”

Idle chatter between the four filled the long train ride. Eventually though the chatter (and shocking surprises) settled down, and each found something to while away the hours while the conversation lulled) “So why did you name him Lurch?” Ron eventually asked as he flipped through the chocolate frog cards. None of the others collected, so he’d gotten quite the haul.

“It’s from his favorite classic television show,” Harry said idly, not looking up from the tiny flickering screen in his hands, his thumbs working the controls.

“You have television?” Hermione said, while the other two muttered “what’s television?” and shrugged.

“Yup. Satellite TV. And cable. And broadband internet…” the tiny box in his hands booped and bleeped. “Vampires don’t sleep much, and we sleep less the older we get. So we gotta fill up those hours with something. For Great-Grandpa? Lots and lots and looooooots of bad late nite movies. I thought he was going to rupture something the first time he saw ‘Blackula.’ “

“Made him mad, I suspect,” Hermione said.

“Laughed his ass off,” Harry corrected her, still without looking up. “It’s his favorite VHS tape. Cheesy vampire movies, tapes of cartoons like Duckula, Count Chocula boxes, cheap halloween costumes… he collects all that stuff. Sort of a cross between a hobby and an in-joke, I guess.” He shrugged. “Like I said, gotta do something with all that time. Dad would go nuts without his wide-screen and his Everquest account.” His thumbs wiggled and the box in his hands went SQUACK. “I get by with my Gameboy though.”

Hermione gave him a know-it-all look over the book she’d been reading. “Well I hope you can do without it,” she said smugly. “Muggle technology doesn’t work at Hogwarts. There’s too much magic in the air in the Wizarding World for those things.”

Harry looked up over his glasses at her and gave her a knowing smirk. “Oh really?” he said. “Sure of that, are we?”

Hermione frowned. She didn’t like having her knowledge questioned. “It’s a well known fact,” she said.

“Then why isn’t London in a perpetual blackout?” Harry pointed out, his smile widening. “it’s got Diagon Alley running right through it, and the Ministry of Magic-- along with the Department of
Mysteries itself—smack dab in the middle of it, right underneath the streets! Even Hogwarts isn’t THAT magical, yet Jolly old London Town is ticking along just fine.”

“But...” Hermione’s brow furrowed as she tried to reconcile the facts as they were, with the facts as they were printed in a book. “But it’s true; my digital watch stopped working the moment I walked onto Platform 9 ¾.”

“Well yeah, but things like digital watches and microchips are fidgety things anyway,” Harry pointed out. “And you dragged it right through the middle of a powerful magical illusion. Small surprise it fritzed out something that could be fragged by getting too near a refrigerator magnet.” Hermione huffed but didn’t retort. “Most ‘muggle technology’ works just fine around magic. And for the stuff that doesn’t... well, that’s part of why the Ministry of Magic is willing to bend over backwards for Old Wallachia.”

“What do you mean?” she said. Ron and Neville, their curiosities piqued, scooted around so they could see what Harry was doing with the tiny box in his hands. They were immediately entranced by whatever they saw on the screen.

“We have hundreds of Sons of Ether living in the Old Country,” Harry said. “It's a fraternity of...well, think ‘mad scientists...’ like right off the telly, no lie. Dad has one on staff; he has a lab in the castle. It’s really awesome: Lightning machines, plasma generators, ooghy things in giant glass vats, the whole nine yards. It’s really cool. Anyway, one of the things the Sons of Ether specialize in is making muggle technology and magic— they call it “poly aetheric Morphic Resonance Manipulation” by the way--- work side by side and play nice with each other. Oh the old fuddy-duddies in the Ministry are throwing a fit and making up nonsense about 'misuse of Muggle' whatsis, but the smart ones are licking their chops at the thought of marketing upscale Muggle electronics to British wizards.” He held up the box so Hermione could see it properly. “And of course, since they need field tested, I get to play with some of the shiny toys Dad is trying to trade.”

“Is that a Game Boy?” She marveled. She’d recognized it immediately…. Though as for that she didn’t recall any model of GameBoy having a wooden case, or brass fittings or glowing vacuum tubes or any of the other odd victorian-esque kibble stuck to it.

“Yup,” Harry said smugly. “With a few post-production add-ons, of course, courtesy of the Doc.” He held it out in his hand, screen turned towards her. She could see a backlit Mario running through his opening screen antics. “One of a kind, first-run prototype. It cost over five hundred galleons...”

“Five hundred galleons?” Ron yelped. “What does it do, grant wishes??”

“It plays games, Ron,” Harry laughed. “Not just arcade games. Table Tennis, card games, puzzle games, chess...” Ron perked up at the mention of chess. “and it even has full color and an illuminated screen... even the muggles don’t have that yet--”

Before he could finish extolling the virtues of his Mad Science electronic toy, the sliding door to the compartment was suddenly slammed open. It was the worst of luck; Harry was still holding the GameBoy out in one hand by his fingertips, and the doorhandle clipped one corner at just the right angle to send it flying out of his grip. It tumbled to the floor and struck with a resounding CRACK, and the little glowing screen went dark.

Everyone, including Harry, froze, staring at the crack across the device’s darkened screen. Neville was stunned, Hermione was appalled, and Ron looked like he was having a heart attack. And Harry…. Well the air seemed to go unnaturally still around him.

In the doorway stood three boys. One was a thin, haughty looking boy with slicked-back blonde hair
and a sharp, ferret-like face. The other two were large, lumpish, and sported dark burr cuts on their
squarish heads. “Are you Harry Potter?” the blonde boy said without introduction. “I was told he
was on this car of the train...”

Harry didn’t look up from his deceased GameBoy. “That was a custom made, one of a kind, Five
HUNDRED Galleon, GameBoy Deucalion,” he said in a monotone. He let out a sigh and with
great deliberation slid back in his seat, put one leg over the other, folded his hands on his knee, and
gave the blonde boy the biggest smile he could manage. “So, what the HECK can I do for YOU?”
he said jovially.

The other Hogwarts students-to-be in the carriage were now frozen for an entirely different reason.
Every eye was riveted on the Heir of Wallachia.

Draco Malfoy hesitated. For the briefest of moments he imagined he’d committed a terrible--
something told him potentially fatal-- faux pas. But whatever the trinket was on the floor, the boy he
was looking at seemed to have dismissed it from his thoughts. Draco gave a mental shrug; not his
fault if whoever-they-were wasn’t careful with their trinkets. He held out his hand. “My name is
Draco Malfoy, scion of the House of Malfoy. This is Crabbe, and Goyle---”

“And I’m Carmen Sandiego. Guess where I am!” Harry beamed.

“...What?” Draco stared, hand still held out. The frizzy haired girl let out an explosive snort. She
quickly smothered it when Draco glared at her. He shook it off. “I assume I’m speaking to Harry
Potter, Hadrian Orlock-Potter of Old Wallachia?” He said with the slightest of bows.

“Suuup?” Harry flipped him a salute.

Draco suppressed a twitch. “I’ve heard many things about you, Potter,” Draco said, smiling
insincerely and slathering his voice with admiration like treacle. “I’m quite the admirer, actually.
We’ve all heard your story.... The Boy Who Lived. The Prince of Wallachia. The Childe with one
foot in the Light, one foot in the Dark--”

“Oh baby baby,” Harry suddenly moaned, his face deadpan. “Oh yeah, work it--”

Draco gaped in shock. “Excuse you??”

Harry’s eyebrows went up and he smiled brightly. “Oh, I’m sorry. I just figured you were trying so
hard for it, I should at least try to fake it for you.”

The boys in the cabin exploded into snickers, while the frizzy haired girl went round eyed and her
mouth formed a perfect ‘o’, the picture of horrified glee. Harry--- or Hadrian-- himself continued
sitting there with a toothy, fanged grin plastered across his face as if nothing was wrong.

Crabbe and Goyle, true to form, merely scowled like a pair of particularly confused rocks.

Draco pulled himself together. “Perhaps I should get to the point...

“As I’m sure you know, my father, Lucius Malfoy...”

“Your dad’s name is Luscious?” Harry’s grin only got wider and sharper. "Bet that goes over well at
the pub."

Draco tamped down on his temper. “Lucius!...Ahem. My father has a seat on the Wizengamot,” he
said. “He also has many political connections, including the Minister of Magic himself... the sort of
men your father would like an ‘in’ with?” He held out his hand again. “If we stick together, we could
be a big help to both our families… I can help you out, too. Keep you from getting tangled up with the wrong sort.”

“The wrong sort, is it?” Ron said. His voice was low and just a touch dangerous.

Draco looked at him, contemptuous. “Let’s see, red hair, shabby robes, slightly vacant expression… a Weasley if I’m not mistaken. A family of blood traitors who dug themselves into a hole and never came back out.” Ron’s ears flamed red and opened his mouth, but Draco was already moving on. “And Neville Longbottom. The Longbottoms used to be something… till their heir ended up in the St. Mungo’s loony bin and left nothing behind but a doddering old grandmother and their near Squib of a son.” Neville had seemed to swell up at the insult, but had quickly shrunken back in on himself when the words “Squib of a son.”

“And…” Draco’s glance quickly swept over Hermione, her possessions and garb. “A *Muggleborn, obviously,”* he said, his voice dripping with scorn bordering on disgust. He was confident of his guess; only a muggleborn would carry one of those pack-bag… back-pack?…. Things with them on the *Hogwarts Express.* Especially one covered with ridiculous Muggle stickers and labels…. And the uncomfortable look on her face clinched it. He turned away from them in obvious dismissal and back to Harry. “These sorts will only drag you down. I can help you with that, show you to the RIGHT kind of people—”

“The Nineteen Ninety Chudley cannons, HUZZAAAH!” Harry said, waving an imaginary pair of pom poms around. Immediately the other three children lost their discomfited expressions and exploded into snorts, smothered snickers and in Ron's case open laughter.

“I’m trying to have a serious conversation here,” Draco seethed, glaring at the ones laughing and grinding his teeth.

“And so am I!” Harry said. Something in his voice snapped everyone's attention back to him. His face fell.

“And I’m failing.

“And I’m sorry for that.

“It’s just that I’m *so agitated* right now.” His smile, already toothsome, returned. Only morphed into something… carnivorous. “Because just a moment ago this *blonde little shit* and his two no-neck friends—” here he paused to slap Crabbe’s hand away where he’d been rifling through the remains of their stash of candy--- “barged into my train compartment, insulted MY FRIENDS, destroyed my one-of-a-kind, FIVE HUNDRED GALLEON GameBoy, *and is now trying to impress me and demand my attention like I’m his alcoholic father.*” Draco’s eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. Even Crabbe and Goyle went a little round-eyed.

“Oh pardon me-- *his alcoholic, metrosexual, Voldemort butt-kissing Death Eater father.* See, I know about your Daddy already. Met him already. Not impressed. Tell ol' Luscious no sale.” He waved bye-bye with his fingertips.

That did it. Draco’s expression went from gawping disbelief to sputtering rage. He whipped his wand out of the sleeve of his robe-- only to come up short as the tip of Harry’s wand was now pressed against his forehead, right between his eyebrows. There had been no transition, no sign of motion; the vampire Childe had gone *instantly* from lounging casually in his seat to standing, his wand arm extended and the red, smoldering tip of his wand brushing the skin between's Draco's eyebrows. And Harry’s fang-edged grin hadn’t changed. “Be a sport and go grab Daddy another pumpkin juice off the cart, would you?” That said he planted his booted foot square in Draco’s chest,
and shoved, ramming the skinny blonde boy back into the chests of his flunkies. Draco and his two would-be muscle sailed out the door and hit the opposite wall with a thump.

After several seconds of flailing about Draco got to his feet. “When my father hears about this—!”

“He’ll what, cuddle his Voldemort body pillow and cry himself to sleep?” Harry said. He made a sweeping motion with his hand. Draco, Crabbe and Goyle’s robes flipped up and wrapped around their heads and they were sent stumbling down the hallway. “BEAT it, doofus!” Harry's eyes glowed bright enough to be visible through his tinted glasses.

Draco decided that discretion was the better part of valor-- or at least, he didn’t resist when his two lunkish bodyguards grabbed him by the elbows and dragged him off down the hall at a stumbling, blindfolded run.

Harry stood there for a moment, looking down the direction they’d run. “Bluh, bluh bluh BLUH,” he muttered, flapping his arms. He turned around and went back into the compartment and slammed the door, latching it behind him…. Before sinking to the floor, howling with laughter.

The others stared at him, discombobulated, as he hooted, his fanged mouth a gaping hole. He composed himself for a moment, wiping tears from his eyes, and saw them staring. “Would you believe I’ve been waiting my whole life for an opportunity to use that speech?” he wheezed.

Ron looked at Hermione while their vampire friend cackled. “It’s gonna be an interesting seven years,” he said.
He floated, inert, aware but without any measurable sensation. No sight, sound, scent, texture. He couldn’t even feel his own anatomy; his proprioception was completely gone. He couldn’t even tell if he had arms or legs anymore. He was an amorphous shape, if that, housing a spark of consciousness.

Hello, Adrian.

“What? Who’s there?” he said in alarm. Even as he spoke he felt a surge of satisfaction that he could speak.

Allow me to introduce myself. I am…. The voice paused, as if searching for words. I suppose an approximation of my name is necessary, your language sort of lacks the nuances for my full name. Call me.. hmm… call me Agent.

“Agent… right.” That wasn’t a comforting nomenclature, all things considered. “Where am I? Why can’t I see?”

To answer the latter first, you are in a semi-amorphous state which has, er, left you without sensory apparatus for your environment. You sense nothing because you have nothing at the moment to sense it with. Agent sounded a little embarrassed at this.

I apologize, I’m sure it’s not comfortable. But you really don’t have any sensory approximates for the environment you are currently in; you wouldn’t understand what you were “seeing” if you could…

Here, let me adjust a few things. The ‘nothingness’ faded… or rather Something faded in: a misty, featureless plain under a twilit sky. Adrian found himself looking at/addressing/facing a soft misty cloud of light hovering over that plain; he realized in the next moment that he himself was an identical cloud of light-- though how he could tell he couldn’t say; he certainly couldn’t crane his neck to look himself over. There, I hope that’s better. It’s all illusory but at least it gives you an avatar of sorts to communicate with.

“Yeah, great.” Why wasn’t he panicking? Wait. No adrenal glands, no fight-or-flight response. Of course. Interestingly enough he was still capable of getting agitated at his situation. “Okay. So my first question? Where the heck AM I? And let me throw in “WHY” while I’m at it?”

You are in my native environment. An existential plane. Call it the Between.

“Between what?”

Everything.

That gave him pause, for sure.

As to what or who I am, I am an extradimensional hyper-advanced… though “advanced” isn’t quite the right term… well, you’d call me a “cosmic entity.” And I have brought you here because I wish to make a deal.

“A… deal?”

An agreement, yes, an exchange of services.

And that kicked Adrian’s bump of skepticism right in. Cosmic beings snapping up random individuals and offering them deals… superhuman powers, or magic green rings, for example…
was a cliche’ in ninety percent of the fanfics he’d read. And more than a couple he’d written.

Yes, you are familiar with the concept.

Adrian squinted suspiciously, or at least thought really hard about squinting suspiciously at the amorphous cloud of light before him. “Okay, why me?”

Why not you? Agent pointed out reasonably. You are well within acceptable averages for the necessary attributes. At the very least, you are familiar with the concept, and seemed agreeably inclined to the idea. Missing fight-or-flight glands or no, you would be surprised at the percentage of three-dimensional entities such as yourself who would go into either screaming hysterics or a catatonic fugue by this point.

Adrian gave a mental snort. At least it wasn’t trying to pass him off as “the Chosen One” or the like. If this was a dream or a hallucination it wasn’t offending his literary sensibilities yet, at least. Of course if he was lying in a hospital drugged to the hairline then all this was coming from his own mind, so it wouldn’t seem excessively ridiculous then either would it? “SO… this deal?”

Let me begin at the beginning. As you can guess I am not the only one of my kind. We live in the interstices between the universes and planes of reality. We’re timeless, eternal, immortal, vastly powerful… and rather BORED.

Ah, here it comes, Adrian thought. The old Bored Cosmic Entity Wants to Play routine. Poker Night of the Gods. Oh well, there were worse cliches.

To alleviate our ennui, we organized a series of contests and games. Each round, every participant--each Agent-- chooses an Avatar from the more finite races, such as yourself, from one of the three dimensional universes. We spend… I’m picking up the word “quatloos” from your mind?… ah, no, a better word there off to the side in your vocabulary, “chips.” Yes, a limited pool of points or “chips” on empowering and equipping the Avatar. Then we place them in a different universe, with a stated mission. If they succeed, they are rewarded, and their Agent moves up in the next round and chooses a new Avatar.

“And if they fail?”

Then the Agent is moved down in ranking.

“And the Avatar?”

Agent seemed reticent. There is no punishment for failure. We do not work like that. But the missions assigned are often… hazardous. The consequences for failure are... self-explanatory.

“Uh… huh.” So it was pass or fail, with a probably lethal “fail” option.

You must understand something, Adrian. Our “game” is about creating and endowing HEROES. The quests they are set on are consequent… to save a person, a family, a tribe, a nation, a world, from some imminent catastrophe. To battle an evil empire, or an overlord, or an alien horde… or just to fight for a humble cause. Any and all of those are dangerous pursuits in places of crisis, even for those endowed with extraordinary gifts they are dangerous. Failure is often fatal.

“Kind of high stakes for a GAME,” Adrian said.

We wish to make the universes a better place, Agent replied. You can’t do that playing tiddly winks.

“Well, why don’t you go into these, these places in crisis and intervene yourself?”
Agent gave what had to be the approximation of a heaving sigh. Adrian, we are a race of super-advanced cosmic entities. We number in the trillions. Does it not follow that we have powers, governances, authorities, laws, codes of conduct that restrain us as well? Our civilization is so complex and intricate it makes the operation of your own world’s governments look like the internal politicking of an aboriginal tribe over who gets the biggest share of animal pelts. It would take years to explain the codes of conduct that restrict our behavior interacting with the baryonic, euclidean universes, and most of it still wouldn’t make sense to you. He grumbled a bit. They often don’t make sense to US.

The Game is, for reasons too complex for you to fathom, one of the few legal, safe, legitimate ways in which we can intervene with the fates of other worlds, even for their own good. Because in part it places the power in the hands of mere mortals to determine their fates themselves. It’s THE RULES.

There’s a world out there where somebody’s in trouble. I am asking you to help me, to help them, and to help yourself. Will you accept?

“My reward?” he asked.

Your primary choice of reward will be: You will be returned home… or allowed to make your home in your new universe… or even pick a third… in any regard, with all your powers intact. There are other, lesser options, but those are the prime rate ones.

Adrian thought it over. Great power. Be a hero. But risking it all… maybe even his life. No guarantee of success, and who knows how much suffering and hardship.

But wasn’t that what made the effort worthwhile.

“I accept.”

He could feel Agent practically beaming with satisfaction. Excellent. The contract is sealed, let us begin. The planescape swirled dizzyingly, and Adrian found himself hovering before a massive, and very familiar opening screen.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Begin Character Creation

“I’m going to AZEROTH?” He yelped. No way in hell… it was his favorite online game ever, but that world and its lore were messed up three ways from Sunday, and it had at least a dozen Doomsday scenarios waiting in the wings to do it in at any given moment, with Lovecraftian Old Gods being the LOWEST ranked world-ending threats. If the literal armies of superhuman wizards, warriors, paladins and whatnot couldn’t handle it, adding one more dink with a plus-one sword to the mess would do nothing. Agent would just end up with his Avatar a greasy stain on an ogre’s foot.

No, absolutely not.

Adrian sighed in relief.

You’re getting your power set from there.

“What?” Okay, that was better. A guy with a World of Warcraft character’s powers and skills could hold up fairly well in most “fictional” universes he could think of…. “Wait. Where AM I going? That’s sort of an important question before I pick my powers.”

There was a sound of shuffling papers. According to the Rules, I’m not permitted to tell you your
destination, if at all, until AFTER you have selected your powerset. Of all the… Agent grumbled a bit. Sorry.

“Not your fault I suppose,” Adrian said. “Still, it makes this a lot dicier.” He flipped through the options-- he had hands!--- and watched as the screen flickered between races, classes, appearances… he suddenly had a twinge of paranoia. “Hey, uh--”

Look, I’m not some Jerkass Genie, Adrian. I’m not going to trick you into becoming a woman, or turning into a black man and drop you into the middle of a Nazi rally. I want to win this as badly as you do, so I’m going to do everything to make sure you get the best deal possible.

“Right. Sorry,” Adrian apologized. He looked over at the amorphous light next to him. “You know you’re sounding a lot more human than when this conversation started.”

A cosmic entity with nigh infinite resources and control over time and space, learning things quickly. Imagine that.

“Touche’.” Chagrined, Adrian turned back to the screen and proceeded with his dicey choice.

If it helps, most of the… limitations, I’d suppose you’d call them… on the various races, classes and such you recall from the game are not in effect. Those are the products of gameplay-- programmers putting in things for the sake of design and balance, not the actuality of how such powers work in Azeroth.

“Really.”

Yes. Think, do you think in real life that a gnome would run as fast as human? Or a human would be as physically strong as an orc? Or that a worgen, after the cutscren, is suddenly unable to claw or bite anymore? Many of the limitations found in gameplay, you can disregard.

“Well you’d better baby-walk me through it then. I don’t want to miss an advantage I overlooked because some programming doink in Blizzard thought it wouldn’t make for good ‘game balance.’ “

Very well. Oh, and you’ll be starting out at maximum level, so to speak. So don’t worry about learning curves for skills or talents.

“Oooh, nice.” Adrian mulled over the screen. He hemmed and hawed, but the choice was inevitable. “Species: Worgen.” he clicked.

May I ask your reasoning why? Agent was looking more and more humanoid; he tipped his ersatz eyeglasses in Adrian’s direction.

“Innate abilities. Stronger than human, faster, quadrupedal locomotion, natural weapons, and going by the cut scenes, incredible leaping and climbing ability. The ability to change back and forth to a human form means an instant disguise option, too. Even a baseline worgen will be pretty kickass.”

Adrian shrugged his ghostly shoulders. “Plus worgen are cool.”

A good choice, and good reasoning. Two notes: contrary to game lore, your worgen “curse” is not contagious. It is innately genetic. As if the elves would be so foolish as to leave INTELLIGENT werewolves with a contagious curse, he muttered in an aside. All it would take is one contagious sociopath and Azeroth would end up like the final reel of the Omega Man…

This does however mean that your Worgen form is your default form, the human one is essentially a shapeshifted disguise. If you violently lose consciousness -- say you are drugged or concussed-- you will revert.
“Yeah, important safety note. Thanks.”

Agent waved his hand. The screen filled with a side-by-side image: to the left, a young, dark haired, athletic man, caucasian with some hints of something exotic, about sixteen or so if Adrian judged correctly. To the right, a black-furred wolf-man, sleek and deadly. “So that’s me?” Adrian asked.

*Yes. Acceptable?*

“Better believe it. I haven’t had abs like that since never.”

*And now… class?*

Adrian looked over the screen. “Druid.” He clicked. The two figures were now carrying staves and wearing Celtic-looking robes… an odd change from the original game’s raven-wing-shoulder “druid look,” but he could roll with it.

*Ah. And again, why this and not any of the others?*

Adrian had the strangest suspicion that Agent already knew why, and it pleased him. “Flexibility. Dunno where I’m going, so I’d better pick the one with the most options. Multiple forms for land, sea and air, and they can opt for melee, ranged attack, defensive, stealth or support. I figure whatever you hit me with, a Warcraft druid will have an option that can cope with it.”

Agent nodded. Definitely pleased. *Coincidentally, you get all the druid forms. Another little plus I spent chips on.*

“Even the owl and the treant?”

*Even the owl and the treant. And now for skills-- or crafts, professions, however you might call it. Coincidentally, you get all the gathering skills as a freebie, regardless. Along with fishing, cooking, first aid, and archaeology.* He peered at the screen, seeming to squint. *What an odd amalgamation of skills,* he noted.

“Engineer,” Adrian said without hesitation, clicking the appropriate box. “And Enchanting.”

*Be warned, the skills won’t work like they do in the game,* Agent said. *You won’t be able to take a handful of copper bolts and some sheepskin and make a helicopter. And some of the materials needed, while they do exist-- you will find creating or finding the more exotic ones to be difficult.*

“I didn’t figure they’d have bars of Adamantine down at the corner drugstore,” Adrian said. “But I figure that at the very worst most of the skills and knowledge in Engineering would apply in the real world-- er, my real world-- as to be useful anyway.”

*And enchanting?*

Adrian grinned. “You basically admitted that it worked just fine on Azeroth. I figure wherever I’m going has to be similar enough to both Azeroth and my own reality to make it work and for me to be functional.”

Agent cocked an eyebrow. Yes, his appearance was coming right along. *Clever boy. It is true: all three universes operate under the same thirteen cosmic forces as every other. Still, you may find it difficult to obtain ingredients like Strange Dust and Astral Essence, even with your Disenchanting ability.*

“And ain’t it interesting how many Engineering projects can be ‘disenchanted’ for ingredients?”
Adrian grinned even wider. He paused. “Thirteen forces? I thought there were only four.”

Agent’s head was still only a blank white shape, but Adrian got the distinct impression of a knowing smirk. *So young and so much to learn.*

Adrian shrugged that off. “Anyway, Alchemy would be even dicier about ingredients… I mean, when the nearest source for peacebloom is Azeroth, it’s a bad idea to take Alchemy as a profession. Besides which people are antsy about taking “home remedies” someone whipped up with back yard plants. Tailoring is too limited, as is leatherworking… even the toughest armor you can make from those is like tissue paper next to chain or plate. Blacksmithing? You could make a Venn diagram of the “mining” skill-- which includes smelting, making ores and other metallurgy-- and engineering, and the overlap would be Blacksmithing.

“Plus Enchanting and Engineering come with their own salvaging skills, in addition to the three basics.”

Agent smiled--- the mouth suddenly appearing on that blank bespectacled face was a touch alarming. *Very good. Very very good. You might just stand a chance.* He gestured to the screen. *And now a name?* The blank box blinked, waiting for an answer.

Adrian only hesitated a moment. “Bayleaf.” He looked at Agent. “My old World of Warcraft handle.” he shrugged. “It’s also a healing herb. I considered “WarCrafter,” but that sounded too… aggressive. I want people to know I’m not just there to run around getting in fights-- I’m there to help.”

Agent nodded. *Done and done.* The choices on the giant screen vanished, leaving the worgen character standing in a battle ready pose. Below him blinked a single option: ENTER WORLD

Adrian looked over at Agent. “Well?” he said, a little nervous. “So where’s my big debut gonna be?”

_A world almost exactly like your own... within 99.9999 percent actually._ He grimaced, obviously unhappy to disclose the rest. _But that ten thousandth of a percent difference is a doozy._ Agent waved. The image on the screen faded, to be replaced by an aerial view of a coastal city. An American one to judge by the flags waving on some of the buildings. *This is Brockton Bay.*

Adrian felt the nonexistent blood drain from his face. “Worm? You’re sending me into Worm??” he floated there, listless with shock. Had he been truly solid he would have hit the ground with a thump.

*Yes. Or rather, it is one of a multiplicity of universes in this local brane where this timeline is, has, or will play out. So you are familiar with this particular panverse.* Agent cleared his throat nervously.

“Oh yeah, you might say that,” Adrian laughed bleakly. “Worm? The Wildbow-verse? One of the most famous superhero genre online fiction worlds, and one of the most notorious? Oh yeah, I know about it. It’s a superhero deconstruction-- if you can call someone violently smashing a basket full of puppies with a sledgehammer “deconstruction.” The storyline is like a cross between a demolition derby and a head-on train collision stuck on instant repeat, with someone standing off to the side pushing toddlers into the middle. It starts with a teenage girl being tortured into a psychotic breakdown and ends with an APOCALYPSE by a MAD OMNIPOTENT COSMIC SPACE WHALE DEMIGOD. It’s so grimdark it shits BATS!

“I’m supposed to fix THIS? Stop SCION from destroying a couple dozen parallel worlds? With nothing but some werewolf druid powers? The entire Justice league backed by the Avengers, Optimus Prime and Chuck Norris couldn’t hack this!”
Godlike powers are not what is needed here, Adrian, Agent said gently. You know that in the original timeline, that--

“That Taylor Hebert ends up saving the world? Or what’s left of it, anyway?” Adrian said. He scowled in anger and suspicion. “So why not let her do it again?”

Because the price paid, even if she wins—by countless billions of innocents, including one poor innocent girl-- is too terrible.

“If she wins?”

As the unaltered ‘verse plays out, the margins between victory and defeat are far narrower even than they look. Agent looked away, his white eyes staring at the endless plain around them. Far more often than not, when the original events are allowed to play out in yet another universe... Taylor Hebert loses.

“...well ain’t that just a ray of sunshine,” Adrian muttered, his veins ice cold.

Adrian, I am, in Agent terms, normally a “low roller.” These are the highest stakes I have ever played for. But every universe in this particular panverse of this particular brane has been labeled as being at high risk. The need is so great that I was able to barter for more intervention-chips than all my previous rounds of the Game combined-- and I have spent nearly all of them just to find a champion, prepare them, and inform them in such great and terrible detail. He hesitated, then placed a spectral hand on a spectral shoulder. Even so, if you wish to withdraw, you can--

Adrian shook his hand off. “No,” he muttered. “No, I’m not gonna quit. How can I? If it was one person I was saving, I wouldn’t. But with a whole world? A whole multi-world of people in danger? I can’t back out... I’d never be able to sleep again.

“It’s just... what can I do? Taylor had... has... will have insane-level powers that will put her BARELY on toe-to-toe basis with one of the Space Whales. What can I contribute in the face of that?”

Often the fate of worlds hinges not on the most powerful, but on the least, Adrian said gently. Throwing overwhelming power into the mix won’t save the day here. I didn’t pick you to save the whole world in one swoop; I picked you because I wanted someone to go there and do the right thing. The little things. Maybe you won’t even be in the final battle--- but even the smallest good deed in the right place can change everything.

Adrian sniffed. “Save the girl, save the world?”

Something like that.

He got to his feet. “So let’s do this then.”

Agent gestured to the screen. “Bayleaf” had reappeared, floating in the foreground over the skyline of Brockton Bay. Just walk through the screen.

“When and where--?”

Somewhere in the Brockton Bay area, I cannot be more precise. And November, two months before-

“Two months before the locker incident,” Adrian-- Bayleaf-- said grimly. He was already imagining what he’d do if he got his hands around Sophia’s neck.
I was unable to secure you identity papers, he said regretfully. I did not have sufficient chips for that level of direct involvement. It would have involved either mass memory editing, time travel, or somehow creating a false identity and paper trail sufficient to fool the resident tinkers, hackers, and Dragon herself. I recommend you pass yourself as a refugee from one of the cities destroyed by Endbringer activity or the like. Secure yourself some finances, obtain a residence and submit yourself to the authorities as an emancipated youth to be enrolled in Winslow High… they have streamlined that process due to the number of young people rendered orphaned and homeless by superhuman catastrophe.

“urgh. Not even a driver’s license, maybe?”

I spent all those points on concealing you from more important threats, Agent said drily. While your powers are in no way derived from the Entities or their Shards, you will be imbued with a false Gemma and Corona Pollenta that will trick most medical scans, and even most psions.

“I can see why that’s important. A cape without a Gemma or Pollenta? That’ll attract attention nobody wants. What about Contessa? Or the Simurgh?”

Agent gave him an evil smile. Due to the combination of your alien powers, your nature as a being from outside their timespace continuity, and the… well think of it as a “holographic” Shard projected by your false Gemma and Pollenta…. you will be a rather large blind spot for the lot of them. In the truest sense of the word; much as your brain ‘paints over’ the blind spot in your own vision, you will be a blind spot they aren’t even aware they have.

“Ohoho. I can see why that cost a lot of chips.”

Worth every one. Especially for Contessa and her Cheat Code Mary Sue ‘path to victory’ power. She’s in for a hell of a surprise if your paths cross. If you see her, punch her smug head up into that stupid little hat, would you?

“I sense a backstory.”

No, I just despise her existence on principle. Her overriding influence makes things WORSE, by ERASING potential options from the board before they can even be considered. And considering the shitty nature of the ‘victory’ her Path leads to…

“Not a friend of the Agents, yeah.”

Or anyone. Nothing causes more Hells on Earth than people like Contessa or Doctor Mother, who think Mother Knows Best. He closed the folder with a snap, it disappeared in a cloud of sparkles. And that is it for pre-flight checkup, he said with a hint of amusement. Ready?

Adrian nodded. “Let’s do this.”

Just step forward into the screen, Agent said. Be warned, you’re going to get one hell of a download of knowledge and neural information, in addition to having your body dramatically metamorphosed. You’re going to get knocked out… and your recollection of your “time” here may be a bit fuzzy for a while. Just remember: your first step is to get into Winslow and help Taylor Hebert. Beyond that… you’ll have to improvise.

Adrian nodded and straightened his shoulders. Maybe he couldn’t save this world. Or any world. But on the other side of that screen there was a little girl who was going to be kidnapped and enslaved by a supervillain. There was a group of teenagers who were going to be railroaded into villainy. There was a miracle healer who was going to utterly destroy her own life with one terrible
mistake. There were countless innocent people who were going to be destroyed in the crossfire between gangsters, drug dealers, and Nazi lunatics. There was one young woman on whom the entire world’s fate hinged, who was going to be put through utter Hell on Earth for no good reason.

Maybe he couldn’t save them all, but if he could save one, he was going to damned well do it.

*Remember, Adrian: you are not as limited as you think.*

He stepped through the screen and the world went dark.

In the realm he just left behind, the screen winked out. The endless twilit plain disappeared, and all detail faded away till there was nothing but a vaguely humanoid figure of glowing smoke floating in the void. Agent clung to the shape for a little while longer; he found it-- appealing for some reason.

Another glowing amorphous shape appeared. *That seemed to go well.*

*Indeed it did,* Agent agreed. *Hello, Oversight.*

--for a given value of well. *Your stratagem in this round… eludes me, ‘Agent.’ Most would regard it as incredibly unwise to reveal so much to their Avatar beforehand. Especially of our own inner workings.*

*Revealing—the Game?*

*Revealing— or at least hinting— at just how far you have gone,* Oversight said. *He knows that you are gambling on his future. What will it do to his chances, I speculate, when he realizes just how reckless a gambler you are?*

*To win big, one must risk big,* Agent retorted. *As risky as my past stakes have been, have I not produced victories like any other Agent? Innocents spared, lives rescued, worlds saved, futures changed for the better?*

*And each time, you have spent more…”chips”… Than you have gained,* Oversight said, his voice heavy with chastisement. *You have been running at a loss for cycle after cycle. One more “victory” like that and you will be destitute. And now you spend your last few Quadoos on a desperate gamble— on not one world, but multiple parallel worlds in peril, and a single lone Avatar to try and stem the tide?*

*And if he achieves one small good deed, I will weigh it as worth the cost,* Agent retorted. *You and I have different value judgments on what constitutes a profit,* Oversight.

*How did a spendthrift like you persuade the Exchequer to even loan you as little as he did?* Oversight said scornfully.

Agent indulged himself and let a slow, genuine, visible smirk spread across his illusion of a face. *Because I illustrated to him that I am playing a longer game than it looks,* he said. *I do not intend to save one panverse world… but two.*

Oversight’s regard-- what a material being would have called a puzzled look-- passed over Agent. Then came a moment of comprehension. *Azeroth,* he said. *You have somehow incorporated Azeroth into your gamble.* He “glared” suspiciously. *How?*

*Consider the fate of Azeroth,* Agent said. *Their technology, their thaumaturgic sciences, have been barely sufficient to save them from catastrophe over and over again. And each cataclysm has been
worse than the last...while their sciences have barely progressed a few short, halting steps in thousands of years. Do you know why?

He didn’t wait for Oversight to reply. Because they have continually failed to unify their theories. Paladin powers, arcanist abilities, druidic “nature” magic, gnomish and goblin technology--- all of it operates under the same scientific laws; it’s all a continuum. Yet their various 'schools' remain divided-- in part by the conspiracy of outside forces but also by politics, by ideology, by terminology, by symbology-- they even use different maths for each; one works in base eight while another works in base ten!

The closest any of them have come in tens of thousands of years to a grand unification theory have been the druids. Their world philosophy is about both diversity and balance, and they subsequently have hodgepoded bits and pieces from all the separate disciplines and have, miraculously, made them work together, discovered which ones were all but identical under the trappings…

And you have just sent out a Druid, Oversight said suddenly. A druid, and an engineer, and an enchanter, Agent said. From a world whose scholastic philosophy is entirely about unification and finding a single grand underlying theory for Everything and More. Into a world full of artifactors and devisors and ur-scientists. When he starts trying out his new powers, flexing his new skills, if he starts digging deeper, if he begins cooperating with the natives of similar mind-- he will begin discovering parallels and synergies that will be staggering in their implications. Staggering enough to trigger discovery of the true Grand Unification Theory… and a new model of the universe that will give both Earth Bet and Azeroth--- which he shall surely be drawn to visit next-- the tools to overcome.

IF. The single word from Oversight was enough to weigh like mountains.

That is where the risk comes in, Agent agreed. But it is the risk that makes it all worthwhile.

Adrian woke with a start, the icy wind rushing past him snapping him to consciousness. He rattled his head, utterly disoriented. Weird images, some strange dream-- a glowing man, an Agent of some great cause, or … a game contestant/host… offering him the deal of a lifetime… what?

He raised his hand to rub his eyes-- and a massive clawed paw groped at his face. He yelped before he realized the clawed, hairy hand was his own. As was the hairy, muscular arm it was attached to…

“HOLY--!” He felt himself over (not like that, you freaks.) In a mere second he had stock of himself: massive hands with semi-retractable claws; seriously hairy chest rippling with muscle, arms like fur stockings stuffed with footballs, powerful digitigrade legs with padded clawed pawed feet, wolfen skull and muzzle, pointed ears, wet nose-- no tail though-- coal-black fur over everything-- He was clothed in a loose cotton tunic and trousers that hung loose on even his massive form and flapped madly in the upward rushing wind.

“Holy crap, it was real,” he said to himself. “Then that means...” He looked up.

Spread out below him was a city-- a city that HAD to be Brockton Bay. It hugged the coastline and curled around an enormous harbor. He could see-- that had to be the PRT building. Or maybe it was
Medhall? He couldn’t remember a description. But there, that over there had to be the Protectorate base, floating out in the water, oh wow, he could see the glittering dome of the forcefield, wow a real forcefield… He could see everything up here, he was out over the middle of the bay--

He was over the bay--

Over-- the bay--

Slowly, the rusted gears of cognition clunked into alignment.

“HOLY CRAaaaAAAaaaaAAP!!!” he began flailing wildly, which only started him tumbling, as he suddenly realized he was thousands of feet in the air without a plane. “AGENT, YOU RETARD!”

He indulged in a couple seconds panic (he was really high up) before he realized he’d better get a grip or he was going to say hello to Earth Bet in a really sudden and final way. He gasped for air as he lay out spreadeagled, slowing his plummet. “Okay, breathe breathe breathe, remember, you’re a worgen—Worgen can’t fly!!- no, but worgen druids can, come on, change into your flight form, bird bird birdbirdbird come on OWL OWL OWL--!!”

He felt a massive, sort of internal twisting and folding, and suddenly where there had been a plummeting, panicking Worgen, there was now a plummeting, panicking, giant owl. It was several long eternities before he managed to right himself and began turning his demented flailing into at least an effort at flapping. Finally, his long dive began to turn into a swooping glide. He leveled out mere feet above the waves and flew, wings spread wide, hooting in victory…

“hooo Hooo HOOOO..”

And plowed into a whitecap a few yards from shore.

A wheezing, waterlogged Worgen sloshed his way to shore a few moments later. Once the waves were no longer lapping at his ankles, he bent over and shook. What had to be a gallon of water sprayed over the sand. He stood up, relieved and feeling a good bit lighter, if not precisely drier. He shook the last of the water out of his ears in time to pick up the high pitched whine of… was that an electric turbine?

Around the end of one of the derelict ships came a low, sleek motorcycle. It looked, Adrian thought, rather like someone had crossbred a lightcycle from Tron with a particularly old school Harley. The rider looked to be wearing a full suit of futuristic armor, with only his bearded chin showing from underneath the visor on his helmet.

Of course, Adrian thought. With disgust. Armsmaster. It would be the egotistical wannabe Iron Man who’d find him first. What were the odds? Of course they probably had all sorts of futuristic radar out on that floating base looking for incoming flying threats. He wondered what radar profile a wolfman plummeting from 10,000 feet left behind…

The armored hero pulled to a halt in a spray of sand a few yards away. He dismounted quickly, pulling out a collapsing rod that folded out into a six foot staff, a shimmering blade snapping into existence at the end. He planted one end in the sand and struck a commanding pose. “Stand where you are, don’t-- WHOAAAH!”

Apparently whatever Armsmaster had been expecting to see, it hadn’t been a sodden, bedraggled, seven foot tall wolf-man. He actually staggered back a step in surprise at the sight of him. Then, obviously miffed at his faux pas, he whipped his halberd down into the ‘armed and ready’ pose, the
blade pointed at Adrian’s chest, his thumb on some button or other on the haft.

“Uh, Hi,” Bayleaf said, grinning sheepishly and waving.

In retrospect, smiling at an armed and armored man with a mouthful of fangs was probably a bad idea. But really, the taser dart had been a bit much...
Bayleaf came to. He was lying on his back in the sand, tingling and aching in a most extraordinary fashion from… what was it?-- oh yeah, Armsmaster had TAZED him. What a great guy. Wait. An airburst? Explosion? He must have made one hell of an entrance. And over the airspace of a superhero base, no less. That explained a little of why Armsmaster was so quick on the trigger.

Bayleaf lay very still. He had no intention of acting in any fashion that got him zapped like that again. He carefully thought out his next course of action…

Suddenly it dawned on him. He had an “in,” now. He had Armsmaster, the Protectorate’s walking recruitment poster, right here. Give him five minutes-- assuming the tinker cape didn’t have an itchy trigger finger and tased him again-- Armsmaster would be hardselling him to enlist. From there it would be smooth sailing, right through the PRT doors. Hi there, I’m a new Cape, golly gee I always wanted to be in the Wards…

“--the suspect made aggressive moves...” Armsmaster was saying, his finger pressed to the corner of his visor. Bayleaf could hear a faint, but clearly agitated voice arguing with him. “--He bared his claws and fangs at me!” Armsmaster protested.

Bayleaf considered the pros and cons. Pros: immediate legitimacy. Food, clothing, shelter, and funding. Access to materials for his “tinker powers” as an enchanter and engineer. Close proximity to several of the important individuals in his little quest… not the least of which was being within throttling distance of Shadow Stalker aka Sophia Hess. he could potentially intimidate the girl into leaving Taylor Hebert alone. Failing that, put her in a hammerlock and force her to behave herself. Or straight up outing her to the PRT for her criminal actions.

“Regardless of what it looked like to YOU, Dragon--”

Downsides: some real biggies. The PRT was secretly run by Cauldron. It was also currently infiltrated by Coil. Its Director in Chief was a Cauldron cape named Alexandria who was a borderline sociopath who would snap an innocent’s neck in an eyeblink to keep Cauldron’s secrets; The regional director was a bigot who’d rather slowly die of kidney disease than let a Cape heal her. Her potential replacement was a xenophobic warhawk that made her look reasonable just by contrast.

“--I’m requesting permission to use Tinker tranquilizers on this one-- Because it will be more efficient to let him regain consciousness in an environment under our control--” Bayleaf heard teeth grinding. “On what grounds?”

Then there was the petty bureaucracy. The administrators, lawyers, and bureaucrats would be watching his every move and dictating when and where he could work, sleep, or take a pee. It would be impossible to perform his mission with all that breathing down his hairy neck.

And he wasn’t sure he could put up with Glenn Chambers for five minutes without killing him. If he was anything like in canon, the PR idiot would tie a ribbon around his neck or something ‘to make him more approachable by the kiddies.’
“---send out prisoner transport, along with containment foam. Tell them to send the news crews out here too--” more chatter. “It’s not about taking credit,” Armsmaster said stiffly. “I just want them to assure the public that the cause of the disruption has been dealt with--”

And he’d be working with this doink. He growled silently to himself; that did it, no sale. He’d go full Indy and stay that way.

He must have growled a little less than silently because he heard Armsmaster jump. There was a whir of micromotors from his armor. “Freeze!” Armsmaster barked. “Do not move, do not attempt to come any closer.”

Bayleaf raised himself up on his elbows and glared at the man. “You TAZED me,” he said in disbelief. His new voice, surprisingly, was not a raspy growl like he suspected, but a low, smokey bass, almost like James Earl Jones.

“That dart should have had you out for at least another 10.25 minutes,” Armsmaster said, clearly displeased. His grip tightened on the haft of his weapon.

“Guess it wasn’t as efficient as you thought,” Bayleaf couldn’t resist needling him. Thanks to his wolf ears he could literally hear the egotistical tinker’s teeth grinding together. One thing canon got correct: Armsmaster's Tinker ability had a specialization in making things more efficient. Anything with overlap, lag, leftovers, or superfluity grated on his power's nerves. He would, canonically, burn weeks on end for a tenth of a percent improvement in weight or battery life. And Armsmaster’s ego was practically flammable if you suggested his work was inefficient in any way.

“You’re being detained,” Armsmaster grated out, “For invading the restricted airspace over the Protectorate base in the Brockton Bay harbor--”

“Invading the-- I was plummeting to my doom from umpty thousand feet up!” The hero’s officious, authoritative attitude was getting on Bayleaf’s nerves.

“You will be interrogated,” Armsmaster said impassively, “and if your story clears than you will be released without incident. If you resist arrest it will go poorly for-- do NOT move!” In the middle of his little speech, Bayleaf had casually flipped to his feet and taken a step towards him. “I SAID FREEZE!”

“Yeah, I heard you,” Bayleaf said, holding up his hands, palms out. “Freeze.” His palms swirled with forest green light. The ground around Armsmaster’s feet erupted, and in a twinkling he was cocooned in the coils of thorny green vines as thick as his armored thigh.

In World of Warcraft, Entangling Vines was a low-level power, so badly nerfed by timid designers obsessed with “game balance” as to be literally worthless. Here though, it was pretty darned effective. The thick, woody vines were so rigid and tough that the armored hero was completely immobilized. Not that it kept him from trying though; he grunted and strained with all his might, barely making the leaves adorning him rustle. “Computer! Emergency Escape Code--”

Bayleaf darted his hand in and crushed the microphone embedded in Armsmaster’s chin strap with his claws. He hooked his fingers around and stabbed out what he suspected were the eye motion tracking sensors in the visor for good measure. “Ah ah ah,” he said. “You’re in time out, Mister.” With those out of commission, Armsmaster would be unable to use voice commands or eye motion to activate any of his surely countless nasty little gizmos. Hal-beard was going to stay put until the cops showed up to free him and Bayleaf was long gone.

“That was Protectorate property you just destroyed!” Armsmaster yelled.
“Really… Don’t… Care.” Bayleaf turned to go. “Later, Hal-beard.”

“Wait!” the voice was tinny and clearly feminine. Surprised, Bayleaf stopped. One of the lenses on Armsmaster’s helmet was swiveling to track him. “Please, don’t go.”

Bayleaf bent over and squinted into the lens. There was only one person that he could think of that it could be. “Dragon, I assume?” he said. Dragon was another individual from canon: an artificial intelligence built by a very paranoid Canadian Tinker, who incredibly became a Tinker herself when her creator died in the Endbringer attack on Nova Scotia (at least, that was what happened to him as Bayleaf recalled it.) Unfortunately, the Tinker in question had apparently spent too much time reading bad sci fi about robots overthrowing their masters, and had put countless poorly thought out "safeguards" into her programming that effectively crippled her, and even threatened her life. Finding a way to free her was on Bayleaf’s rather extensive to-do list.

As it so happened, she was also close friends with one Colin Wallis, aka Armsmaster. She collaborated with him often via internet, and actually dreamed of moving their friendship into a more romantic arena... possibly because she was the only sapient being on the planet who could tolerate his presence for more than five minutes.

“Indeed,” the A.I. said. “I am Dragon, an associate of the Protectorate and PRT.”

“You hacked my gear?” Armsmaster looked utterly offended.

“Needs must as the Devil drives,” she said to him. “Now hush. Please, sir, allow me to apologize for Armsmaster’s… precipitous actions. Your arrival caused a bit of alarm, and it put him a bit on edge. You do understand.”

“He fired on an unarmed man,” Bayleaf growled grumpily. “And then got on the phone to call the five o’clock News to brag about it.” Armsmaster stiffened-- well, as much as he could stiffen, wrapped in wooden vines.

“Again, I apologize,” Dragon said. “I’m sure this is all a misunderstanding. You are apparently a new Trigger, a Case 53, and out of your element. Please reconsider. I know this is a poor first impression, but the Protectorate and the PRT can be a real boon for new capes such as yourself. If you cooperate with the Protectorate they can help you out.”

Bayleaf realized that this was another golden opportunity: a chance to drop a few important bugs in a very important pair of digital ears. He decided to seize it with both hands. He let an expression of disgust cross his face. “Your local director is a bigot. Your PR office is run by idiots. You have a bullying psychopath in the local Wards --” (Armsmaster’s bearded chin twitched; ding ding, he obviously already had his suspicions who was being referred to)--” and word is on the street that you’re riddled with Coil’s spies.”

“Spies?” she said faintly. Hook, line, and sinker, Bayleaf thought smugly. That ought to set the super-intelligent AI to sniffing around for Coil’s fingerprints months ahead of schedule.

“--and even without that, you’re so tied up with red tape you can barely move, much less DO anything,” he snorted. “So no thanks.” Once again he turned to go.

Of course, Armsmaster couldn’t let that go. The Man With No Personality had to stick his oar in. “I don’t know where you came from,” Halbeard yelled at his retreating back. “But things will go a lot easier for you here in Brockton Bay if you work with us heroes and not against us!”

Bayleaf stopped, turned back and got up in Armsmaster’s face, looming over him. “Get one thing
straight, you tin-plated, cereal-box-top Judge Dredd wannabe,” he rumbled, his muzzle threatening to curl into a snarl. “You’re no hero. You’re a grand-standing, glory-hogging, rent-seeking Prima Donna, and I’d rather be shot with a taser again in the DICK than work with you.”

Someone behind him spoke. “Holy--!” He spun around. Standing there on the beach were a couple of teenagers in heavy coats and hoodies and carrying backpacks. Bayleaf had no idea what a couple of kids would be doing out in the Ship’s Graveyard on a freezing cold day like this. Worshipping crack and smoking Satan, for all he knew or cared. But they had obviously just stumbled on their little tableau and were staring in astonishment at the sight of the lead hero of Brockton Bay being held at the mercy of a bedraggled eight foot tall wolfman. “Hey!” Bayleaf barked. They jumped. “Either of you got a cell phone with a camera?” The one on the left nodded.

Bayleaf loped over with his hand out. The kid pulled out a smartphone and very nervously handed it to the worgen. “Thanks.” Bayleaf loped back to where Armsmaster still stood wrapped in vines, fiddling with the buttons. “Camera, camera-- how do you—ah!” He threw one beefy arm over Armsmaster’s shoulders, held up the camera, pulled the goofiest expression he could think of, and clicked. The armored hero made a sound suspiciously like ‘arrgh.’

“Congratulations, pal,” Bayleaf said, tossing the camera back to the kid-- who barely caught it; he and his friend were now laughing fit to split a gut. “Enjoy your instant million-hit blog post.” He heard sirens faintly in the distance. “Later.” He turned, started to run, and in between one step and the next transformed from an enormous black wolf-man into an enormous black sabertooth tiger. To shouts of "cool" and "awesome," he hit all fours still running-- and then faded away, vanishing into thin air.

“That camera is now legal evidence in an ongoing criminal investigation,” Armsmaster shouted at the teenagers in a warning tone. They ignored him, the phone’s owner gleefully working the keyboard.

“Too late, Colin,” Dragon murmured in his ear. “They’ve already posted it to Facebook.”

“Arrrrghggghhh.”
Ladybird

Taylor gazed in horror at the filth spilling out at her feet. Before she could do more than gag, hands seized her from behind and shoved her forward into the locker. Refuse and roaches welled up around her legs as the locker door slammed shut behind her. She gagged, retched, and screamed, kicking and thrashing, trying to kick the door back open—she heard the lock snap shut. “Enjoy your stay with the rest of the filth, Hebert,” a voice taunted her from outside. Emma? It was Emma?? No, Emma wouldn’t do this, things were bad but Emma would never go this far. “Emma, please, don’t do this—please you were my FRIEND—”

Three voices rang out with mocking laughter at her pleas. “Can you believe this bitch?” she heard Sophia say. “You were my friend, you were my friend—”

“I was never your friend, you hopeless sop.” Emma’s voice cut through the steel door into Taylor’s ears like a knife. “Nobody’s worthless enough to be a friend with something as worthless as you! Sit in there and rot with the rest of the garbage!”

A year and a half of torment finally came to a head; that last strut holding together the edifice of Taylor Hebert finally broke.

Everything went dark. Then the void filled with teeming, swirling light. Something vast, enormous, a fractal impossibility swarmed in the dark. Something vast as a continent broke free and floated down. It reached out a tendril glowing with countless promises, reached down—

“What is this?”

The Shard hesitated. INTERSECTION/INTERFERENCE/INTERVENTION?

“Oh, Sister, this is terrible.” Something white, golden, an aurora of pastels.

Something else; dark indigo, swirling with pinpoints of glittering light. “Strewth, what—infestation is this?”

“We should have stopped by decades ago...”

“We must needs make amends—”

“It will take some doing. We must be careful.”

“Yes. Carefully, subtly. But as for THIS wretchedness...”

The Shard flinched back, too late. Dawn and Midnight swirled and struck; the Shard gave a shrill voiceless cry, then melted away to nothingness like a snowflake, a fractal returned to chaos.


“Oh, poor little one.” The voice was as tender as the morning. “Here, dear child. We cannot yet do much directly, but let us do this much for you...”

A horn of spiraled midnight, a horn of shining white, touched her brow. Everything suddenly changed and Taylor’s world exploded with light.
Sophia, Madison and Emma cackled outside Taylor’s locker. “Come on, let’s go before someone on staff shows up,” Madison said.

Sophia snorted. “Don’t worry about the STAFF, Mad,” she said disdainfully. “They haven’t got a testicle or a spine between ‘em. But yeah, let’s go and leave Hebert here to think about her place in life… wait, what..?” Sophia’s arrogant sneer had turned to a scowl of surprise and confusion. Puzzled, her two tag-alongs turned to see what she was staring at. Taylor’s cries had stopped, and now her locker was vibrating with a deep, ominous thrum. Pale lavender light was shining out of the ventilation slots and leaking out around the seams of the door.

The explosion naturally caught them completely by surprise.

The call went out over the PRT comlinks. “Attention all Protectorate, this is Dispatch. We have a Trigger Event, I repeat, we have a Trigger Event at the Winslow High School, any Protectorate in the area please respond…”

Armsmaster and Miss Militia were already on patrol, cruising the streets on their custom motorcycles. Armsmaster was the first to respond; he opened the comlink in his helmet and spoke up over the thrum of his engine. “Dispatch this is Armsmaster and Miss Militia, we are en route, what’s the sitrep?”

“We copy Armsmaster. According to reports we are receiving from inside the school, we have a code two, possibly a code three Trigger event inside Winslow. One of the students manifested just about fifteen minutes ago and has been rampaging through the school, pursuing one particular group of three female students through the hallways and classrooms, believed to be the ones responsible for the trigger event. The staff are evacuating, and according to phonecalls we are receiving from inside the school Shadow Stalker is already on the scene and responding.”

“Is that confirmed?”

“The caller is a Madison Clements, who apparently was given Shadow Stalker’s PRT phone by Shadow Stalker and told to report in.”

“Sir,” a voice broke in over the transmission. “This is Kid Win. I was doing a flyby on my way to the PRT building when the balloon went up. I’m in a holding pattern over the school, do you want me to engage?”

“No, Kid, do not engage till we arrive,” Miss Militia replied as they accelerated down the street. “Give us oversight till then. Do you see Shadow Stalker or the Trigger?”

“Yes, I have a visual on them both. The fight has moved to the cafeteria, I can see them through the cafeteria windows.” His voice sounded odd.

“Can you give us a description of the Trigger?” Armsmaster barked.

Now Kid Win’s voice sounded really strange. “Yyyes, sir, I can…” there was a pause. “It’s a lavender unicorn.”
“It’s a whaaauuh?” Armstrong was so startled he veered off the pavement at the next intersection, jolting over the sidewalk at the corner.

“It’s a little lavender unicorn with a curly black mane and tail,” Kid Win said with determined fatalism. “And it is kicking Shadow Stalker’s ass.”

By the time Miss Militia and Armstrong roared into the Winslow parking lot, the school had been evacuated. The student body, for a surprise, was still there, milling about at a distance and craning their necks to see; their morbid curiosity apparently keeping them in attendance. The two heroes kicked open the double doors and moved in, commando style; the ruckus, or the remainder of it, was coming from down the hallway, through the cafeteria doors.

Another commando-style kick-and-enter and they were inside. What greeted their eyes had them both forgetting every shred of their training, lowering their weapons and standing there gormlessly slackjawed.

The hallways had shown signs of battle-- bent and half-ripped-off locker doors, books and litter blown about the floor, cracked and shattered lighting--- but this was a whole nother order of magnitude. Cafeteria tables had been sent tumbling, steel trash cans upended, plastic trays had been scattered everywhere, some shot through the shattered windows, others embedded in the drywall ceiling, their loads of food spattered hither and yon, half the lighting in the ceiling ripped loose, along with parts of the ceiling. All in all it looked as if a troop of gorillas had expressed their extreme displeasure at the menu.

Off to one side was what had to be Shadow Stalker. At least Armstrong surmised it was her, from what he could see of her. She was clad at least partially in her costume, presumably having to don the cloak and some bits of armor over her civilian clothes in haste. She was jammed headfirst into a partially full trash can. The mouth of the can had been crimped down by some force around her waist, pinning her arms by her sides and leaving her butt and flailing legs sticking in the air. Her crossbow pistols were lying on the floor, crushed like beer cans and tossed aside. Broken bolts-- the kind with steel heads, which she was NOT supposed to have, Armstrong noted with displeasure-- were scattered across the floor, snapped like pencils.

At first he was puzzled as to why she was unable to free herself with her intangibility powers-- then he noticed the blinking lights. Some well-meaning soul had apparently made an effort at decorating the cafeteria for the just-past holiday season and had strung electric lights around the ceiling; Shadow Stalker’s assailant had apparently pulled down one end of the strand and used it to tie up the abrasive Ward before stuffing her in the trash. Along with the troublesome Ward’s many personal flaws, she also had powers with a flaw: she could not go intangible and pass through anything with an electric current running through it, at least not without getting the mother of all uninsulated electric shocks. Muffled, sulphurous swearing was coming from inside the can as it rocked back and forth. Oh well, at least she was alive and, to judge by the vociferous nature of the swearing, in good shape.

On the back wall, between the hot plate lines where the chalkboard with the menu of the day hung, was a redheaded girl of about fifteen years of age. She was bruised, battered, spattered with dust and debris and looked absolutely terrified. She was pinned to the wall, held several feet up off the floor by a lavender aura that wrapped around her and pinned her arms to her sides.
At the other end of that aura was a tiny lavender unicorn. The glowing tip of its horn was barely higher than his own armored knee. It had childlike proportions, enormous blue eyes, and a mane and tail of tumbling ebon locks that (he judged) would be the envy of any female. There was some sort of marking on each of its hips, but he couldn’t quite make it out as the tiny creature was spattered with absolutely vile looking filth, all over its hooved legs clear up to its shoulders and haunches. It stood there on all fours, splay legged, its eyes fixed on the girl in its intangible grip and an expression of unspeakable rage and pain on its childlike face.

The hostage saw the heroes standing there. “Oh god, help me! Kill it, shoot it, the freak’s going to KILL me--!”

“FREAK?” the little unicorn screamed. The voice was clearly feminine. “You and Madison and that bitch Sophia--” Armsgmaster’s face settled into an even grimmer scowl behind his visor at the name. He was getting together a picture of what happened that was uglier by the second.”-- torment me for a year and a half, you beat me up, destroy my things, steal my schoolwork, turn the entire school against me, stuff me in a locker full of rotting tampons--” and it became instantly clear what the mung and scraps of cotton and cloth clinging to her; Armsgmaster and Miss Militia both suppressed gags-- “You turned my LIFE INTO HELL for LAUGHS, AND I’M THE FREAK??”

The girl went white. “Taylor-- please--”

She floated the girl about a foot away from the wall and slammed her back into it, hard enough to knock the wind out of her. “You were my FRIEND, Emma!” She pulled her out and slammed her into the wall again. “We grew UP together!” Slam. “We did EVERYTHING together!” Slam. “YOU WERE FAMILY!” Slam. “YOU were my SISTER! I LOVED YOU!” Slam. “I loved you...” the unicorn’s voice trailed off into a quavering whimper. The telekinetic aura faded away, “Emma” slid down the wall, battered and bruised but otherwise unharmed. The little unicorn’s face screwed itself up into a vision of agony and grief. Enormous tears welled up from the clenched shut eyes; with a gut wrenching sob she turned and ran blindly, staggering, out through the cafeteria doors.

That snapped Armsgmaster and Miss Militia out of their fugue. “We’d better follow her,” Armsgmaster said unnecessarily. “Kid Win!”

The teenage tinker was there, hovering just outside the shattered windows on his hoverboard. “Uh, yessir!”

“Stay here, administer first aid if it’s needed.” the trash can by the wall cursed some more. “And maybe see about getting Shadow Stalker out of there…. No rush though.” His bearded chin radiated a grim future for the probationary Ward. “I’m going to want her to stick around, if you get my meaning.”

“Got it sir.” Kid Win snapped off a salute. Armsgmaster nodded, and he and Miss Militia left in pursuit of the weeping unicorn. Kid floated in through the window and dismounted. After a cursory examination of the former hostage-- and a warning not to leave the premises until after the authorities had spoken to her. That done, he walked over to where his “teammate” was still imprisoned, and slapped an EMP cuff around her ankle. The cuffs in question were solid titanium alloy, rated for several categories of brute, were laced with high-voltage circuitry to restrain capes with intangibility powers, and had a built in tranquilizer to subdue anything else. They’d become standard issue shortly after Shadow Stalker had made her debut as a rogue, for some peculiar reason. “SO.” Kid Win said loudly, slapping the side of the trash can. It made a deafening bang, eliciting yet another oath from the Ward inside. “Looks like you got your grimdark
ass kicked by a Lisa Frank poster.” He played a quick bongo solo on the bottom of the can.

He held up his cellphone and hit record. The video of her epic swearing echoing out of that trashcan was going to be Youtube gold, he knew it.

It was fairly easy to track the fleeing unicorn; she was still leaving a trail behind her, bits of paper product and footprints-- hoofprints-- etched out in something tacky and disgusting neither of the Protectorate heroes wanted to think about. She wasn’t exactly evading them, either; the trail led straight to the school gym and beelined for the girl’s locker rooms. They stood outside the door, weapons at the ready.

“I’ll go in first,” Armammaster said. He swung around the doorframe and in through the marked door.

Miss Militia said nothing. She holstered her weapon and stood in front of the door, arms crossed over her chest. “Three… Two… One…”

Armsmaster promptly came back out as quickly as he’d gone in. He pointed a thumb at the “women’s” logo on the door. “…You go in. I’ll go…”

“… Backtrack, examine the, ah, scene of the crime. Or something.” Miss Militia said. “Right.”

“…Right.” The tinker hero of Brockton Bay beat a hasty retreat. Miss Militia rolled her eyes, smirking behind her bandana, and walked inside.

It didn’t take much guessing to figure out where the distraught, mutated girl had run. Miss Militia could hear the showers going full blast… and the sound of the girl’s sobbing. She sighed, put her phone and wallet on a nearby bench for safekeeping and walked into the shower room.

Like everything else in Winslow, the shower room was bare, utilitarian and ugly. It was a single large room with bare concrete floors and walls, lined with drains and shower fixtures every few feet. Every shower head was going full blast, filling the room with spray and steam. The unicorn-girl was sitting on the floor under the last showerhead, hunched and miserable, water gushing over her and flattening her mane and tail. A few travel-size bottles of shampoo were scattered around her hooves. She was making a feeble attempt to scrub her own flanks with a hoof, trying to get the muck from the locker off her, and sobbing fit to break a heart of stone. She was the picture of abject misery. “Taylor?” Miss Militia said.

The unicorn looked up at her. If the sobbing hadn’t already done it, that face would have melted her heart like butter in a blast furnace. “Muh…Miss Militia…?” she quavered. “Oh… oh no…” she broke into a new round of tears.

Miss Militia took a long, invigorating breath and let it out in a sigh. She firmed herself to ignore the drenching her costume was about to get-- she’d waded chest-deep through leech infested swamps, she could tolerate having soggy britches from a high school shower stall-- and walked inside. She crouched down next to the girl… next to Taylor… and carefully, gently rested a hand on her withers. “Hey,” she said gently. “It’s going to be okay, I promise.”

Taylor closed her eyes and shook her head, wet mane flapping around her neck. “I-- I Triggered,” she whimpered. “I went ‘Carrie’ on the whole school...”

“It’s not that bad, Taylor.”
“I’m gonna go to the Birdcage...” she sniffled.

Miss Militia couldn’t help but laugh a little. “No, I promise you are not going to the Birdcage,” she said. “Noone was seriously hurt... and the damage isn’t even too bad...” she picked up one of the bottles at their feet and opened it. “Tell you what, before anything else, let’s get this mess cleaned off. Then it’ll be that much easier to tackle whatever’s next. Here, let me give you a hand... you're not going to get very far with hooves...” that said she emptied the bottle on Taylor's head and back and began scrubbing in a no-nonsense fashion. The gunge sloughed off mercifully quick, swirling to the floor and down the drain.

Taylor held up one of her hooves and looked at it. “Why...?” she said.

“You Triggered,” Miss Militia said, going for the obvious answer. “Your transformation is... pretty extreme, but with help you will be able to adjust--”

“Why did they do that?” Taylor went on. “Why did they do any of it?” She looked up at Miss Militia. “Months and months and months of hurting me, mocking me, hating me-- why would they do that. Why would a hero do that to an unpowered person? Why would anyone do that to anyone else? Why would someone do-- that-- to-- their-- best-- friend--” she broke down again, leaning her head against Miss Militia’s shoulder. “Why, why, why, why??”

Miss Militia patted her back and tried to think of something comforting. Then she realized the girl’s horn was glowing again. Trapped in indecision, unwilling to stay or leap away as the glow grew brighter-- then without warning exploded in an enormous wave of lavender light--

Armsmaster looked at what was left of the row of lockers. It was obvious which one had been Taylor Hebert’s. If the filth and gunge spilling out of the bottom hadn’t been an obvious clue, there was the fact that it was no longer so much a rectangular steel and aluminum box as it was a work of modern art. It had been ruptured open from within like someone had stuffed an M-80 into a beer can and lit the fuse. It was a miracle noone had been injured…

Though perhaps not, he reflected on a second look. From the look the… detonation, for lack of a better word… had been deliberate, blasting almost entirely upwards and sideways, mashing several lockers on either side and peeling itself open and laying it out like the petals of a flower. An extremely jagged, incredibly VIOLENT flower, but still.

He poked through the rubbish spilling out of it with a handy pencil. (There were quite a few handy… there was quite a bit of stationary lying about where students had hastily abandoned it.) He wrinkled his nose at the mess: it looked to be at least several waste cans worth, and had been in there for a considerable amount of time, long enough for some of it to start to rot. Probably over the entire holiday break. Roaches scuttled over everything, eliciting a grunt of disgust from him.

And they’d taken another human being and stuffed them into a locker full of this, he thought. Just for their own amusement. What kind of a teenage sociopath did this sort of thing?

His memory flashed back to a certain crossbow-wielding, highly antagonistic teenage vigilante of his own acquaintance and winced. Exactly, that sort of teenage sociopath…
“Hello?” one of the lockers said.

Armsmaster stared, then walked down the hall to where the locker in question stood. “Who is this?”

“I’m Madison?” the locker said, tremulous.

“The girl who called in the alert,” Armsmaster said, remembering.

“Uh huh.” There was a pause. “Is the scary pony gone yet?” she said, her voice high and fearful.

“She has been dealt with. How did you get possession of Shadow Stalker’s phone?” Armsmaster asked, his ‘interrogation’ voice on full.

“We stuffed the Taylor bitch in the locker, and then there was this explosion-- this EXPLOSION and purple light everywhere and screaming and the angry pony was coming after us--” the voice halted, then started again. “And then Sophia was pulling on a mask and armor and getting this crossbow out of the janitor’s closet, and she shoves this phone in my hands and yells at me to call the PRT and what to tell them… so I hid in here and called…”

“That phone is PRT property, I need it back,” Armsmaster said. The locker door cracked open just wide enough for the phone to slide out. He took it; the door shut again. “….Aren’t you coming out of there?”

“I think I’ll stay in here a while,” the locker whimpered.

“….Very well.” He returned to the ruined locker at the other end of the hall and poked about in the rubbish with the toe of his boot. Well, there wasn’t much here that any forensics officer couldn’t figure out. He grimaced…

Then the walls began to vibrate. The lockers rattled against each other. Armsmaster braced himself, but before he could do more than that a wave of lavender light swept down the hallway, passed through him, and then passed on down the hall-- eliciting a scream from Madison the Locker Girl-- before disappearing.

Armsmaster staggered and blinked. Then blinked again. The hallway was suddenly full of butterflies, blues and yellows and greens, a riot of color flitting back and forth. Where had they all come from?

He looked down. The mess of filthy bandages and tampons and dried blood had vanished, replaced with-- “red and wide rose petals?” he muttered. An enormous yellow and blue butterfly alighted on his helmet, unnoticed. He rewound his helmet cam and re-watched the last ten seconds of footage.

He blinked. He blinked again. Had he seen…?

Yes, there it was. As the wave of purplish light had washed over the cockroaches, they had transformed, one by one, into brilliantly colored butterflies.

It was a scene. The entire student body was still milling about, E88 punks heedlessly rubbing shoulders with ABB, Merchant junkies with E88, preps with jocks, all crowding in among the vehicles surrounding the building. Police squad cars, the fire department, the EMT, a PRT van and at
least one TV News van were there; the PRT and BBPD were working to keep the crowd back while
the school principal was busy shmoozing with the news crew, preening for the camera and spin
doctoring as hard as she could.

As the mobbing students watched, the school doors opened and Armsmaster came striding out, his
boots clanking loudly on the cracked sidewalk and his lips set in a thin line. Immediately behind him
came Miss Militia, inexplicably soaked, and carrying a large bundle of towels from which peeped a
mass of tousled curly black hair and pair of wide, worried eyes. The weaponsmaster cape made a
beeline for the PRT vehicle; the crowd of students parting like the Red Sea before Moses the instant
they caught a good look at what was in her arms.

Miss Militia smirked to herself as she climbed aboard. She was going to derive a lot of enjoyment in
the future recalling hard-faced asian gangsters and tattooed neonazi punks retreating in wide-eyed
fear from a little lavender unicorn.

Armsmaster cast about, looking for the principal: a highly unpleasant, scrawny blonde woman with a
bowl-cut hairdo. She had struck him, even in his brief encounters, as completely unqualified to
maintain discipline or structure over an educational institution such as this one, much less over a
Ward like Shadow Stalker. Well, if what he had pieced together over this fiasco was any indicator,
his original assessment had been laughably generous. He spotted her over by the news van, giving an
obviously prolonged interview to the press, as the saying went, before the bodies had even cooled--
another damning black mark against her. He strode over, the butt of his halberd striking the pavement
with every step so hard it should have struck sparks.

“Yes, the Protectorate responded immediately,” Principal Blackwell was saying. “The girl has been a
problem for the school in the past, but we of course never suspected--”

A steel-gauntleted hand clapped down over the microphone. “Any and all information on this matter
is under PRT jurisdiction,” he said. “Further inquiries will be addressed in a prepared press release.”
The cameraman and the hair-sprayed talking head both yelped in complaint. He ignored them and
pulled Principal Blackwell away by her skinny arm.

“What is the meaning of this--” she yipped.

“I would like to know, Principal Blackwell, why you have not complied with PRT or Protectorate
procedures like you agreed to.” Armsmaster’s voice was low and dangerous.

“Now what do you--”

“You were supposed to keep a tight rein on Sophia Hess while she was under your supervision,” he
said, his voice clipped. “You were supposed to immediately report any disciplinary problems-- any
of them!-- to Director Piggot or myself. Yet I have just uncovered evidence of what had to be the
culmination of a year long campaign of sadistic bullying by her and her two underlings against
another of your students; one severe and traumatic enough to induce a TRIGGER EVENT.” His
temper was growing so hot that the biofeedback readings were making the servo motors in his suit
whine.

“And to cap it all off I find you out here, talking with the press, disclosing information about a
metahuman incident involving those same students without our clearance. Principal Blackwell, you
are in a great deal of legal trouble of so many kinds and variations it will take a week just to write out
the list.”

Blackwell’s mouth flopped open and closed like that of a particularly unattractive fish. “Our legal
department will be in touch both with you and with the Hebert family. We will be requesting many
things, Principal Blackwell. Including all school records and files concerning all the parties involved, one GLOWING recommendation for transfer to Arcadia for one Miss Taylor Hebert, and your signature on a Non-Disclosure Agreement that will require you to fill out forms in triplicate before you pass so much as a FART, much less any information about what occurred today.

And for your own best interests, Principal Blackwell, I recommend you develop a sudden, fantastic case of amnesia concerning Taylor Hebert or anything to do with her. The only words that should cross your lips about her from here on out should be ‘Taylor Who?’

“Am I PERFECTLY CLEAR?”

Blackwell fishmouthed for a few more seconds. “...Yes?” she squeaked.

“Very good.” He started to stalk away, when yet another microphone and camera lens appeared in his path. Another blow-dried talking monkey, this one possibly male, beamed in his face. “Armsmaster, we just wanted to congratulate you and your fellow Protectorate members for swiftly bringing an end to this terroristic attack against one of our schools,” he said, his teeth gleaming. “Can you tell us anything about the events that led to this terrible rampage against innocent children?”

Armsmaster looked over his head at the teeming crowd of students. He spotted Merchants, Neonazis, Azian Bad Boys, and other gang colors scattered among them…. But that wasn’t so much to the point as the expressions he saw on all their faces. Whether they were jocks, preps, punks or gangers, it was the same; apathetic boredom, morbid anticipation, ghoulish eagerness-- all of them waiting for a little blood or mayhem, all of them waiting to catch a little bit of the spectacle of someone else’s life coming apart at the seams.

He felt a vein twitch in his eyelid. Wordlessly, he activated the Crowd Addressing System in his armor, amplifying is voice enough to be heard by the entire mob. “Yes. I have found evidence that this incident was caused by a months-long campaign of sadistic and cowardly bullying against a student, one of such breathtaking cruelty and viciousness that it caused the innocent victim to go into a power-triggering emotional breakdown. Furthermore it was committed by three of the most popular students in this student body for no better reason than their own petty amusement.” Out of the corner of his eye he saw a seriously bedraggled and garbage-spattered Shadow Stalker being hustled into another PRT vehicle and felt a moment of satisfaction. “It is also clear from what we have already learned that this campaign of bullying was made astronomically worse by the cooperation, both passive and active, covert and overt, implicit and explicit, of the COWARDLY and GUTLESS student body and school staff, who witnessed this CRIMINAL AND INHUMAN ABUSE and did NOTHING AT ALL to intervene. Many of them even contributed or participated...and noone, absolutely noone, tried to help the victim.” several of the teachers and students gaped in outrage, more than one cringed in guilt. “So I would have to say that it is my professional opinion that this entire school is full of nothing but WORTHLESS LITTLE SHITS.”

“Thank you and good day.” He roughly shouldered the flabbergasted reporter aside.

It was probably only his imagination that he heard several students on the fringes of the crowd applauding as he climbed inside the PRT transport.

He sat down across from Miss Militia, who was still cradling a towel swaddled Taylor in her lap. The patriot-themed hero’s eyebrows had nearly climbed past her hairline. “May I ask where that all came from?” she asked in a mild tone.
Armsmaster stared off at nothing in particular. “You are aware of some of the things they speculate about me on ParaHumans Online?” he said. “Autistic? Asperger’s Syndrome? That sort of thing?”

“Er, yes?”

His face, what one could see of it, was impassive. “How well do you think the public school system, or the children in it, treated autistic-spectrum children twenty to thirty years ago?”

The back of the transport was silent for a moment. “So what now?” Taylor said.

“We contact your parents or guardian…” Miss Militia said.

“Father,” Taylor said. “My mother, she-- it’s just me and my Father,” she corrected herself.

“We contact your Father, and have him come out to the PRT building where we discuss your membership in the Wards.”

Taylor’s ears pricked up (Miss Militia barely restrained herself from squeeing at the adorable. It would have been terrible for her image.) “Really? You want me in the Wards? Even after all this?”

Miss Militia’s eyes crinkled in a smile. “Like I said, we’ve seen a lot worse than this.” Taylor’s muzzle wrinkled as she considered the track record of a certain other Ward in the next vehicle; Miss Militia wasn’t kidding.

“It’s sort of inevitable isn’t it,” Taylor said.

“It is most likely the best place for you,” Armsmaster said matter-of-factly. “With your unique circumstances and abilities, you are going to have some equally unique necessities. The PRT and the Protectorate are the best equipped to provide those.”

Taylor nodded glumly. “Something tells me a secret identity’s not exactly in the offing, is it?”

Miss Militia smothered a snicker. “Probably not. I think you’ll still need a cape name though. Taylor’s a nice name, but I don’t think ‘Taylor the Unicorn’ has quite the right pizzazz.”

Taylor made a noncommittal noise, but it was clear she agreed.

Armsmaster glanced down. “Hmm.. interesting.”

Taylor saw where he was looking. “Do you mind not staring at my butt, sir?” she said.

“What? Oh, hm, sorry,” he said, hastily averting his eyes and sitting stiffly. “I was just noting your odd markings… did you have tattoos before your transformation?”

“What? No!” Taylor protested. She craned her neck to peer at her own uncovered haunch. “What, what is that?”

Miss Militia poked at the mark. “It’s a ladybird,” she said with a smile in her voice.

“Hey!” Taylor protested. “… No, that’s not what I meant, I meant how…” she gave up on that line of discussion. "Anyway that’s a ladybug...”

“You would be amazed at some of the strange symbols and markings that capes spontaneously produce,” Miss Militia said. "I've seen capes that had complex mandalas appear on their skin, or paragraphs out of books they had read. And that's what some people call ladybugs,” she added. “Ladybird.”
Taylor seemed to consider. “Ladybird, huh?… A good a name as any.” She rolled the name around in her mouth for the feel. “Yeah.”

“Ladybird.”
“Please, I just want to see my daughter,” Danny Hebert said, alternating between pleading and threatening. “Let me see my daughter!!”

“We will shortly sir,” Battery said patiently. “But there are some things you have to understand about your daughter’s condition--”

“Condition? I wasn’t told anything about a condition!” They were on the hospital floor of the Rig. Danny looked about frantically and saw a glassed-in room off to the side that seemed suspiciously active. “Is that where you’re keeping her?” he pointed. “Get out of my way!” He lunged past the protesting heroine and marched for the room.

Danny opened the door.

Inside a small mob of medical professionals and technicians were gathered around an examination table. Sitting on the examination table was an adorable little lavender unicorn with a curly black mane and tail and a ladybug tattoo on its hip. They all looked up to see who had come in and stared.

“Hi Daddy,” the little unicorn said.

Danny closed the door.

Several long, unnervingly quiet moments passed. Battery walked over and stood next to him.

“Okay….” Danny Hebert said, his voice calm as oceans. “I’m listening.”

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“Here comes Shadow Stalker. She’s hopping along, still pulling on parts of her costume, guess she’s in a hurry-- she’s firing back down the hallway as she rounds the corner-- are those broadheads?? Naughty, Naughty, Shadow Stalker, you know you’re not allowed those… and heeeere comes the unicorn! Woops, looks like little hoofies aren’t good for traction on tile, she just slid past the intersection but she’s a game one and she’s coming round the corner--- whoa, look at those eyes, she is out for BLOOD--”

Aegis groaned and palmed his temples. Of all things, giving Clock Blocker console duty as punishment for his past infractions was going to go down as the worst mistake of Aegis’ short career as leader of the Wards. He had possibly resorted to it one too many times in a failed attempt to simmer down the overly exuberant Ward, and Clockblocker had sworn that someday Aegis would regret it.

Well, he was right.

“And we switch now to footage from the cafeteria… Holy crap are those exploding crossbow bolts? Why yes they are-- it’s double secret probation for you, Stalky-- too bad it seems our friend the unicorn has some sort of forcefield. Holy cow look at those tables fly--”
In retrospect, Aegis couldn’t think of a worse mistake than giving a boy whose down-time hobby was editing together comedy videos for Youtube access the PRT Console system. During the Trigger Event Incident earlier today, he had managed to tap into the Winslow security camera system--- he suspected hacking help from Kid Win-- set up a laptop to record the footage, and had in a matter of a couple hours spliced together a highlight reel of Shadow Stalker’s disastrous battle with the new Cape, which he was now showing on his laptop to anyone who would watch. The footage was silent and in black and white (Winslow High was, in addition to being a terrible school, miserably cheap), and Clockblocker was narrating the onscreen action with relish.

Aegis suspected him of planning to add silent movie sound effects later. Possibly Yakkity Sax.

“Oh, oh, oh, she’s shooting out that glowing aura and it’s got Shadow Stalker by the leg! Ohhhh, slammed into the wall! And now the other wall! And the ceiling! And the floor! Ceiling! Floor! Wall again! And the floor! She’s gonna feel that in the morning all next week, folks--”

Thankfully, Aegis knew, the Triggered student hadn’t used nearly the force that it sounded like. Still, Shadow Stalker had bruises on top of her bruises, for sure...

“And she spots the trashcan by the wall… she shoots, she SCORES! Dun, duh duh dunt, DUN, duh duh dunt-- And that’s game, folks! Score: cute little unicorn, TWO, Shadow Stalker, NOTHIIING!”

The current captive audience was Kid Win and Browbeat. Clockblocker was sitting in the common room sofa with the laptop in his lap while the other two watched the video over his shoulder. Browbeat was leaning on the back of the sofa trying not to laugh; Kid Win was completely collapsed over it, by all appearances dying from lack of oxygen due to laughing so hard. “You do realize that if that video gets out on the internet I’ll have to kill you myself,” Aegis said to Clockblocker. “Otherwise Piggot will kill ALL of us and hang our bodies from the ramparts as a warning.”

“We have ramparts?” Clockblocker said, amused.

“She’ll build ‘em.”

“Not likely,” Kid Win snorted between fits of giggles. “Piggy’s already too busy trying to decide who to strangle first: Shadow Stalker for her screwup, or Armsmaster for his.”

“Yeah, between the parole violation, the bullying scandal, the Trigger Event, and Armsmaster’s little public op-ed, everybody in the tri-state area wants a strip of her hide. She’s gotta be tearing her hair out! The rest of us were good little boys and girls-- it’ll probably be days before she even remembers we exist.” Clockblocker chuckled and hit replay.

“Your highly irrational optimism is refreshing,” Aegis said. “I can’t believe you of all people have forgotten the Two Rules of Crap.”


Clockblocker’s smirk (his full-face visor was up) turned rueful. “You’re new, so you’re forgiven for not knowing the Two Rules of Crap in the Wards. One: When the stuff hits the fan, it never spreads evenly. Two: No matter how it spreads it always runs downhill.” He sighed. “Still, a guy could hope...”

“So don’t go borrowing trouble we don’t need,” Aegis suggested. “Keep that video off the web.”

“You ought to anyway,” Browbeat added, a look of empathy crossing his face. “The new kid is probably still pretty fragile. She don’t need to see that right now.”
Clockblocker’s smile vanished. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said, shutting down the app and closing the laptop. “I wasn’t going to put it online anyway, but-- yeah.” There was one thing you just didn’t jerk people around about when you were a cape: Trigger events. “So how long till we meet the new kid?”

“They said Saturday at the earliest,” Aegis said. “Her mutation is pretty extreme, so it’ll take them a while to clear her medically. The medics and the power wonks are going over her with every scanner and probe they got.”

Kid Win winced. “Better her than us.”

“I heard they were even asking Panacea to come in and take a look,” Browbeat threw in.

Clockblocker froze, so suddenly Aegis almost thought he’d used his power on himself. A slow grin spread across his face. “So after running the gauntlet she’s going to get an official introduction to us this weekend?” he said.

“That’s the plan,” Aegis said.

Clockblocker’s smile grew to unsettling proportions. “And that’s when Vista gets back from her family trip, right?”

“Yes, she… oh boy.”

“Oh man. This is gonna be good…”

Taylor sat patiently as the technicians and doctors and other PRT staff poked, prodded, and at one point waved booping rods over her. Her father sat next to the examining table, his hand on her withers; men armed with crowbars couldn’t have pried him away. It warmed her heart to know how devoted he was to her… even if he was looking a little poleaxed at the moment. At the moment there was a nurse with a clipboard speaking to them. “…With all that we’ve done so far, we’ve gotten the outlines sketched down of your daughter’s new physiology,” she was saying, “But with your permission, we’ve asked as a special favor for Panacea to come in and take a look.”

“Panacea?” that seemed to pull her father out of whatever world his mind was wandering in. “But I thought she was a healer. How exactly…”

“Panacea’s abilities give her an innate understanding of a person’s biology and biochemistry better than our best scientists and doctors,” the nurse said. “She’ll be able to spot things we never could, give us a general idea of your physical development, any possible medical concerns—”

Taylor’s stomach suddenly growled, loud enough to hear. She blushed brightly enough to see right through the fur on her face. “Dietary needs?” she said meekly.

The nurse laughed. “It has been a long day, hasn’t it. Didn’t they give you anything to eat?”

“I had a plain salad about an hour ago.” Taylor said. “It wasn’t much but it seemed safest.”

“Ah.” The nurse nodded, making a note. “Well, once Panacea looks you over, checks for any food
allergies or the like, we can give you the all-clear for a proper meal. So… with your permission?”

Danny nodded. The nurse smiled and hustled over to the door. She leaned out and spoke to someone; a moment later the robed figure of the world’s most famous healer walked in. She was startlingly young; she couldn’t have been any older than Taylor herself. She had dark brown, curly hair that peeked out from under the hood of her white robes, and a scattering of freckles across her face, and despite the professional look of her uniform she looked terribly worn out, with a listless expression and heavy circles under her eyes. She slouched into the room, barely lifting her head. “Okay, I understand you have a new cape here, a case fuuuuu…” her sleepy eyes went wide as they locked onto the miniature lavender unicorn sitting in the center of the room.

“….Yes?” Danny said innocently, gently patting his pony daughter on her shoulder. “Something the matter?”

Taylor scowled up at him. “Daddee…” she hissed, poking him in the ribs with a hoof. “Stop winding up the world-famous cape healer.” She rolled her eyes. Dad Humor. Honestly…

Panacea jumped. “It talks!” she squeaked.

Taylor’s eyebrows tabled. “Yes, it talks,” she said sarcastically. “It also hears.” It had been a long day, and she was getting a little grumpy.

“Yes, ahem.” The lead doctor butted in. “This is Taylor Hebert, age fifteen, she just triggered and--”

“She’s the trigger? A-are you sure a biotinker didn’t make her?” Panacea stalked forward like a cat who’d just seen its first laser dot. She reached out a hand to touch Taylor’s face.

“Hey!” Taylor said, pulling back.

Danny gently, but firmly grabbed the girl’s wrist. “Yes, she’s my daughter,” he said with patient amusement. “The only biotinkering that went into making her involved me and my wife, thank you very much.”

“Daaad!!” Taylor said, mortified.

Taylor’s wasn’t the only face flushing dark. Panacea backed up, hands to her mouth and her cheeks red. “Oh, I-- I’m so sorry-- I apologize, I don’t know what-- It’s just--”

“It’s just you don’t get too many breaks from patching up the same old breaks, bumps and bruises,” Danny said knowingly. “Or to use your power on anything unique or new. And,” he chuckled and looked at his daughter, “This is certainly unique and new.”

Panacea gave him a fleeting smile. “Yes, that’s… true. I’m sorry about that. If I may…?” she asked Taylor, holding out her hand.

“Go ahead,” Taylor said. She leaned her head forward till Panacea’s palm was resting on her forehead, just under her horn. The healer’s eyes fluttered shut for a moment, then back open. “Oh, wow,” she breathed.

“What??” Taylor asked in alarm.

“Your physiology it-- it’s incredible!” Panacea stammered. “It’s perfectly orchestrated to gather, generate, and transmit… some sort of energy, I can’t say what--”

“That glowing aura she generates when she uses her telekinesis,” one of the techs standing by said.
“It’s giving our propeller-heads fits. The readings might as well say “Bingo Bango Bongo Boingo” for all the sense they make.”

“...Th-the keratin in your hooves, horn, mane, and tail all seem to conduct this energy too,” Panacea went on. “Reactive to it--”

“That would explain why her hair frizzed when one of the techs startled her,” someone muttered.

“Oh, your horn is alive, by the way,” Panacea told Taylor. “It has a nerve fiber in the base and a live root, and apparently grows like a rhino horn or a rodent tooth... slowly, but you may need to file it smooth every few months or so.”

“Important grooming tip, thanks,” Taylor muttered.

“Reproductive cycles are… different,” Panacea said, her brows furrowing as she stared at nothing. “Probably an eleven month pregnancy cycle--”

“NOT going to be an issue,” Taylor said.

“Normal for a horse, though,” someone else said.

“But a monthly waxing and waning fertility cycle--and no menses. Looks like you got spared your monthly visit from Aunt Flo, you lucky little stinker,” Panacea said.

“Nice to know but could we PLEASE move on from my ‘reproductive issues?’” Taylor said on a rising note. “What about dietary? Is chocolate poisonous to me now? Am I going to have to live on grass now or oats or something?”

“Actually… oh good grief…”

“Waaaahahaha?” Taylor said. Would she ever stop DOING that?

“Well, you don’t have to worry about chocolate,” Panacea said. It was hard to tell whether she was more amused or annoyed. “Your body can easily handle the theobromides and other toxins that give dogs and cats so much trouble. In fact it can handle toxins way better than a baseline human… or a baseline horse. You not only COULD eat grass and like it, you could nosh down on plants that would kill a horse-- or a human.”

“Really,” Taylor said, impressed.

“What about meat?” Danny asked.

“You and your barbecues...” Taylor said.

Panacea huffed. “Yesss, she can still eat meat and dairy,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “For that matter, normal horses can eat meat too... it takes some time to adjust to it but they can. Her? She could sit down right now and eat a Fugly Bob’s Burger without a hitch.”

“So what’s the catch?” Taylor said.

“What catch?”

“You said ‘oh good grief’ earlier… that no sound good to me.”

Panacea snorted. “It’s just that on top of all the above, your metabolism, your lipid storage and your insulin cycle are practically bulletproof. They can handle mass loads of starches, sugars, and
carbohydrates-- in fact they're turbocharged to run on ridiculous excesses and LIKE it.” She bent down to look the unicorn in the eye. “In layman’s terms you’re custom-built to snarf chocolate cake and ice cream sundaes like they’re going out of style.” She hmmmed. “Even your saliva and tooth enamel are more resistant to decay…”

“Oh, now I’m starting to hate her,” the nurse with the digital clipboard joked. “Someone up there must like you, kid.”

“Someone up there must think it’s adorable to have a little purple unicorn that can practically live on cookies and cake,” Taylor corrected her wryly.

“Part of it might be you have to burn a lot of calories to make that… glowy aura thing you did,” Danny pointed out.

“In part, yeah,” Panacea agreed. “Anyway, your growth cycle… hmh?” she paused, looking puzzled. “Oh… kay… your maturation is about the same as a human-- about 12 to 13 years to the start of puberty, full maturation by about 25… slightly longer lifespan, possibly close to 120 to 150 years--”

“Whoa, that’s good!” Taylor said.

“But… I can’t quite put it in words--” Panacea stopped and took a breath. “Okay, it’s… really fuzzy down past a certain point. But the impression that I get is that your ‘species,’ for lack of a better term, has three major possible forms. And that during the first month or so of your gestation-- that is, if you had actually had a gestation-- your form could have gone one of those three possible ways. The form of a unicorn is only one of them.”

“Really?? Then what are the other two?” the lead physician asked.

Panacea rubbed her forehead, vexed. “How would I know?” she said. “Reading a DNA strand to know how it MIGHT have developed is like-- like looking at part of a blueprint for a half finished house that got changed again and again before construction started. Short of cloning her and seeing what the clone grew into-- assuming we could even figure out what the trigger is to select the form-- we can’t tell.

“The real kicker though is that there’s coding here for a-- a conditional metamorphosis.”

Taylors’ eyes went even larger, and Danny’s body went stiff with sudden tension. “You mean I’m going to change AGAIN?” Taylor cried out in dismay.

“NO! No, no no,” Panacea said, shaking her head firmly. Both father and daughter relaxed, but only slightly. “Your physiology is perfectly stable. What you see is what you get.” Danny and Taylor sighed in relief. “But there’s… something here, a sort of switch-- almost a … promise of potential. one that will only activate under extreme duress or environmental conditions. Perhaps a-- larger form? No, not quite--” she sounded frustrated. She squinted at Taylor’s head under her hand as if the answers were written in a too-small font on the unicorn’s brow.

“So okay, I’m some sort of Pokemon or something?” Taylor said, cocking an eyebrow. “I’m going to ‘digivolve’ or whatever? Or possibly could?”

“It’s… not very likely? The sequencing sort of implies one hell of an environmental stressor--- a drastic change-- is needed to cause the paradigm shift...I’m sorry, my power usually isn’t this cryptic,” Panacea complained. “I haven’t hit a no-sell like this since they had me look at Weld-- and he’s made of living metal!”
“It’s okay,” Taylor said sympathetically. The healer looked like she was getting a terrible headache from trying. “You’ve already told us a lot of important stuff we really needed to know.” Her stomach suddenly growled again, making her blush madly. “Speaking of which--”

The techs and physicians all chuckled. “Okay, I think that’s lunch,” the lead said. “Or dinner, considering the time. If you like,” he said to Danny and Taylor, “the Rig has a pretty decent cafeteria. I’m pretty sure they’ll spring for the bill.”

Danny gave him a half-smile. “Sounds good. Sounds good Taylor?”

“Definitely,” Taylor said with relief. She’d been starving for ages, it felt like! She looked up at the healer. “Care to join us?”

Panacea blinked. “I… well yes. Something to eat does sound good right about now. Thank you.” She smiled briefly, as if it pained her. “Call me Amy, by the way.”

Taylor held out a hoof. “Taylor.” Amy shook it, this time with a sincere smile.

The staff of the PRT working out on the Rig were of the highest calibre, and of the highest professional standards. They worked with masked heroes who trusted them implicitly with their anonymity. Discretion was their byword and their personal code.

So naturally the photos of an adorable little lavender unicorn sitting in the Rig cafeteria, eating her way through an enormous hamburger and fry platter and a sundae almost as big as herself, hit the internet within a matter of minutes.

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Emily Piggot, director of the Brockton Bay PRT, a jowly woman with a severe haircut and an even more severe scowl etched permanently on her face, sat behind her desk and glowered like a basilisk at the two leaders of the Brockton Bay Protectorate. She was not amused. She was never amused. But current events had her less amused than ever before. Her current level of amusement could be annotated in negative numbers. “So would either of you care to explain to me,” she said in the dulcet tones of someone who had spent the past 24 hours chewing nails and tearing hair, “why our illustrious Armsmaster decided to do an impromptu on-air interview and turn our intercession in a Trigger Event, something which should have been an easy PR coup for us, into a screaming public relations disaster?”

Miss Militia was seated casually across the desk from her. Armsmaster, in a none-too-subtle show of defiance, had refused a seat and was standing, staring out the picture window, sunlight gleaming off his blue and silver armor. “I’m not retracting my statement,” he said without looking at her.

“You will if I say you do,” Piggot said, her temper flaring. “Even if I have to stand behind you, mimic your voice and move your lips with my finger.” She rapped on the desk with her knuckles absentely. “Armsmaster, you stood on live TV and informed the people of Brockton Bay that their darling, angel children were all, quote ‘worthless little shits.’ Tell me that isn’t going to bite us in the arse.”
“That is a gross distortion of my words,” Armsmaster said, his lips a thin line.

“Which is exactly what they’ll do with those words-- are already doing with those words!” Piggot leaned back in her seat, grimacing as her ruined kidneys twinged.

“And they were exactly what needed to be said,” Miss Militia said.

Piggot’s eyebrows raised. “And how do you figure that?”

“Director, I don’t expect someone who is never in the field to be aware of things as we are,” the patriot-themed cape began. Piggot bristled at the reminder of her permanent state as a PRT desk jockey, but held her tongue and let her continue. “But you read the dossier, you saw the photographs and the footage. What was done to Taylor Hebert by those girls-- by the entire school, staff included, was… obscene. And what’s more horrible is that this event was actually the culmination of a year-long campaign of cruelty--”

“Aided and abetted by the school administration’s willful apathy,” Armsmaster bit out. Piggot’s eyebrows rose further. She’d rarely seen Armsmaster so agitated about something.

“It not only needed to be said to the little assholes,” Miss Militia added with a sardonic tone to her voice, “It was in our best interests to express outrage and disgust at the whole thing, and as bluntly as possible.” Her brows furrowed. “Because, in case you forgot, Director, we are at least partially complicit in the whole affair. We were the ones who placed a highly questionable probationary Ward in that school. We were the ones the school staff thought they were pandering to when they hushed up the activities of Sophia Hess and her friends. And after today’s little media circus, to say nothing of the few hundred cell phone videos that are going to hit the internet over the next few days, anyone with the IQ of a gerbil is going to figure out that Shadow Stalker, the Protectorate Ward, is also Sophia Hess-- the leader of the most notorious group of bullies since they dumped a bucket of pig’s blood from the gym rafters in Carrie.”

Piggot made a sound somewhere between a snarl and a groan and rubbed her temples. She was defeated and knew it. “Could you at least have found a more diplomatic way to distance us from that?” she almost pleaded. “Did you have to let ARMSMASTER speak to the Press unfiltered?”

“Honestly, not without sounding mealy-mouthed,” Miss Militia said. She refrained from pointing out she didn’t ‘allow’ Armsmaster to do anything. “Tell me, Director; would you expect him--” she jerked a thumb over her shoulder “--to be diplomatic?”

“No,” Piggot admitted bluntly. “I’d expect him to sound like he was reading off a teleprompter if he tried.” Armsmaster made a few grumbling noises himself at that.

“Neither would anyone else,” Miss Militia said. Her eyes crinkled slightly in amusement. “In fact it’s expected of him to be utterly tactless.”

“I’m right here, you know,” Armsmaster said.

“So basically it works out that what we needed to say got said, in the way it needed to be said, by the one person who could get away with saying it.” Miss Militia’s amusement faded. “And within earshot of the one person we sincerely needed to hear it most: Taylor herself.”

Something in the heroine’s voice caught Piggot’s attention. “And why do you think it’s so important that the PRT curry favor with a talking plush toy?” she asked.

Armsmaster turned from the window and walked to her desk. He pulled two glass jars from a compartment on his belt and set them on her desk blotter. One contained a handful of red and white
flower petals. The other had holes crudely punched in the lid, and held a vividly colored, living butterfly. “These are rose petals,” he said, tapping one lid, then the other. “and this is a butterfly; a Holly Blue, by species.”

“And?”

“This morning they were a rotting tampon and a cockroach, respectively,” he said. “I can show you helmet cam footage of the precise moment of their metamorphosis.”

“When I was tending to Taylor during her emotional breakdown, she emitted a pulse of that strange energy of hers,” Miss Militia said. “The wave encompassed the entire school. We have techs going over the building with a fine toothed comb, but so far it seems all that was metamorphosed was the bugs and filth from the locker, including the remnant clinging to her own skin.” She held up an evidence bag with a few flower petals inside. “Daisies and carnations, in this case.”

“I thought you said she was a telekinetic!” Piggot sputtered in alarm. “She’s capable of transmutation, too?” She refused to say biokinesis. It was too alarming to even think on. Someone with the power to transmogrify things at range, without even line of sight, over an unknown area... the implications were frightening beyond measure.

“And who knows what else,” Armsmaster added. “The scans so far indicate this energy field of hers is... exotic beyond imagining.”

“She knows Sophia is Shadow Stalker,” Armsmaster went on. “She could hardly not figure it out, seeing as she went from being stuffed in a locker by her to thrashing her up one end of the school and down the other. It’s in our favor that we were quick to respond and that we moved to help her; that means she saw us as on her side right from the beginning. And right now she’s probably still a little shell shocked from all that’s happened to her. But the instant things settle down and she has time to think things over, she’ll start making connections.

“If she decides we’re still on her side, we’ll get a new and fantastically powerful member of the Wards. If she decides that the past two years of suffering were our fault, then the explosion we saw at Winslow could be small potatoes.”

“To say nothing of what her father could do to us,” Miss Militia couldn’t help adding, even as Piggot groaned and covered her face with her hands. “In case you missed it, Danny Hebert is in charge of the Dockworker’s Union, and a political gadfly in his own right. If he gets it in his head, he could raise a public stink like nothing you’ve ever seen.

“‘Protectorate covers up Ward criminal behavior,’” she said, making quote marks in the air as if reading a headline. “‘The big bad heartless PRT verses the poor little cute crying unicorn girl.’ How bad an aneurysm would Glenn Chambers have, do you think?”

“And what do you recommend?” Piggot hissed, sourly admitting defeat.

“How about the novel approach of ‘the truth’?” Miss Militia said cynically. “Look, the only way we can do it is if we just do it straight. Tell everything. All at once. Like ripping off a bandaid. We let the Heberts know everything, make it clear that we had a failure in our chain of command...”

“No fooling,” Piggot said dryly. “I know a certain Ward handler who’s getting thrown under the bus.”

“We come down on Shadow Stalker with both feet,” Armsmaster added. “No shipping her off to another district with a name change, no quiet shuffling away. Her family goes under witness
protection and she goes straight to Juvenile Hall.”

“Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars,” Miss Militia said smugly.

“The Chief Director may give us trouble on that,” Piggot said. “The whole reason we gave Shadow Stalker probationary status was because she insisted the girl’s abilities were just too useful.”

“They’re still useful,” Armsmaster said curtly. “But she’ll keep in the Cooler just as well as anywhere else.”

Piggot nodded and gave a grimace that could almost pass for a smile. “Fair enough.”

“And we make a point of cutting a sweetheart deal with the Heberts,” Miss Militia added. “Compensation for our part in her pain and suffering. Even if it’s a token gesture, it’s still a gesture, and should be made.

“The upper management will quibble over that,” Armsmaster said. “Say that it’s too self-incriminating, or the like. Make it a few extra pluses on her eventual contract with the Wards; extra pay or benefits-- say that it’s due to her unique physical needs, her inability to maintain a secret identity, etc.”

Piggot nodded slowly. “We already do something like that for the few Case 53s we have on board,” she said. “That will at least pass muster...” She sighed and shook her head. “I can’t find any reason not to do it the way you suggest. I’m just not looking forward to the ruckus-- or the red tape-- that’s going to cut loose when we do.” Her expression soured.

“Look on the bright side, Director,” Miss Militia said, her eyes crinkling again. “Once she signs up we are going to make a MINT on merchandising.”
Ladybird, Chapter 3

“And if you will sign here, and here,” the PRT office worker said. Danny carefully signed, then slid the paper sideways to his daughter, who picked up the pen with her hoof and signed with a cheerful flourish--

She picked up the pen in her hoof--

She picked up the pen--

In her hoof--

Taylor “Ladybird” Hebert sat there staring at her hoof, the pen clinging to the frog. “Wait. What?” She held it over the desk and dropped it. Then she picked it up again.

Danny and the desk lady blinked. “How...”

“Oh, right,” Taylor said suddenly. “Pan-- I mean Amy-- did say that my hooves conducted my power, too. I guess that gives me, er, grippy hooves?”

“Oh. Okay. I guess?” Danny scratched his head. “Still looks a bit odd.”

The desk lady cleared her throat. “Well, anyway. Let me be the first to say congratulations, and welcome to the Brockton Bay Wards…. Ladybird.”

“Why thank you very much,” Taylor… Ladybird… said with a smirk. She stood on the seat of her chair and gave a little pony-style curtsey. Danny and the secretary chuckled and applauded. “So what next?”

“I’m afraid Mr. Hebert can’t accompany you beyond this point,” the lady behind the desk said, getting to her feet. “We’ll be dealing with a lot of internal security matters, not the least of which is meeting your new teammates unmasked.”

“Ah, I understand,” Danny said with a weak smile. “And I’ve been here too long as it is. The Docks won’t run themselves forever.”

Taylor put a hoof on his leg. “I’ll be fine, Daddy,” she said, giving him her best brave-girl smile. “Besides I’ve got--”

“Call me Madelyne,” the office worker said.

“I’ve got Madelyne to look after me, right? Besides. I’m gonna be a superhero. I can handle whatever comes next.”

Danny crouched down and gave his transformed daughter a long hug. She threw a hoof over his shoulder and hugged him back. “You be good, Little Owl,” he said in her ear.

“I will...”

He patted her hair a couple of times. “Hmmm. Soft.”

“Daaad…!”
Danny chuckled. “Hey, couldn’t help it.” He got up to go. “I’ll be back tomorrow evening.”

“Bye..” Taylor followed him with her eyes as he walked out the door and down the hall— quickly, and without looking back. Just like he did on my first day of Kindergarten, she remembered. She turned to Madelyne. “So… what next?”

“Next, I believe, you get to go over to the PRT and meet your new teammates,” Madelyne said over her shoulder as she finished running the papers through the computer scanner. She paced off down the hall, Taylor trotting in her wake. “You’ll love them, they’re a good bunch of kids… er, well…”

“We know about Shadow Stalker,” Taylor said, a trifle grimly. “We also know she’s not a problem anymore.” It had been two days of exams, tests, and paper-filling, but during that time they had kept informed. Director Piggot was sending Sophia Hess, aka Shadow Stalker, on her way to a stay in Juvie, and she wasn’t taking the slow boat to China about it either. They had met very briefly with the woman; she was an intimidating figure to say the least. But she had made it clear that she was solidly on Taylor’s side in this mess, which was a lifetime more than could be said for Principal Blackwood back in Winslow. “All the same,” she went on. “off the record… is there anyone I should look out for?”

The secretary hesitated. She made a point looking around the hallway before answering. She leaned over the desk in a conspiratorial fashion. “Truthfully—Armsmaster can be a bit stiff. And Director Piggot can be a real hardcase… but so long as you stick to the rules and don’t go out of your way to tick them off, and don’t waste their time, they’re no problem. The only one I’d really worry about is Director Calvert.”

“What about him?” Taylor asked.

“Nothing in particular,” the woman said, biting her lip. “Mind, it’s only a personal impression. But he gives off this...oily air. Sleazy. Like you want to wash your hand after shaking his…That's just a woman's intuition speaking. That he's the sort of man who’s used to getting his way, and not too particular about how he gets it.” She shrugged it off. “Not that it should matter much, he’s not even close to your chain of command, so you should rarely even see him, much less have to worry about him.”

Taylor nodded in relief. After all that had happened, she really didn’t need to go through a round of inter-office drama. “Um, anything else.”

The secretary half-grinned, half-winced. “Well, there is Glenn Chambers. He’s the head of the Public Relations department and he…”

“Wait. Is he the one responsible for Glamour Girl out in Vegas having to wear gold lame’ and high-heel platforms into combat?” Taylor said with fatalistic apprehension.

The secretary nodded. “He’s… yeah. I haven’t heard a hero or heroine yet who hasn’t complained at the top of their lungs about him.” She looked down at Taylor and sighed. “At least he can’t jerk you around about your costume design, sweetie…”

Taylor frowned. “My costume design?”

“Well, you’re…” the secretary waved her hand up and down, indicating Taylor in the altogether.

Taylor’s enormous eyes went even rounder. Her pupils turned to pinpricks.

“OHSWEETMERCIFULCRAP I'M NAKED!!!”
The next few minutes found a small enclave gathered around the nearest bathroom door. “Ladybird, please come back out,” Madelyne said patiently to the door. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“You mean besides spending the last several days running around completely starkers?” the door shouted back.

“Well she has a layer of fur-- ouch!”

One of the orderlies had spoken up; Madelyne had jabbed him with her pen. “Not helping,” she said. “Really, Ladybird, you’re making a big deal out of it. Nobody saw anything.”

“That’s not the point!”

“Actually nobody could see anything,” the lead powers researcher said, not looking up from his datapad. The others stared at him. He noticed the looks. “What? Didn’t you notice?”

“Notice what?” Taylor said from inside the bathroom. Ponies apparently had very good hearing.

The lead powers researcher leaned in toward the door. “Ladybird, look at yourself in the mirror,” he said. He had the air of someone who knew something nobody else had noticed.

There was a moment of silence. “Doctor Micheals,” Taylor said with exaggerated patience, “Do you know where the mirrors are usually located in a bathroom?”

“Er, above the sink?”

“And how tall am I, again?”

“She’s never seen herself in a mirror yet? I hope she washes her hooves after she-- Ow! Quit it.” Madelyne had stabbed the orderly again.

“Oh, er, right. Someone go fetch a full-length mirror? There has to be one around here somewhere, capes are all clothes-horses...” The orderly hustled off. Possibly for a mirror, possibly to escape Madelyne’s pen. He returned with a tall dressing room mirror in tow. “Okay, Ladybird? Taylor? If you’ll just come out for a moment… I promise, there’s nobody here but us medical types. And Madelyne of course, but you know her.”

The door creaked open and a small lavender unicorn hustled out, cringing, her tail tucked underneath her. “Okay, take a look at yourself,” Doctor Micheals instructed. The orderly set the mirror on the floor and held it up. Sulking and fussing, Taylor faced the mirror. Her ears pricked up in surprise and her rump thumped on the floor. “Holy crap!”

“What?”

“I’m… cute!” Taylor said. “I mean, ridiculous cute. I want to give myself a teddy bear, a hug and a cookie!” She sounded as if she didn’t know whether to be horrified or not.

Dr. Micheals rubbed his finger fiercely over his mustache as he struggled not to laugh. “Well yes,
we’ve noticed. But notice anything else?” Taylor stopped staring at herself in the mirror to look at him. “Go on, stand up. Turn in a circle and look yourself over.”

Taylor obeyed. “….AAAH! I’m a kewpie doll!” She turned in a circle, then reared up on her haunches and looked down her belly. “Where’d everything… I mean everything was there the last time I went to the bathroom--” She realized what she was doing and fell down to the floor in a huddled crouch. She gave everyone a look. “Just a second. Iiii… gotta check something--” she backed into the bathroom and slammed the door.

“Wait. There everything… uh, I mean… okay, what the heck?”

“Remember what Panacea told you about conductive keratins?” Dr. Micheals said through the door. The door opened and Taylor stuck her head out. “Your fur is apparently projecting a, ahh, modesty-protecting mirage of sorts over your epidermis that camouflages certain areas of your body. Much like Narwhal does with her skin-tight layer of force fields.”

“So what you’re saying is that I’m basically dressed in unicorn pony magic?” Taylor said.

“Well, if saying it that way helps...” he shrugged expressively. “Yes, I suppose.”

Taylor sighed. At least she hadn’t been streaking everybody for the past two or three days. “Okay, but maybe it’s my imagination, but I’m starting to feel a draft in here,” she complained. She used her telekinesis to pull a towel from a nearby cart and threw it over herself like a shawl, so only her head and forehooves were exposed. “Could I please have something…?”

“Like what, a doggy sweater?… OW! Dangit already!”

Madelyne suddenly snapped her manicured fingers. “I know just the thing! Be right back!” She trotted off down the hall, her high heels clicking. Everyone stood around looking awkward for about ten minutes; then she came clickity-clacking back. She was holding something that looked a bit like a soft, off-white cloak… only it looked hand made, had a couple of buttons and a fringe, and seemed to be knitted or crocheted.

“What is it?” Taylor asked, cocking her head to one side.

Madelyne held it up. “It’s a shawl,” she said. “My mother made it. It’s not really my look, but it’s just the right size…” she knelt down, whipped off the towel Taylor had donned and threw the shawl over her. “see, we button it around the tail and down the back, and then we tied it off around the neck--perfect!” Madelyne regarded her handiwork. “Not half bad… at least it’ll do till the costume monkeys come up with something more suiting.

Taylor regarded herself in the mirror. It covered her up like one of those-- what were they anyway, those cover things race horses were put in off the track?-- but it draped on her a bit, coming down to her knees in the front and her hocks in the back. It almost looked like she was wearing a dress. A little-old-lady dress cut for miniature ponies, but still-- far better than nothing.

“How does it feel?”

“Better,” Taylor sighed. It did feel better to be clothed in some fashion. People got used to walking around in open-backed hospital gowns, she supposed; she could get used to this. “It’s comfortable anyway.”

“Excellent. Okay, I think we’ve kept the Wards waiting long enough…? We have to catch a chopper out to the PRT base; that’s where the Wards HQ is...
Life was suck, Missy Biron decided. Work was suck, mandatory vacation time was suck, EVERYTHING was suck. She slouched into the elevator and hit the button for the floor for the Wards quarters.

It was all Piggot’s fault, she decided. It was Missy’s father who’d gotten it in his head to be “impulsive,” rent an RV, and take the whole family to Disneyworrrrrld(blegh) over the Christmas Break on some sort of “fix the family” outing. But it was Piggot who had signed off on Missy’s leave from the Wards-- who had made it mandatory-- that she go on this horrible trip to Disneyworrrrrld(blegh) with her family. Had shot down every effort Missy had made to sign up for extra duties, extra patrols, Console Duty, ANYTHING--(where was an Endbringer attack when you needed it?) to justify not going along with this incredibly bad idea.

So Missy had gotten the excruciating pleasure of spending several days trapped in a cramped RV on a road trip to Florida and back with two alleged adults that couldn’t stand each other anymore and who were probably plotting right now how to murder each other with their souvenir Mickey Mouse ears.

Disneyworrrrrld(blegh) had been no better. The park had been crowded, Missy lost track of how many attractions were shut down for repairs thanks to some Tinker villain LOSER who had tried to hold the entire park hostage the week before by using his weird remote-control powers to sabotage one ride after another till they paid him off… the local Protectorate had caught the LOSER, but not before he’d ruined dozens of computerized rides and games… the rides that had still been running had made Missy nauseous, and her parents had spent the whole time either fighting with each other or complaining how much everything cost. And Vista had to force herself not to suplex some of the more annoying costumed characters.

And now she was back, feeling like something the cat dragged in and then threw back out, getting ready to meet the newest member of the Protectorate ENE Wards. Apparently about three days ago some oh-so-lucky kid had a trigger event at Winslow High, and for whatever reason she was being express-shipped straight into Ward membership. Hurray, a newbie. And one who was still probably a shaking mess from their trigger event.

She sighed and adjusted her visor. Yup. Another day of suck.

The elevator doors swooshed open. She looked around the enormous domed room that made up the hub of the Ward HQ. Yup, just like she left it. Everyone was gathered in the main break area it looked like.

Then she clapped eyes on what was sitting in the middle of the couch and felt the air whoosh out of her lungs. For the first time since joining the Wards her eyes were fixed on something other than Gallant. It was little, it was lavender purple, it had cute little hooves and big adorable eyes and tumbling black locks of mane and tail and a dinky spiral horn from its forehead and it was the most perfectly wonderful thing that Vista had ever SEEN--
Taylor sat on the couch and chattered amicably with the other Wards. Things were actually going well; after getting over the awkwardness of introductions and her own shyness… and the totally unique awkwardness for everyone of holding a conversation with a talking mythical beast… they all opened up. Snacks and soda had been broken out and something of a makeshift “welcome to the team” party had taken shape. Gallant and Aegis were rather polite and charming, Kid Win was energetic and friendly, Clockblocker had an eccentric sense of humor, Browbeat was bluff but soft-spoken… they all went out of their way to make the new member feel welcome.

Still, Taylor got the odd feeling that they were waiting-- some like Clockblocker, on pins and needles-- for something to happen.

There was a chime from the elevator and the whoosh of doors opening. Clockblocker broke off in the middle of his story (something about a nun and a penguin) and looked up. “Ah, there she is,” he said with a crap eating grin.

Taylor stared at him “What--”

“OMIGOSH OMIGOSH OMIGOSH OMIGOSH OH MY GODDNESS!”

WHUMP!

Without warning Taylor was hit amidships by a fast moving projectile. She got a brief impression of green cloth and blonde hair, and she suddenly had a twelve year old girl clinging to her like a limpet, seriously squeezing the stuffing out of her. “Ohmygosh she’s adorable ohgoshogosh a REAL LIVE UNICORN did some biotinkerma...makeherIcan’tbelievemeliveunicorn canwekeepher--”

“Uh,” Aegis waved his hand in the air helplessly. “Vista, this is Ladybird.”

The gleeful little girl looked up at him as she petted the lavender unicorn with one hand while nearly strangling her with the other arm. “oh is that her name? Is she our new mascot?”

“Um, actually, I’m you’re new teammate,” Taylor said.

“Ladybird,” Aegis said blithely. “Allow me to introduce Vista.”

The transformation of Vista’s face from childlike glee to horrified dismay was heartbreaking.

She was still sitting in the kitchen area a half hour later, back turned to the door. Taylor stuck her head in the doorway and sighed at the sight of the twelve year old Ward. She was hunched up on a kitchen chair, eating her way through a box of ginger cookies, sulking and miserable.

It was only she had bolted from the break room literally shrieking in embarrassment that the others had broken down and gave Taylor the full story. After they had stopped laughing (that idiot Clockblocker was still giggling over the photos he’d taken on his cellphone.)

Apparently Vista had triggered with her space-altering powers at something like the age of NINE, and had been a Ward ever since. She was consequently both the youngest member of the Wards and
the one with the most seniority. But since the PRT rules said that rank was by age... well, she’d spent the last four years being ordered around by capes with one-tenth her experience, then watching them graduate to full Protectorate status-- only to have a brand new, inexperienced cape come in and replace them as leader and start ordering her around as well.

On top of that apparently she had Triggered due to the fact that her parents were a pair of selfish, immature, overgrown children who were constantly fighting and perpetually on the fringe of divorce, and like most poor children put in that situation she’d taken it upon herself to somehow try and pull her broken family together.

Throw in a horrendous crush on Gallant on top of that, one that Vista thought nobody knew about but everybody did...

To say she was a bit precocious as a consequence was an understatement. Her frustrations had made her constantly obsessed with being thought of as “mature” (hence the breastplate on her armor that she kept trying to make a bit more “breast” than “plate”) and was constantly posturing like she was a thirty year old veteran of the wars. She hated being called little or cute, she hated having to wear the skirted costume that made her look like a little girl (she was allegedly plotting to someday poison Glenn Chambers’ egg McMuffin), and she absolutely hated being caught acting like a little girl.

The fact that she was a little girl had zero persuasive force with her.

Taylor clip-clopped a few steps into the kitchen. Vista obviously heard her. “Don’t look at me,” she muttered.

Taylor sighed. She’d already had her dignity upturned a half-dozen times this week; one more time wouldn’t hurt. At least for a good cause. She trotted over, sat down next to the stool, and leaned against the girl’s leg. “Hard day?” she said, looking up at her.

Vista nodded. Taylor could practically see the girl struggling with the urge to reach down and pet her. She decided to up the ante and rested her head across the girl’s lap, pushing the box of cookies aside. “Ear skritchies,” she commanded.

“Hey!” Vista protested, catching the cookie box.

“Hay is for dinner,” Taylor joked. "Ear skritchies now.” Vista looked conflicted, then gave in to the inevitable, digging her fingers carefully into the mane around her ears. Taylor smiled; it actually felt rather nice. Her hind hoof started tapping in time on the tile floor. “Mmm, I’m starting to see why dogs and cats like this so much,” she said. This elicited a giggle from Vista. Progress! “My code name’s Ladybird, but you can call me Taylor,” she said.

“Um, really? Why Ladybird?” Wordlessly Taylor lit up her horn (eliciting a gasp of surprise from Vista) and lifted the hem of her shawl, revealing the ladybug on her hip. “Oh, neat,” Vista said, blinking. Taylor let the hem drop.

“My code name’s Vista, but my real name’s Missy,” Vista said.

“Sorta caught that,” Taylor replied. Missy’s face flushed red under her visor.

“I’m sorry I did that,” she muttered.

“Eh, I’m probably going to have to get used to it,” Taylor said. “I’m little, I’m cute-- adorable if I do say so myself-- “ she fluttered her lashes and smirked; Vista giggled. “and people are going to treat me a certain way.”
Vista’s expression soured. “Gee, that sounds familiar,” she muttered.

Taylor poked her with a hoof. “Hey, no pouting,” she said. “At least you’ll grow out of it. And it’s not all that bad, you know.”

“Really,” Missy said, her voice dripping cynicism.

“Yeah really. At least this way people are nice to me… or at least they aren’t freaking out screaming that I’m a monster. Which would YOU rather be: a cute and cuddly pony or something that looked like a naked mole rat?”

Missy grimaced. “What’s a naked mole rat??”

“Picture a rat that looks like someone turned it inside out,” Taylor said, amused.

“Ew!”

“Besides, sooner or later people will start respecting me for who I am, not just what I look like,” she said. “It just takes time.”

“Too MUCH time,” Vista muttered, thinking of a certain armor-clad Ward and blushing slightly.

“So? There’s no big rush. Till then I’ll enjoy what I have. Heck, I’m gonna exploit the heck out of it.” She looked up. “Now gimme a cookie.”

Vista giggled, tried to smother it, then gave up. “Get your own cookies, Ladybird.”

“But you have cookies right here and now,” Taylor said. She gave Missy the biggest puppy dog eyes she could manage and a wibbling lower lip. “Cookieeee…”

“Oh, okay,” Missy said, finally giggling openly. She pulled a cookie out of the pack and stuck it in the pony’s open mouth.

“Araamum. Mmm, Good cookie,” Taylor said with her mouth full. She munched happily.

“You’re more immature than I am,” Missy teased, giggling fit to bust now. “How old ARE you?”

“Oh, fifteen,” Taylor said. “Practically an old woman.”

“Is this how practically old women act?” Missy said sarcastically.

“Whenever they want to. What’s the point of growing up if you can’t act like a little kid whenever you want to? ‘When I was a child, I acted as a child; when I grew up I put away childish things… including the childish need to be thought of as ever-so-grown-up,” she paraphrased her favorite quote from C.S. Lewis, giving the younger Ward a knowing grin.

Missy huffed. “They sent you in here to give me some sort of lecture on being “a normal kid,” didn’t they,” she mocked, making quote marks in the air and rolling her eyes. Her voice was full of the longsuffering of any child anywhere about being lectured by grownups. One minute they complained about you being immature, then they complained about you being too mature. It would be nice if they made up their minds.

Taylor shrugged. “I came in here because this is where the cookies are. Speaking of which: cookie.” Another cookie was popped in her mouth. “Fanks. Nom…..Aaaaand because you were here, and you were upset, and I felt kind of bad about that.” She finished her cookie. “So, you feel better?”
Vista dimpled. “A little.”

“Come back out with me?” Vista hesitated. “Come on, you aren’t gonna leave me alone out there with a bunch of doofus GUYS are you?….they’re talking about ordering in some pizza,” she tempted.

Missy snorted. “We’d better head back out there then and run an intercept. Kid Win puts pineapple on everything. Gak.”

“Can’t have that,” Ladybird agreed with a chuckle. The two got to their feet and ambled to the door.

“Can you eat pizza?” Vista asked in curiosity.

“Sure. I can eat pretty much anything. I’m a little four-legged trash compactor...”

On the way out the door Taylor looked over her shoulder and saw Gallant leaning, semi-casually, against the wall outside the kitchen. He gave her a covert thumbs up. Taylor gave him a smile in return, then went back to answering the youngest Ward’s question about unicorns.
The Warcrafter, chapter 3

Bayleaf stuck to his stealth mode form till he was fairly sure he was out of range. He found himself in an area filled with boarded up factories, decaying warehouses and run down tenements…. The Docks, if he remembered the layout of Brockton Bay canon correctly. He slipped between two buildings and changed to his human form-- then reconsidered as gravel and broken glass cut into his bare feet. Swearing, he pulled the bits of glass loose and hastily shifted to his worgen form; the shifting seemed to heal the minor cuts, and the leathery pads on his wolfen feet were far tougher than his tender human skin.

It was time for a quick assessment. He was stranded in a strange unfamiliar territory with no money, no ID, no shelter, no… well it would be easier to list what he DID have, he decided. He looked down at himself. He had a shirt made of what seemed to be homespun linen, and dark brown breeches of the same with a rope belt. Not even shoes. Apparently Agent had traded in even the basic druid starting gear for more points to spend in the point-buy system.

So he had two pieces of clothes that might have won a medal at a renfaire for authenticity, and his own carcass. Oh, and a butt-load of talents and powers, but at this point that and two bucks would buy him a cup of coffee. So… what did he need first?

He needed clothing. That was a quick and easy fix, though. It was already close to sunset; he could wait. For now he contented himself with finding a back door into the abandoned factory he was hiding behind. The doorknob and lock snapped off easily. He slipped inside and looked around: it was dark, dusty, and there were no signs of anyone else, not even the junkies or homeless had gotten into this place yet--- probably too recently abandoned. Perfect. He had shelter now, at least temporarily.

Once the sun went down he turned back into the black sabertooth, went into stealth, and went on the hunt.

Calling the Docks a poor neighborhood was being generous. It was impoverished, run down, covered in graffiti and trash and there seemed to be a homeless junkie in every alleyway or at every other street corner. But struggling neighborhoods did have certain commonalities, no matter where you were, so it didn’t take him long to find what he was looking for: A Goodwill store, complete with one of their ubiquitous clothes-drop bins out front. Once he was sure the coast was clear, he shifted into worgen form and snapped the security chains off the bin. He grabbed as many bags of donated clothing as he could carry (which was a considerable number, considering his strength) and ran for it. A quick leap from alleyway to rooftop and he soon returned to the abandoned factory, his loot in tow.

He felt very little guilt about robbing a Goodwill; people dumped their old clothing and possessions there under the delusion that they were donating to a charity. They weren’t; even though Goodwill was listed as a nonprofit, the owners of had made themselves millionaires re-selling free stuff-- almost pure profit. They paid their workers a pittance, too, sometimes as little as a quarter an hour, while bragging about “employing the unfortunate and disabled.” Meanwhile their CEOs took home six figure salaries at a minimum.

No, he didn’t feel guilty at all stealing some of their free stock.

It was a mishmash, but he managed to find a few hoodies and tees that hung baggy on his human form. He even found a couple pairs of tennis shoes. He made extra sure to hit everything with his “purify” spell; it was meant for cleansing people of toxins, diseases and poisons but it doubled
surprisingly well as a cleaning and sanitation spell. It wasn’t as good as a trip to the laundromat but it would have to do for now.

He Purified and hung up his homespun on a peg in the wall. Waste not want not.

The moon was high now; time for step two in his brilliant plan.

There were beaches all along the Bay; some more popular than others. The ones nearest to his location on the North side of the harbor probably weren’t very popular with the beachgoing set, due to the proximity of the Ship Graveyard, but it would do for a start.

It was a short run in Worgen form from the abandoned factory to the beach. He brought along nothing but a backpack he’d found in the Goodwill loot and, because he was feeling optimistic, the now-empty garbage bags. He wouldn’t need anything else.

On Azeroth, there are certain abilities used by nearly everyone that, were anyone to examine them with an objective eye, would become obvious as being “arcane” in nature. Those trained in mining could use their thaumatic senses to locate nodes and pockets of ore, precious metals and gems, even from the air. Those trained in herbalism could detect plants by species, at considerable range. Hunters (and druids, when in one of their more feral forms) were known for their ability to detect any animal life form and differentiate by type and species.

Thanks to Agent’s min-maxing, Bayleaf had been brain-crammed with the training and talent for all three. It was how he had managed to avoid running into any of the residents of Brockton Bay while out on his little junket; he could sense someone coming from blocks away.

Here and now though it made him possibly the king of all beach combers.

He knelt down to dig his claws in the sand, closed his eyes, and Searched.

When he opened them, hundreds of glowing ghostly stars speckled the beach as far as the eye could see. Some of them seemed to shine up through several feet of sand like lights underwater. Copper, silver, gold (and not a small amount of nickel and zinc...)

He grinned a wolfish grin and started digging.

By the time he called it quits for the night, the beach looked like it had been attacked by an army of gophers. (Heck with it, let ‘em wonder.) His Alexandria backpack was so full and heavy the seams were stretching. It was small change, mostly, but there were still quite a few watches, rings, bracelets, necklaces and earrings, ready to be rinsed free of sand and pawned. There were also a couple of raggedy wallets-- he had only sensed them because of a few coins in them or a key stuck in a side pocket-- and a couple of them were stuffed with bills and credit cards. After a terrible struggle with himself he regretfully dropped the wallets, contents untouched, into the first convenient mailbox. More than likely some crooked postal service worker would steal the cash themselves, but he wasn’t going to start out life here with that on his conscience.

He returned to his temporary lair, made a campfire with his Vine Entangle, and crashed out on the bags of clothing he had stolen from a charity bin.

The next day started, cold and clear, with a quick trip to a pawn shop to unload his boodle. The man running the place had raised an eyebrow at the sheer quantity, but had said nothing. He’d probably noted the sand still flecked on some of the items and took beachcombing as an acceptable
explanation. Adrian left with about two hundred dollars in his pocket-- highway robbery, but he was in no place to quibble at the moment. Between that and the coins he had just under four hundred in cash on him.

The next stop was the public library for a little research. Joy of joys, they had internet. His objective was to do a quick research of the Endbringer attacks, then failing that, the Slaughterhouse Nine, the Teeth, then maybe metahuman rampages in general, to find a likely destroyed city he could claim as his birthplace when he applied for status as a refugee.

It was morbid work. There were a depressing number of them; way more than had been listed in canon. Most of them though weren’t major cities. Major cities could generally bounce back from even a Hulk-style rampage; It was usually the small towns that had gotten the hard end of a cape triggering and going off the rails. Apparently unlike in the comics, where the villains always started their little rampages in places like New York where there were more capes per square mile than there were Starbucks’, the super powered villains in Earth Bet did occasionally have the brainstorm to start their campaigns of terror in some little podunk town with no heroes (see the Slaughterhouse Nine, who had obliterated several small towns in their travels already.)

Adrian eventually found a villain rampage that was practically custom made. Some doink chemo Tinker calling himself Memento had gone on a prolonged terror campaign out in the Midwest. He’d apparently go out on a junket till he found some podunk one-stoplight town that offended his inexplicable sensibilities, proclaim it a blight upon the face of the earth, then spray it down with his amnesia-inducing gas. Once the bewildered and panicking populace had run off, he’d hit it with fuel-air bombs and blast it off the face of the earth. He’d obliterated five dinky communities before the local heroes showed up and bagged him.

It had been less than a year, and Memento victims were still turning up dozens of states away with most of their previous lives a permanent scrambled blur. Society had pretty much shrugged in exhaustion, chalked them up as yet another categories of S-class or A-class refugee, and told the civil service sector to streamline putting them back in the system-- and the system had readily obliged. It seemed governments didn’t like it very much when people dropped off the grid and would go out of their way to get a nice shiny paper trail stapled to them again.

So a Memento victim it was. It was the right nationality, the right accent, the right background (he would have had a hell of a time convincing people he was a Nova Scotian or Japanese after all) and people would know better than to ask silly or inconvenient questions about his past.

He rented a room, little more than a closet really, at a decrepit building owned by a grungy fellow who asked no questions and who happily backdated him as living there for several months for an extra hundred up front. Then he stopped at the post office and snagged a PO box. From there he made a beeline for the Brockton Bay Human Services offices. He walked in as Adrian, a man without a country. Three hours after that he walked out as Adrian Smith, an official native of Brockton Bay, sixteen year old emancipated minor, complete with a fresh shiny ID card and a registered sophomore at Winslow Academy. From there it was a beeline to the local bank where he used his shiny new ID card and a chunk of his cash to open a bank account. Then for a final touch, it was over to city hall to open a business license: A tiny little pushcart business called “World of Crafts.”

He had a legal ID, a permanent address, a bank account, a legitimate revenue source, and a decoy paper trail that, thanks to the ridiculous circumstances of this world, looked totally legitimate despite existing for less than a day. That was as close to being a respectable citizen as anyone could get in Brockton Bay.
Then it was a quick shopping run. A cheap burner cell phone, some canned and packaged foods, a proper military backpack from an army-navy surplus (the Alexandria backpack had its charms, but really…) along with a few bits of camping gear, a box of tools, a sleeping bag and a few other oddments.

He also managed to find Fugly Bob’s. He used the last of his pocket cash and ordered a Fugly Bob Challenger… alas, in his human form he could not finish it, and had to pay for it. He doggy-bagged it for later. Doggone if he didn’t feel like a proper Brocktonian now, with a proper belly full of Fugly burger.

That would have been it for his day, except for a moment’s inspiration. He had lugged along some of his clothes, including the homespun he’d arrived in, and put them through a quick wash and dry at a coin laundromat. It was as he was folding and stashing the clothes that he realized something very important about his first outfit: it hadn’t been made in Brockton Bay. It had been made in Azeroth-- or at least with Azeroth methods. Which had some VERY interesting implications.

The bell on the door jingled as he meekly entered the shop. It was a beautiful dress shop, but surprisingly small and crowded considering the reputation of the owner and manager. Every spare inch of space was crowded with manikins swathed in silk and satin, cotton and crinoline. Fortunately the showroom floor opened a little bit past the entryway.

He was still standing in the middle of the room gawping like a tourist at the sartorial splendor when the shoppe owner came in from the back rooms. “I’m sorry, sir,” she said. “But our boutique is by appointment only--”

She was a tiny thing, five feet if that, and dainty. She was wearing what appeared to be an antique dress with more ruffles and frills and furbelows than Adrian had ever seen, and her hair-- or possibly her wig-- was a veritable mass of golden Shirley Temple curls. Most disturbingly she wore a doll-like porcelain mask that completely concealed her face and made dark hollow holes of her eyes.

Adrian held up a hand. “I know, I apologize for intruding,” he said. “But I’m not here to shop-- or to snap photos like a tourist. It’s just that… um, how do I put this? I discovered something that might be of interest to you.”

“Oh really?” Parian (for that was who she was) said warily. Out of the corner of his eye Adrian saw the dresses around him rustle. Ribbons hiding unobtrusively among the manikins floated on nonexistent breezes, coiled like cobras ready to strike. The cloth-kinetic cape had little to fear from the likes of him.

“Yes. Please, I mean you no harm.” The rustling stilled. He carefully set his backpack on the ground and gestured to it. “If I may?” After a moment she nodded. He unfastened a large side pocket and pulled out the homespun tunic and breeches. He held the folded cloth out to her. “What do you make of these?”

Parian took the clothes carefully in her hands and ran her gloved fingertips over them. “Let’s see. Linen obviously. Oh, and hand made linen, you can tell by the irregularities. You don’t see that often.” she unfolded the tunic and shook it out. “All hand stitched, with hand made thread--! The cut, the design, everything down to the buttons is authentic. Well,” she said, giving Adrian a look, “this could hang in a museum display on medieval clothes-making. Where did you find this?” she sounded intrigued.

“Would you believe along with a load of donated clothing?” he said with a crooked grin. It was technically true, if not precisely so. “But that’s not the really interesting thing. Take a look at those breeches and tunic, then take a look at me. Think they’d fit me?”
Parian looked at the clothing in her hands, then gave Adrian the once-over. She took in his six-foot height and broad shoulders. “Not likely,” she said, amused.

“Well that’s the thing...” He looked around. “Let me show you. Do you have a couple of manikins to spare? One adult male, one child.” At her gesture two cloth-covered manikins tottered out from the workroom in the back and set themselves up in the middle of the floor. “Now, try the tunic on the adult.”

The manikin raised its arms and the tunic slid down over its head. It settled on its shoulders, hanging in a loose yet comfortable fit. “Okay,” Adrian said, “Now try it on the child.” Obediently, Parian sent the tunic over to dress the smaller manikin. It slid down over the child doll’s raised arms… and settled in place, once again a perfect fit.

“What?” Parian stammered. ‘How…?”

Adrian knew. The clothes were of Azeroth make. And in Azeroth, tailoring incorporated so much of the arcane that enchanter would salvage old clothing for the exotic dusts, motes, and energies they used in their own craft. Among other things it made the clothes more durable to the point that they were often used as a substitute for armor. But the most common feature added was to make the clothing naturally self-resizing. This was how an Orc could shop for clothing (or for that matter, real armor, which incorporated the same techniques) at the same place as a gnome.

Parian shot a look at Adrian. “Oh no,” he half-laughed, holding up his hands in protest. “I didn’t make them. They were just donated.” Which was the truth, more or less. “when I noticed their, er, odd behavior, I naturally thought of you.”

Parian pulled off one of her elbow-length gloves and ran her fingers over the cloth. “it... I can’t describe it,” she said. “There’s something… strange beyond explaining in this cloth. Yet... Don’t ask me how I know but I’m sure that with the right materials, I could duplicate this!”

Adrian smiled to himself. He’d figured as much. He suspected that Parian was as much a cloth tinker as she was a telekinetic. “Some tinker somewhere?”

“All that I know of,” Parian murmured, still stroking the cloth in a perturbing fashion. “And I know literally every tinker with a cloth-related specialty on the planet.”

“So,” Parian said. “How much, then?”

“Well, seeing as I only FOUND the things, maybe a small finder’s fee; I wouldn’t feel right—” before he’d finished the sentence she’d scribbled out a number on a scrap of paper and stuck it under his nose. His eyes went round in spite of himself. “And it was nice doing business with you,” he squeaked.

When he walked out the door, she had his tunic and breeches. He had her private cell phone number in case he made any more “discoveries”-- and as one might expect of a rogue who had to regularly do business with capes of every stripe, six figures in small unmarked nonsequential bills stuffed in his army backpack.

The weekend (it was apparently Wednesday when he made splashdown) arrived. Plans were progressing fast; he had a new identity… or would that be a false identity or a secret identity?… courtesy of the state and federal government, a sizeable bankroll (he had been in near hysterics before he’d finally gotten back to his rented room and hid it all under his mattress), and he was
enrolled in the appropriate school… now for phase two.

Bank account or no, it was going to be a tricky process depositing most of that cash. A homeless teenager who suddenly dropped six figures in cash into his bank account was the sort of thing that had people pressing alarm buttons. He’d probably have to disguise it as cash profits from his business.

Speaking of which, he needed to start getting together a stockpile of merchandise to sell. He was an Engineer, with the full category of gnome and goblin inventions, plus the entire catalogue from the Warlords of Draenor garrison engineer and the gnomish gearworks AND the goblin workshop. He had blueprints in his head and knowhow in his hands to make everything from toys to tanks. But, he needed a workshop to build this stuff… and to build all the cape gear, weapons and more that he’d need in the field.

He also needed a place to stash all the stuff he didn’t want people to know about just yet (like tens of thousands of dollars in small nonsequential bills, ahem), a place where he could rest, mend his own wounds, and keep his head down for a while when things (as per the original timeline) started getting more desperate and dark…

He needed a lair.

Thus began a long weekend at the library web-browsing for a certain category of abandoned construction and/or public works. He was sure there were plenty of old smuggler’s tunnels around the harbor; port cities tended to have those in multitude. But considering the forecast in the next two years or so called for cloudy with a chance of Endbringer, he didn’t particularly want anything too close to the waterline. Captain’s Hill, as he recalled, was going to remain well above the floodline and out of the combat zone when Leviathan came by to say howdy-doo. Unfortunately it didn’t have quite as much construction and none of the sort that he was looking for.

No, he needed to shift his search further North. Brockton Bay had been a shipping nexus even back in the days of the horse and cart. That meant a lot of on-site machine work. What he needed would probably be someplace between the Docks and the Trainyard… someplace where, back in the city’s heyday, a lot of cargo got shifted and a lot of steelwork needed done. He hunched over the library computer and clicked on the interactive map he’d found of Brockton Bay. There. He tapped a finger on the screen. There was a little patch of real estate, a little row of buildings right on the line where the Docks ended and the Trainyards began. It was deep in gang territory-- he grimaced to himself at the thought; in Brockton Bay the only place that wasn’t in gang territory was under a force field bubble out in the Bay.

He cross-referenced the buildings in question with the city records… bingo. Five of the buildings were listed as completely abandoned. Three were of the type he was looking for. One was available to anyone who was willing to pay the back taxes on it…. But noone had even benvched an offer because of it’s utterly untenable location.

Fifty minutes later, the ghostly silhouette of a jungle cat could be seen slipping through the alleyways of the Trainyard. The building in question was just off the actual railyard by about half a block; he could hear the deafening clank and roar of the diesel trains as he scouted out the location. He squeezed through a narrow gap between yet another warehouse and an all-but-shuttered factory of some sort that took a sixty degree bend about fifty feet in, went twenty feet more, then opened into a little cobblestone courtyard. It was walled in on three sides with ancient brick and stone, and had exactly one door. There was part of an old fashioned slate shingle roof visible above it, with two or three stone chimneys poking up into the sky behind the factory’s more modern smokestack. Bayleaf switched back to his worgen form and forced the door, the ancient lock cracking like peanut brittle
under his grip. He took a deep breath and stepped inside.

The place was one of those odd little forgotten corners. Back in the day it had been a repair and work shop, built right next to the railyard for convenience. Over the years it had been used to provide the railroads with everything from shoeing draft horses to ironwork to brasswork to glasswork to… well, just about any work that required strong hands, solid tools and a hot furnace. But times had changed, the tracks had been re-laid, and the workshop had fallen into disuse as better facilities were built on the OTHER side of the tracks. Other buildings had cropped up around the workshop, building over it, overlapping it, till it was hidden from site and all but forgotten to the world.

Bayleaf looked around. It was perfect.

The dust was inches thick. It was undisturbed even by the footprints of mice and probably had geologic strata to it. Cobwebs were everywhere, long abandoned by the spiders that wove them for the lack of flies. But the walls were solid stone— not brick, but stone, the bones of a world; huge raw-cut blocks that made his druidic senses hum with satisfaction. There were two furnaces, long cold. Stout worktables made of heavy oak beams and still scarred black. Even the tools were there, abandoned where they lay— hammers, tongs, anvils, tools for iron and brass and glass and leather. There were even a couple of anvils. It was actually a two story building as well, with sleeping quarters up in the rafters.

There was a washroom in the back corner with an antiquated showerhead and a toilet...

To his surprise there was no wood rot, no mildew, surprisingly little rust as well. For a place near a seaside harbor that was a bit unusual. He could only guess that the place had been corked up so tight when it was closed that nothing of moisture or humidity could get in.

The only question that remained was how to get his equipment, materials, and the like in and out of the place. The answer came when he found the double doors in back. He ripped off the boards blocking it and opened it to find his back door directly faced a solid brick wall. Disgruntled, he began ripping out bricks with his bare clawed hands.

...To find himself in yet another abandoned warehouse. “Town oughta start trading in abandoned warehouses, they’d make a fortune,” he muttered to himself. He climbed through and found it spacious if empty. There were a few flickering lights— perhaps not so abandoned?— and a bathroom with running water, so whoever owned it was still paying upkeep for some reason. As he recalled, building owners tended to keep even empty buildings hooked up to utilities in order to keep the heat on, so as to prevent freezing and moisture damage…

Either way, bonus for him. Since they were so rude as to build over his back door like that, he would avail himself of the facilities and splice into the electric and water lines in here. Assuming he even needed them, considering his plans. But the real bonus was that the place had a front door and a delivery ramp and thus an address to have things delivered to. Whenever something he ordered arrived here, he would be on hand to open the door and roll it on in… and right through to the back, out the hole in the back wall, and into his workshop.

He found a loose sheet of plyboard large enough to cover the “secret entrance” (aka Huge Frickin Hole in the Wall) and set about cleaning the antedeluvian dust out of his lair.

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Saturday was spent on shopping.
Not just any shopping, though. Porch sales. Yard sales. Garage sales. Flea Markets. Even Brockton Bay had such things, especially in a mild late October. He was treasure hunting, and he was stretching his Searching power to the absolute limit. The treasures he wanted were scattered far and wide… but it was amazing the amount of territory you could cover when you could turn into a bird.

Added bonus? No receipts, which meant no paper trail.

He bought a few things for his comfort-- some bits of furniture including a bed, a little winter clothing, a propane heater-- but the main items on his shopping list were:

1. clockwork, engine, motor and electronic components.
2. certain gems, crystals, and rare earths and metals.
3. scrap metal in bulk.
4. tools.
5. Fuel.
6. anything his Searching power “pinged” on.

His approach was as methodical as his beach-combing. He first scoped out the local papers for any listed yard sales. Then he overflew those areas in his raven form, scanning. If he pinged on anything he dropped down into a secluded spot, turned human, and quickly bought whatever he’d pinged on, then followed up by going over everything else with a fine toothed comb. If the people running the yard sale were amenable to it, he’d pay them a little extra to box up and set aside what he’d found, with the promise he’d be back for it later.

He made some surprising finds; enough that he started wondering what treasures he’d completely overlooked in his past life when he went yard sale trolling. He found countless pieces of real silverware, including a serving platter and cover. He found more than a few bits of gold too. Gems were a rare find but he found plenty of crystals and semiprecious stones that would have been worth ten times their weight back on Azeroth. The hippie lady at the flea market with the new-age crystal stand must have thought her ship had come in when he came along and basically bought her out. He even bought the push cart.

He snapped up clocks of every size, wind up toys, old electric countertop appliances, pocket watches, and any number of items that noone watching could have guessed the reason… but he’d spot them amongst countless other debris, his eyes would get a funny gleam and he’d snatch them up. At one point on impulse he’d bought a stack of flowerpots, some potting soil, and an assortment of seedlings...

He’d realized even before he’d started that he’d have a touch of trouble dragging his haul back to his lair. Not for the first time since splashdown he groused to himself bitterly about Agent not equipping him with the standard Azeroth “bottomless” handy haversack (or more likely trading it in for more points.) He’d gotten around that problem by scouting around till he found a guy in one of the lower-rent neighborhoods lounging around who had a pickup truck, and offering to pay him a couple hundred to haul him and his crap around for the day. His name was “Efe,” so far as Bayleaf could figure; a balding, potbellied old guy with a ballcap, a wife-beater shirt and a fringe of shoulder length stringy hair and a disturbing resemblance to Cheech Marin. But he was mellow, and cool with doing a little driving for a few bucks. They drove around and picked up all Adrian’s purchases. By the time they got to the false front warehouse, it was loaded to overflowing. “Efe” helped him unload, wished him luck, told him they should go out for a few beers sometime and drove off…. Never even having
asked Bayleaf his name. No fuss, no muss and once again, no paper trail.

One might have thought it strange that, in a world and a city where tinkers scavenged like cockroaches, that Bayleaf pulled in such a load. Of course, the usual behavior of tinkers was to either scrounge dumpsters and junkyards, or try to pull off a not-so-daring heist and rip off a factory or a warehouse full of high-end technology. The few who even thought of money tried to order from horrendously overpriced underground companies like the Toybox, or even (in cases of extreme stupidity) tried to have stuff delivered to them in bulk from companies, thereby putting an enormous bulls eye on themselves with a big fat blinking neon arrow above it that said “Please kidnap this Tinker now.”

Almost none of them thought to buy things directly from ordinary people with plain old cash. And those who spoke of tracking Tinkers by their “unusual purchasing habits” never considered the millions of people at flea markets, Salvation Army stores, and yard sales whose purchasing and selling habits would probably make the most demented Tinker look banal.

Sunday he would have taken rest-- but must needs, as the saying went. He threw his furniture in place, started up his propane heater to keep warm, sat down next to his stacks of salvage, and got to work.

There were over five hundred “toys” listed in World of Warcraft. He could craft a shocking number of them, just with what he had. In one hour his first trinket was clicking, buzzing and whirring around the Foundry floor. By the end of three he had a small platoon chattering along… including one very special one, for a special purpose.

Monday morning, he was ready.

Principal Blackwell sat back in her chair with a self-satisfied air. “Well, Mister… Smith…”

“Sorry,” Adrian said with a shrug and a half-smile. “I guess government offices aren’t exactly creative with names.”

“…Yes,” Blackwell said with pursed lips. “Well, according to the standardized test they gave you, you place in the sophomore or junior year. We will be observing your actual performance in class over the year to determine your actual placement…”

Yyyeah, that would be the purpose of the tests they regularly hand out to ALL students, Adrian thought to himself with a mental raised eyebrow. In other news grass is green, water is wet, film at eleven. Her point?

“But I trust that your future performance will… compensate for your checkered educational past.”

At this he did raise an actual eyebrow. Checkered past? According to the file she was handed, I’m an amnesia victim. I don’t even have a past to checker!

“I will warn you right now, we have low tolerance for troublemakers here…”

I just may barf. I walked past three skinheads swapping sandwich baggies just on my way to the office. Who is she kidding? He considered his appearance. Jeans, sneakers, t-shirt, and a leather
jacket. Was she picking up her cues on “troublemaker on sight” from old James Dean films?

“I will say I had some misgivings about your enrollment here, Mr. Smith. Your past is due cause for concern.”

The penny dropped. Ah, I get it. Should’ve thought of that first. With things like the Simurgh, or Bonesaw, or Nilbog running around, there’s probably a certain amount of prejudice against survivors of metahuman attacks. She’s probably afraid that nutcase Memento might have turned me into some sort of teenage tyke-bomb. He huffed and curled his lip. Or that I might have a bad day and trigger all over her nice clean school. Irony ahoy.

She saw the tiny lip curl and predictably, misinterpreted. She stiffened a bit, and her already less than warm tone turned frosty. “You had best watch your attitude, young man. I run a tight ship here—”

hmrrnk.

“—and I will be keeping a close eye on you for any irregularities. So don’t give me any crap.”

He looked at the scowling woman in her bowl-cut and only barely suppressed the urge to say You got it, Moe. “Understood, ma’am,” he said. “May I go find my locker now? I think lunch is starting soon.”

She glared at him for a moment. “Dismissed,” she said. He beat a hasty retreat.

He found his locker in short order, and started unloading his backpack into it. He looked over the inside. “Cripes,” he muttered. “This thing is enormous. I didn’t think anyone made lockers this size for real.” He shook his head. He needed to focus on his next objective: finding Taylor. Her description was pretty straightforward, so that shouldn’t be a problem, he decided. There was a good chance he’d spot her at lunch-- but then again, maybe not. Didn’t she take up eating her lunch in various hidey-holes to try and escape the gruesome threesome? Or was that something she started after the locker incident…?

“Hey Taylor!”

Adrian’s head whipped around. He looked just in time to see a petite redheaded girl in an ungodly amount of makeup stick her foot out and trip another girl in a hoodie and backpack. The hoodie girl stumbled and nearly fell. The other girl went so far as to slap her in the back, to try and get her to stumble further. The girl in the hoodie managed to keep her balance though. “Better watch your step, Taylor,” the redhead taunted. “You’re just so terribly clumsy.”

Taylor didn’t even look back. She just righted herself and kept walking, her head down and shoulders hunched. Adrian felt like someone had taken a bite out of his heart. His conviction only firmed; even if he didn’t fix anything else, he was going to make this right. She kept walking down the hall right towards him…

And stopped at the locker next to his and began working the combination.

Holy carp. Luck of all the Irish. “Uhhh, hi,” he said. “How ya doin?” She jumped, then looked up at him, brushing stray curls of her dark hair out of her face. With her glasses she looked like a frightened owl…

Taylor flinched and looked up at the boy next to her warily. She blinked a little when she realized she didn’t recognize him. She was fairly sure she would have remembered being in the locker next
door to a tall, dark, broad shouldered-- she pushed that thought away, blushing. He was handsome though, with chiseled looks and dark gray eyes. He gave her a crooked smile.

Had he said something?

“Oh! Uh. Hi….?”

“You must be Taylor,” he said. “I’m Adrian.”

Taylor’s paranoia sprang to the fore. “How do you know my name?” she said warily.

Adrian jerked his thumb down the hall, indicating the departed Emma. “I overheard Princess Maybelline back there shouting it,” he said wryly.

“Princess Maybelline?” she said with a half smile of her own.

“Yeah.” He looked down the hall thoughtfully. “Dang, how many layers of makeup does she have to slather on to get that perfect Resting Bitch Face, d’you suppose?” Talyor did let out a hiccup of a laugh at that one.

“I don’t recognize you,” she said, immediately feeling stupid. Of course not, he was obviously a new student--

“Yeah, well. Funny thing is, if we had known each other, we probably wouldn’t now,” he said. He tapped his head. “Memento refugee.”

Taylor’s mouth made a silent “o.” “I’m sorry,” she said.

“Hey, not your fault. At least all I got was a clean slate; I could’ve ended up like those guys who can’t remember anything past the last half-hour, or whatever.” He looked a bit uncomfortable with the topic, and made an obvious move to change it. “So…but basically means I’m totally new here. As new as you can get actually. Any more like Resting Bitch Face I should look out for around here?”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “You mean besides the neonazis, the asian gang members, and the junkies?” she said sarcastically.

“Well I know about those guys. At least they’re courteous enough to wear identifying colors,” Adrian said, amused. “But what about the rest?”

Taylor’s smile disappeared. “That’s Emma,” she said. “You’ll get to know her soon enough. “Her, Madison and Sophia are the Queen Bees in this school and everybody knows it.” She pulled a trapper-keeper out of her locker and flipped through it. Then flipped through it again. “Dammit!” She threw her head back and stamped her feet in frustration.

“What?” Adrian asked.

“Those-- they stole my homework. Again!!” She threw the trapper-keeper down in the bottom of her locker and let her head fall against the doorframe with a thunk. “I can’t stand it. I even changed my lock....”

Adrian knew exactly why changing her lock made no difference, but he could hardly tell Taylor that at this point. He had to take a different approach. “What kind of lock did you get? Can I see it?”

Taylor looked up at him. “Just a regular combination lock,” she said. She pulled it off the door latch and gave it to him. He rolled it over in his hands and made a knowing sound.
“Eh, well, there you go,” he said. “Just a regular school lock. They could get this thing open lickity split.”

“How?” Taylor scowled.

Wordlessly, Adrian took out his walled and pulled a metal strip— it looked like it had been cut out of a soda can— out of one of the pockets. He closed the lock. Then he wrapped the strip of metal around the shackle and worked it down inside the body of the lock. There was a click, and the lock popped open. “Easy peasy,” he said. “They’ve got how to videos online.”

Taylor groaned. “Well that’s ten bucks wasted,” she grumbled.

A noise came out of Adrian’s backpack. “Vweep. Whirrrwhirrrwhiirrr. Ebbeebbeebbp. PTING.”

Taylor backed up a step. “The heck was that?”

“Oh. Darn, must’ve turned him on by accident...” Adrian reached down in his oversized pack and pulled something out. It was a little toy robot about a foot tall, out made out of copper and brass. It had rotating red beacon light for a head, two headlight “eyes,” a short squat body, short little limbs with large bell-shaped hands and platform feet. “Oh, this is just one of the toys I make,” Adrian said, holding it up. “I call it the alarm-o-bot.”

“You’re a TINKER?” Taylor blurted out. Adrian laughed.

“Oh no no no,” he said. “This is all just off-the-shelf electronics, and a little handicraftyness.” He shrugged and laughed. “it’s sort of a gag gift. You place it where you want— like on your desk, or in your car, or whatever, press the button to set it, and if anybody sets off its motion detectors it sounds an alarm. Look—” he poked something on it.

The red light lit up and began rotating. “WARNING, FART DETECTED! FART DETECTED! CLEAR THE AREA! DO NOT LIGHT A MATCH!—”

“All clear, all clear!” Adrian shouted at it frantically. The alarm shut down. “um, wrong setting,” he said weakly, palming his face.

Taylor was trying not to laugh and failing. “That’s awesome! And you make these little guys?”

Adrian nodded, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment. “Yeah. I make little windup or battery powered toys, sell ’em from a push cart...” he gave her a card. It said “World of Crafts” on it and listed a website and cellphone number. “Its how I pay the bills.”

“Neat.” she smiled and tucked the card away.

Adrian hefted the Alarm-o-bot and looked at Taylor’s locker thoughtfully. He could see a flute case in the upper compartment... they hadn’t stolen her flute yet... “Say, wanna have a little fun with whoever’s rifling your locker?” He held up the toy and waved it meaningfully.

It took a moment for the penny to drop. “Oh, that would be brilliant—” she hesitated. “Oh but we can’t. They’d break your little robot just to get even—”

His grin grew strangely feral. “Meh, I ain’t worried about that,” he said. “I make these things by the dozen, remember? Out of old cell phones and crap. Be worth it to scare the crap out of Resting Bitch Face, wouldn’t it?” He held the Alarm-o-bot up to her face. “Go ahead; say ‘All clear.’” he pressed a button on the toy’s back.
“All clear.”

“There, that’s the shutoff code.” He stuck the little robot in the upper compartment, clamping its magnetic feet so it stood in front of the flute case. “Back to your duty, soldier,” he said, giving the toy a mock salute. Taylor laughed as he closed the door.

She never saw the toy return the salute…

“Wow, what other stuff do you make?”

“All sorts of things,” he said, stuffing his bag into the locker. “Most aren’t nearly as complicated as Obie, there.” He nodded at the locker.

“Obie?”

“Short for Alarm-o-Bot. AOB.” He picked out the books for his next few classes, and slammed the locker shut. “Anyway, most of my stuff is just windup stuff or battery powered trinkets. Stuff like this.” He held his hand up. Perched on his finger was a butterfly made out of wire and glass. As she watched it slowly opened and closed its shiny black wings. Even its antennae moved.

“Oh wow.” She reached out a finger and petted it on the head. “How--?”

“The wings are broken bits of solar cell,” he said. “and there’s a really simple electric motor-- more like a little solenoid-- that turns a little wire camshaft that moves the wings and antennae. The movement changes speed depending on how much light is shining on the wings. It’s not much more complicated than one of those bobbing bird toys, but it looks really lifelike, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. Pretty, too,” she said.

He smiled. “Here.” He reached up and fastened it to one of the stray locks of hair sneaking out from under her hood. It clung there, fanning its wings slowly. She immediately started to protest.

“Oh no, I couldn’t--”

“Hey, free advertising,” he said with a smile and a shrug. “Besides you looked like you could use a smile.”

The school bell blatted. “Come on, we’d better get to the cafeteria before they give away all the good slop,” he joked. “Come with me?”

He watched her chew on her lip, undecided. She had to be half-broken at this point; convinced that noone would willingly associate with her; terrified her three tormentors would use it as a justification to turn their ire on her-- or him-- but by this point so desperate for someone, anyone to just be with…

“It-- it might be a bad idea for you to be seen with me,” she managed to say.

“Great! I’m all about doing what’s bad for me. C’mon.” She hesitated again. Then, for a miracle, she gave him a smile.

“Okay… okay, sure.” After all, what did she have to lose, right?

“Mmmm, slop ahoy…”

Behind them in the locker, the Alarm-o-Bot sentry blinked its eyes and settled in for a long shift on duty.
“The great Harry Potter must listen,” the tiny, wizened elf said, wringing his hands. “The great Harry Potter must go back to Hogwarts this year!”

Harry frantically shushed the strange creature, then hesitated in confusion as he parsed what Dobby had just said. “That is what I was planning to do anyway, Dobby,” he said.

Dobby nodded and came in close. “Yes, yes,” he said in a stage whisper. “Dobby knows. But Dobby also knows that many bad peoples is trying to stop you. Dobby will help, as much as he can. But that is not much.” He shook his head in despair till his long ears flopped.

Harry decided to bite. “And why is it so much more important that I go back this year?” he asked.

Dobby moved in even closer, till his long nose was almost touching Harry’s. “Many things is coming to Hogwarts,” he whispered. “Strange and wonderful things. But bad wizards is planning terrible things, to happens to them. This must not be.

“The Great Harry Potter must save them from the bad wizards.” He looked deep into Harry’s eyes. “Because then, maybe, they is saving him, too.”

They were just changing into their school robes when there was a tremendous bump that shook the entire train. Exclamations of surprise echoed from all up and down the car, but nothing seemed to come of it. A bit of track that needed repair, Harry wondered? The Hogwarts Express was enchanted to roll right over such things, he’d heard.

It was then that Ron began slapping at his shoulder with a nerveless hand. “Harry?”

“Give me a minute, Ron,” he said. He was terrible at tying the knot in his tie.

“Harry?” Ron’s voice sounded oddly high. “This can’t wait.”

“What, what?” Harry said impatiently, looking up. Ron just pointed at the window, his face so pale his freckles stood out like dots on an astronomy map. Harry looked.

The ground was missing.

Harry looked down. And further down. And further down still. There was nothing; the blue sky faded slowly into a starlight night, an endless void below. He could see the train tracks curving out ahead of the engine, floating suspended on nothing. Just for the sake of argument he looked up-- no, the ground wasn’t hiding up there, either. Just endless blue sky.

“Ron! Harry!” he heard Hermione shriek. She came bombing back into the compartment a moment later, her tie askew and her hair frizzed out more than ever. “What is this? Where did the rest of the Earth go? Ron, what’s going on??”

“Why are you asking me?” Ron exclaimed. “Do I look like somebody gave me a memo?” Hermione
socked him in the arm in frustration. “OW!”

“You’re the only one of us who was raised in the Wizarding World. You’re supposed to be the-the-
the street smart native guide of our adventuring party!”

“When did we vote on that?”

“Guys,” Harry said suddenly, pointing. “Look.” Coming out of the distance-haze far ahead was an
everous floating island, almost an upside-down mountain. Spilling off one side and down into the
void was an enormous waterfall. For counterbalance another waterfall, seemingly out of nowhere,
was tumbling down out of the sky and into the lake that fed it. A forest, sitting on a shallower,
broader island of floating earth and attached by a narrow bridge of earth, hovered off to one side.
And standing on a rise next to the lake…


They all stared in awe. “That over there must be the Forbidden Forest,” Hermione said, pointing at
the dark wooded island.

“The twins will have a bit harder time sneaking out there this year, I think,” Harry said, by way of a
weak joke.

“Where is the water coming from?” Hermione wondered. “The lake should be running dry…”

Ron pointed up at the second waterfall. “I think it loops around, and comes back out up there,” he
said. “The squid better not swim to close or it’s in for a heck of a ride.”

“Where’s Hogsmeade?” Ron said. “Anyone see it?”

“Down there and to the left, on that, er, island by itself,” Harry said. “The only way back and forth
must be by broom.”

“Can’t imagine they’re too happy about that…” Ron said.

Hogwarts’ floating island drew quickly closer. As they watched the day slowly turned to night… not
with the sun rising and the moon setting, but all at once, with the blue sky swirling away like a
melting snow cone, and a purpling sky speckled with impossibly huge stars taking its place. They
pulled into the Hogwarts’ station with a thump and a cloud of steam. All the students dismounted.
Harry could hear Hagrid calling for the first years: a comforting note of familiarity, all things
considered. It was a shockingly quiet group, for once. Harry realized with an inner laugh that for
once the firsties and the muggleborns looked less gobsmacked than the older, native-born wizards.
The muggleborns had no experience with the magical world other than through books and movies;
riding a flying train to a castle on a floating island was probably nothing less than they had expected!

The carriage ride to the castle was quickly filled with chatter, though, as speculation ran wild as to
what had happened, and what was going on. Hermione’s theories in particular were rapidly spiraling
out of control, till Harry put a hand on hers and stopped her. “Dumbledore is here,” he reminded her.
“If we just wait, I’m sure he will explain everything.”
The headmaster stepped up to the podium, a smile on his face. “Welcome, everyone, to another year at Hogwarts School for Wizards and Witches,” he said. “I’m sure you’ve all noticed some changes since last year…”

“No foolin,” someone in the Hall said. Several people shushed whoever it was. Dumbledore only looked amused.

“Allow me to proffer a brief explanation. During the previous summer, Some of our staff were conducting some minor experiments in their down time. There was… I can only refer to it as a fortuitous discovery that led to Hogwart’s current condition and location.”

“Magical accident,” Ron murmured to Harry and Hermione. “A wallopin huge one.” They nodded. They hadn’t missed that Snape was sitting at the head table, sneering as usual and nursing a number of bandages and burns.

“Those researching the matter have determined that this particular condition is both safe, and stable. Hence the resumption of the school year without interruption. It has, in fact, turned out to have many benefits which the Department of Mysteries of our own Ministry of Magic is looking into… possibly as an option for any and all magical locations and communities. There may come a day when all magical locations in our world are moved to safe, private pockets like the one we currently inhabit.”

One of the Ravenclaws raised a hand. “But… where are we, exactly, sir?” she asked.

The headmaster paused as if searching for the right words. “I think the best description would be Between,” he said. “We are in a place that is between our own world and the next one over. Or the next several ones over, actually. There is a portal connecting us to our own world; you passed through it while on the Hogwarts Express. And there is a portal to yet another world-- I shall not disclose its location, for your own safety--- that connects to us, here.

“What is more,” he said, raising his voice above the buzz of voices this comment had stirred up, “We… that is, our Ministry… have made contact with the beings of this next world, and opened up diplomatic talks with them.” There was a resounding thump as Hermione toppled to the floor.

“Mister Potter, Mister Weasley, would you be so kind as to revive Miss Granger. She’ll get a chill lying on the stone floor like that.” A wave of the headmaster’s hand summoned a towel and a pitcher of water to where the trio sat.

“As I was saying, we have opened diplomatic relations. And in the interests of those relations, we will be hosting several of their own people as exchange students, here in Hogwarts.” There was a loud moan and Hermione passed out again. “Ahem.

“So without further ado, allow me to cede the floor to Princess Celestia, Sol Invictus, and Princess Luna, Nocturnis Immaculatus.” He stepped aside with a bow. From the back of the room stepped two visions.

“Coo!” the entire student body said, and gasped hard enough to suck the air out of the room.

One was a white mare, tall and slender with a long spiral horn and snowy wings. A golden tiara rested on her brow, and she was adorned with golden shoes and a gem-studded peytral. Her mane and tail swirled around her in a cloud of soft pastels.

Next to her walked another, clearly her sister. Only she was the color of midnight, and adorned in onyx and silver. Her mane was a billowing cloud of night and stars.

The two paced regally from the back of the room up to the podium. The white one, clearly the elder,
stepped forward and spread her wings. “Greetings, my little ones,” she said with a smile.”I am Princess Celestia of Equestria, and this is my sister, Princess Luna. I am pleased to meet you all at last, and hope that this is only the beginning of a wonderful friendship between our people.

“Both my sister and I wish that we could spend more time getting to know you ourselves, personally. Alas, though we do intend to look in on you all from time to time, our duties preclude us from spending too much time away from our thrones. So to foster better understanding between our two races, your Headmaster and we have come to an agreement: some of our little ponies-- personal proteges of our own-- will be attending here for the next seven years, as full students of Hogwarts Academy.”

The midnight one spoke. “We hope that thou wilt make them feel welcome, and trust that they will be good and proper guests to thee.”

“And now, regrettably, we must depart,” Celestia concluded. “We wish you well and we shall speak again soon.” The two began to shimmer, then dissolved into a cloud of sparkles that swirled away and disappeared.

“My, how precipitous,” Dumbledore said. “Well. Let us commence with the Sorting, shall we?”

From the back of the room, where they had been watching the proceedings in silence, came the firsties… and noone failed to note that mingled among them were a number of small, fourlegged participants.

Professor McGonagall came forward with the stool and the Sorting Hat, which she set down with great ceremony. The hat straightened up, its folds and wrinkles forming a face. It opened its “mouth” and sang.

“This is your Sorting Song,
It isn’t very long…”

Everyone hesitated. “Well?” McGonagall said to the hat.

‘We’re running a bit long this year, aren’t we?’ the hat replied snarkily. “That’s all the song you get.” Several students tittered. McGonagall huffed, but she let it slide. The hat was a bit right after all. She opened up the scroll of new names.

“Abercrombie!” She called out.

The students waited through the first few names on pins and needles. It was obvious that everyone present was waiting for only one thing: the sorting of the first Equestrian student. Finally though, it came.

“Rarity Belle!”

The one who trotted forward was a unicorn. She was pure, gleaming white, with an elegantly groomed mane and tail and a pattern of diamonds scattered on her flank… for all that she was the size of a unicorn foal and gifted with the childlike proportions of a plush toy, she was still the very picture of a magical symbol of pristine purity. She climbed up on the stool and sat demurely as McGonagall lowered the hat--
Only to raise a hoof and stop her. “Oh, just one moment, please,” she said. Her horn glowed and blue-white sparkles shot from her horn into the hat.

“Heee! Stop, that tickles!” the hat protested squirming.

“My apologies, sir hat,” she said sweetly. “No offense intended, but after all those heads, I think both of us would appreciate the use of a quick cleaning spell.” Several students in the audience with unease started noticing a faint itching in their scalp.

The hat huffed. “I’ll have you know I have permanent cleaning and sanitation charms--” it groused.

“Oh. My apologies,” Rarity said, embarrassed. The grumbling hat was lowered onto the unicorn’s head. Once again the audience said “coo” and held their breath. A long, slow minute passed.

Well, this is a conundrum.

Pardon?

Truthfully madame, you have plenty of ambition. And cunning I see here aplenty. More than enough for a dozen of the Slytherins running about today.

You do flatter, Mister Hat.

Heh. But that House, dear lady, has fallen far. They mistake avarice for ambition and cruelty for cunning. And there are many in it that favor the Dark, for it readily gratifies both vices. And there are evils in our world that regard that House and all in it theirs for the taking. The house of Slytherin is little loved by others. You would have a long and hard time of it there.

Those poor children? Rarity thought in disbelief of the crowd of first years. Her decision, her new ambition, firmed.

Then I will have to show them a better way.

You are well named the Element of Generosity, Miss Rarity Belle. So be it.

“SLYTHERIN!”

All across the room, jaws dropped. More than a few quickly strangled cries of disbelief sprang up here and there. The expressions around the room ranged from shock to outright horror. The expressions at the table of the snakes, however, were ones of unsuppressed glee. Once the hat was removed Rarity gave a curtsey to a stunned McGonagall and trotted off to the Slytherin table, the cravat she wore turning Slytherin silver and green.

“No way,” Ron rasped. “No bloody way!”

“I don’t think she really knows that house’s reputation,” Hermione said. “Cunning and Ambition don’t sound all that bad on their own, after all. I think she’s in for a rough ride.”

Up on the stage, Applejack leaned over to Rainbow Dash. “What was all that about?”

Rainbow Dash smirked. “I don’t think those Snakes know Rarity’s reputation,” she said. “I think those guys are in for a rough ride.”
“Sweetie Belle!”

The next one up drew coos of adoration from half the witches in the room. She was a tiny unicorn filly with a soft curly pastel mane and adorable as the day was long. She got up on the stool-- with a little boost from McGonagall-- and donned the hat. Her entire head nearly disappeared under it down to the shoulders.

Ohohoho. You ARE a sly little thing, aren’t you.

Am not. The filly blushed.

Ha. I know better. Even your own sister doesn’t have a clue, and she’s as sharp as a tack, that one.

I don’t mean to be-- Sweetie thought.

Oh that is not a bad thing, not always. “Be ye harmless as doves, and cunning as serpents.” Sometimes it is best that people underestimate you, especially the wicked. Remember that.

I will, sir.

Oh and good luck on your singing career. Perhaps next year we can sing a duet?

Sweetie giggled.

But first, let’s put the cat among the pigeons-- or the sneaky little unicorn among the poor luckless Snakes---

“SLYtherIn!”

If the silenced had been shocked for the first, the cries of dismay, for all they were quickly hushed, were piercing. Sweetie doffed the hat and stared out at the crowd in bafflement. “WHAAaaaat?” she demanded. When nobody replied she rolled her eyes, climbed down off the stool, and joined the Slytherin table with her new silver and green cravat proudly displayed.

“I never would’ve thought of Sweetiebelle as cunning or ambitious,” Scootaloo whispered to Applebloom.

“Those ‘re the kind y’ gotta watch out for,” Applebloom muttered back, amused. Their conversation was interrupted by McGonagall.

“Apple Bloom!”

Hmm. A good bright mind, you could do fairly well in Ravenclaw. Oh my, an aptitude for potions? ‘swhat my cutie mark means, Applebloom thought, thinking of the apple in a klein bottle on her hip.
Oh I see. How fascinating. It’s rather like you all have a sorting hat on your backsides, isn’t it? The hat’s amusement was rich.

Hy-larious, y’all are. Mister Hat?

Hmm?

Could you put me in Slytherin with my friend Sweetie Belle? And Scootaloo too?

And why would you want that?—Oh, I see. In a moment the Hat flitted through her memories of the Cutie Mark Crusaders: of a lifetime of adventures and laughter and friendship shared in a few short seasons. He chuckled.

My dear, who said that you had to stop being friends if you were in different Houses?

Well-- it’s just--

Apple Bloom, sometimes friends have to be apart, so that each of them can thrive and grow in their own way. Sweetie Belle will thrive in Slytherin; but you would be utterly out of place in it. As out of place as if you tried to follow Scootaloo to flight camp. You would be miserable!

Apple bloom had a vision of herself taking her first flying lesson off the edge of Cloudsdale. Yeah—Briefly, she thought, her mental voice dry.

What?—Oh. Oh! Ahaha. Good one! The hat actually chortled out loud, puzzling some of the onlookers. Well, you’ll have plenty of time together even in separate houses. You’ll have classes together, and meals together, and countless hours of down time you can spend together how you wish, and of course the holidays… you’ll spend some time apart, grow into your own hooves, as it were, and your friendship will be the stronger for it.

Well, okay. You’re the expert…

The hat chuckled again. Anyhow, you’re no stranger to hard work, and you’ve got loyalty for miles, that much is clear. No better place for you than--

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

More than a few anxious students sighed in relief. For a moment it had looked like the whole herd of Equestrians was going to end up in a Slytherin stable. Apple Bloom trotted down to the Hufflepuff table in her new black and yellow cravat, hesitantly at first but soon with a happy gallop as welcoming smiles and applause greeted her.

“Rainbow Dash !”

The cocksure pegasus fluttered up from the back and landed with a thump on the stool. The hat went on.

Merlin!
Pardon you?

Heavens. I’ve never seen such a Gryffindor mind. Gryffindor to a FAULT. You, my dear young mare, are the most Gryffindorish Gryffindor I have seen in years!

Well then that makes the choice easy, I guess. Huh.

What, may I ask?

I woulda figured Hufflepuff. On account o’ me being the Element of Loyalty, and they’re the house of Loyalty…

Oh, they’re more than just THAT. Just as you are. Take this chance to show other people that you are more than just one thing… and maybe to hone that “Gryffindor to a fault” into a proper virtue.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Dash flew over the tables, did a backflip and dropped into an open Gryffindor seat. “Called it,” Applejack chuckled, while a grousing Spike handed her a galleon.

“Apple Jack !”

“Ack!” the farm pony hustled to the stool. She took off her hat; McGonagall took it from her. “Uh, thank y’ kindly.” The hat dropped down.

My my, you and your sister are two peas in a pod, but for a few years. Pomona Sprout would never forgive me if I put you anywhere else.

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“That was quick,” Apple Bloom said as Applejack sat next to her.

“I suppose some things are obvious,” Applejack replied.

Several more young wizards and witches were sorted, followed by:

“Scoota Loo!”

The orange pegasus filly buzz-hopped onto the stool. “It’s one word, by the way.”
“My apologies,” McGonagall said primly, and placed the hat on her head.

*My, so many obvious ones today.*

“**GRYFFINDOR!**”

Every Hogwarts native stared and blinked when Pinkie Pie’s turn came up. “I’ve never seen anything that shade of pink before,” Ron said to Harry, who shook his head in agreement.

“And nothing that… frizzy,” Hermione added. The other two stared at her. “*Oh shut up!*”

*And then the hat began to laugh.* It started as a deep chuckle and rolled into a full bone-shaking belly laugh. It laughed for a good solid minute, rocking back and forth on the giggling pink pony’s head.

“**HUFFLEPUFF!**” It finally shouted between gales of laughter. “And good luck, Pomona!” It was still laughing as the pink pony pronked her way to the Hufflepuff table.

“Well, that wasn’t ominous,” Pomona said under her breath to Flitwick. For his part Flitwick made a silent bet with himself on who would crack open the Glenfiddich first this year-- McGonagall or Sprout.

“**Flutter Shy!**”

There was a loud squeak, then a long pause. “**Flutter Shy!**” McGonagall repeated. There was a rustle from the back of the crowd of first years’, then a pegasus slowly made her appearance. She was soft yellow, with a long trailing mane and tail of pastel pink. She caught a glimpse of the crowd staring at her, let out a squeak of alarm and vanished behind the other first years again.

“**Miss Shy!**” McGonagall said sternly. “Come on out and be Sorted. You’re holding things up!” Cringing nervously, her tail tucked beneath her, Fluttershy came back out and climbed up on the stool. There were a few unkind sniggers at how fearful she was. The other Gryffindors had to restrain a glaring Rainbow Dash from finding the mockers and making something of it.

The hat came down-- surprisingly gently this time; McGonagall wasn’t totally heartless-- and the students waited.

“**GRYFFINDOR!**”
“Huh?” seemed to be the general consensus at this decision. Fluttershy hurriedly made her way over to the Gryffindor table and sat between Scootaloo and Dash with an obvious air of relief. A few snickers and unkind remarks at the Gryffindor House’s expense wafted across the room, largely from the Slytherin table. This time Dash wasn’t the only one to swell up and get to her feet. Several curt words and pointed glares from Heads of House soon had things settled down, though. Only barely.

Two more students were sorted into Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. Then McGonagall read the name that nearly upset the apple cart.

“Princess Twilight Sparkle!”

The commotion at this took several minutes, and finally a call from Dumbledore himself, to settle down. A princess! Whichever house got her, that was going to be a feather in their cap—even more than two white unicorns like the Slytherins had.

Twilight stepped forward. At first she seemed like an ordinary unicorn, as much as a unicorn with a violet coat and a deep purple mane could be ordinary anyway. Then she spread her wings and fluttered up onto the stool. She perched there with her wings mantled for balance as the hat came down.

It certainly didn’t take long.

*My, you ponies don’t do things by halves, do you. Try not to get yourselves lost in your books like you did in your LAST school, Princess. You’ll miss out on a lot.*

*Er--*

“RAVENCLAW!… as if the rest of you lot hadn’t guessed,” the hat said sarcastically. Several of the ponies snickered.

The applause from Ravenclaw table was thunderous as Twilight, bronze and blue cravat neatly tied, stepped over to join their table.

“Spike !”

Everyone peered curiously. One more? A moment later a short, scaly, purple and green figure stepped out of the firsties. Unlike the others he wore a proper robe and tie. Perched on the row of spikes on his head was a small, faintly glowing yellow bird. Webbed wings unfurled from his back and he flapped up onto the stool, his spade-tipped tail curling around the legs. “A dragon?” Neville yipped.
Fluttershy spoke up. “Oh that’s Spike,” she said. “Don’t be afraid of him, he’s a sweetie, and a perfect little gentleman.”

“Your dragons are very different from ours, then,” Neville said warily.

“Um, well...”

“Is that a baby phoenix perched on his head?” Hermione exclaimed.


“But... Phoenixes don’t grow up from chicks! They hatch, then have their first Burning Day and are completely full grown!” Hermione protested. “I read it in--”

“Hermione, If you say ‘I read it in Hogwarts, a History,’” Ron said in an overly sweet voice, “I swear that the next time we ride the Hogwarts Express I’m chucking that ruddy book right out the window.” She gaped at him in outrage. “And good luck finding it in that fathomless void that’s out the window now,” he added as an afterthought.

Harry laughed at her expression. “Hermione, don’t you get it? They’re from another world. Everything your books have to say about them is probably wrong. You’re going to have to do more than just run to the library to learn everything about something this time, because books are going to be pretty much worthless.” He turned back to watch the proceedings, while his best friend sat there and spiraled into an existential horror at the blasphemies he’d uttered.

McGonagall set the hat on Spike’s head. “Oy!” the hat said. It hawked and spat, shooting an angrily chattering Peewee across the stage. “One customer at a time, you!” The students laughed as the tiny phoenix fluttered off to perch on a nearby sconce and sulk.

Ah, let’s see...

Ravenclaw please.

Hm? Hold on now, lad, I’ll be doing the sorting here.

Look, trust me. I’m Twilight Sparkle’s number one assistant. I need to be there for her.

Now hold on, lad.. hmm. My word, you’re certainly smart enough to fit in Ravenclaw fairly well. Scribe, Librarian, musician, chef, you have quite a multiplicity of talents and skills.

Comes from having to be Twilight’s assistant. It’s in the job description.

And quite a load of book knowledge, at least of your own world.

You don’t hang around the smartest and most powerful unicorn in a generation without picking a few things up.

Unicorn?-- oh, I see, a rather recent promotion. Or metamorphosis rather?

Ehh. Little of column A...

Ah. But the point, you see, is that my job is to place you where it will benefit YOU the most. So YOU
have a chance to flourish. It’s in the job description.

Touche’. So where would I do best? Just for argument’s sake.

Let’s see then. Like I said, quite talented and smart, so Ravenclaw would be fairly good… hmmm, and a good bit of ambition. Mostly that draconic need to get a proper hoard going-- that would serve you well in Slytherin-- but also a certain amount of aspiration for a certain lady fair, no?

...Shuddup.

Heheheh. You’re a hard worker, definitely loyal, and have more than your share of bravery. My word, you tackled three diamond dogs barehanded as a hatchling? And gave them a bit of a thrashing too, I see. Bravo. You could fit fairly well in any of the Houses.

In that case it’d better be Ravenclaw.

Got a one track mind, do you?

Dude. Did you or did you not see my memories of the Smarty Pants incident?

The Smarty Pants…? Oh dear.

Or the Gala Ticket fiasco?

My.

Or the Birthday party meltdown?

Good heavens.

Like I keep telling you-- Twilight’s smart, and brave, and kind… but she needs someone to keep her on an even keel. And she isn’t all that good at taking care of herself. Here, lemme show you the last time she cooked for herself--

No, no, I get the point. Eh, I did say you’d do well anywhere, and she does need a little help, it’s obvious… but my boy, do try to take advantage of this time, and do a little growing for your OWN benefit.

I’ll give it a try anyway.

“RAVENCLAW!!”

Spike proudly trotted over and joined his Housemates. Before McGonagall could call the next name, Peewee dove down from his perch and flew up inside the hat. He cheeped in a demanding fashion.

“Oh fine. RAVENCLAW for you too!” it spat the bird back out. Peewee flew over and perched on Spike’s head, fluffing up proudly. The Ravenclaw students looked proud enough to burst. The Slytherin table, on the other hand, looked fit to be tied; their little coup early on had been flipped completely over.

A half dozen more Sortings, and the platform was clear. Dumbledore stepped up to the podium as the hat and stool were put away. “A most momentous sorting, I do say. But now, our welcoming
The door to the Gryffindor tower opened, and the Gryffindors piled in. Harry came through, A groaning Ron leaning against him with his arm over his shoulder. Right behind them came Hermionie, scolding and quibbling. Behind her came another pair of students bearing a groaning Rainbow Dash. Both victims were left to sprawl over the nearest sofa while the other students spread out around the common room or totter their way up to bed. “I can’t believe you challenged a little pony to a pie eating contest,” Hermionie scolded Ron.

Harry smirked. “I can’t believe she won.”

“Totally worth it,” Dash grunted. She lay on her back sprawled out, her belly pooching into the air.

“I think I have some of those fizzy tablets in my trunk if you want, Dash,” Fluttershy said.

“Nah, I’ll be good in an hour or two,” Dash said. She looked up. “Hey, where’s the squirt?”

“Already asleep. One of the firsties already carried her up to your room.” It was true and it had been adorable. Colin Creevy had snapped a half-dozen shots of it, to go with the hundred or so he’d taken since getting on the Hogwarts express that morning.

“Yeah,” one of the older students said. “Most of the first years are already out of it by now. But you guys can hang out down here with us for a little bit. Get to know each other better, sort of thing.” He opened one of the end tables scattered around the room and pulled out a bottle of cherry fizz. (While Ravenclaws stashed books everywhere, the Griffs had long ago discovered the glories of the handy and easily concealed Mini Fridge.)

Several voices were raised in agreement, urging the two pegasi to stay up and chew the fat a bit. Dash was easy enough— it was clear neither she nor Ron were moving till several plates of pie were digested— but the sudden burst of attention, Fluttershy balked.

“Oh no, I don’t think I should,” she stammered, wings fluttering nervously. “It is a long day tomorrow and-- oh, I don’t… um… goodnight--” the timid mare fled up the stairs to the girls’ dormitory.

Seamus Finnegan shook his head. “I’ve no idea how a timid little thing got in Griffindor of all places,” he said.

“People can surprise you,” Neville said defensively.

“Oh, she’s nice enough,” Seamus hedged. “But in the house of the brave? I don’t--”

“HA ha!” Rainbow Dash let out a raucous laugh. Everyone looked at her in surprise. “You REALLY don’t know Fluttershy yet,” she said, cackling.

“How so?” Harry said, curious.
“D’you know I once kicked a full grown dragon in the face?” Dash said incongruously.

“Oh, no way,” someone scoffed.

“Yes way. In. The. Face.” She smirked at the scoffers. “Big jerk was hibernating in a mountain over our town… his snoring was clogging the air with smoke. We all went up to get him to move out. He wouldn’t get his lazy tail up, so I bucked him in the face. Whammo.”

“You’re joking,” Ron said. He looked at her face. “You’re not joking.”

“Yep!” She rubbed her head with a hoof sheepishly. “Not one of my brighter moves…”

“So what’s your point?” Someone threw in.

“I’m the one who kicked it in the face and made it mad,” Dash said. She pointed up the stairs. “She’s the one who made it BREAK DOWN AND CRY.”

The Gryffindors stared at her. “And that was nuthin',” Dash went on. “Manticore? Pulled a thorn out of its paw and had it eating out of her hoof. Cerberus? Gave it a tummy rub. Cockatrice? Beat it in a STARING CONTEST.

“She keeps a full grown grizzly bear in her cottage as a PET, and she gives first aid to rattlesnakes and mountain lions. And she civilized an avatar of Chaos, and has tea with him every weekend!

“Sure she’s shy and timid and meek and all that, but when she needs to be, Fluttershy can be a force of nature. And don’t you ever forget it.”

The Gryffindors stared at the little rainbow maned pony, speechless. There was no telling how many of them even believed half of what she said, but in the passing days it would certainly cross their minds.

The Hufflepuffs were gathered in their common room; Pomona Sprout, their Head of House, was presiding. She was a round cheeked woman who smelled of earth and green growing things, and had a natural gift for settling the nerves of young and jittery students away from home for the first time. “Welcome one and all to House Hufflepuff,” she said. “Don’t worry, we won’t be long. I’m sure you all want to get to your beds.” Several students and one yellow pony yawned in unspoken agreement. “But I do like to have a quick meeting to welcome everyone and get them situated their first night here. We’ll have similar meetings every weekend, so we can air any problems and talk things out as a House.

“Now we have a busy year ahead of us, and we’ll have many opportunities to shine both as individuals, and as a House.”

“Fat chance of that,” one of the older students muttered.

“I beg your pardon, Mister Macmillan?” Sprout demanded. Everyone in the room turned to look at the transgressor.
Macmillan waffled, but decided to double down. “Oh come on, Professor, look at this,” he said, waving at the room. “Hufflepuff got the short end of the stick AGAIN.”

“And just what do you mean by that, Mister Macmillan?” Sprout said sternly.

“I’m only being honest, Professor Sprout,” he huffed. “Let’s look at facts here. We have a Headmaster who plays favorites with Gryffindor. Remember the House Cup scoring last year?”

“Yes, I remember,” Sprout said, huffily. “We had WORDS with the Headmaster over that, I assure you.”

“And the Deputy Headmaster is the Head of House for Gryffindor. She plunked Potter onto her team as Seeker a year early, even bought him a brand new broom for it. Broke like three or four Hogwarts rules in the process, but nobody said a thing.” He sneered a bit. “My, wasn’t THAT impartial.” Several students shifted uncomfortably. “And don’t even get me started on Snape--”

“Professor Snape,” Sprout corrected him sternly.

“Well Professor Snape hands out points to his own house-- and demerits and detentions to everyone else-- like they were penny candy,” Macmillan went on.

“But even if half the staff wasn’t running around playing favorites and making earning house points a joke…We’re still a house of duffers, because that’s how that Hat sorts us.

“And this year’s sorting just takes the cake,” he said. “Gryffindor gets three Pegasus. Slytherin gets two unicorns. Unicorns! And Ravenclaw gets a winged unicorn--”

“Alicorn,” Applejack said drily.

“--An alicorn princess, a dragon and a Phoenix! And what does Hufflepuff get?” He waved at the three new pony classmates. “three plain as paint nothing ponies.” His voice turned bitter with disappointment. “And I will take the rest,’ Hufflepuff said. Once again we get the leftovers that nobody wants.”

“Nothing ponies?” Pinkie Pie said, sounding wounded. “Hey!” Applebloom exclaimed, hopping to her hooves and looking angry.

Professor Sprout grew livid. “MISTER Macmillan, you will apologize to your new Housemates this instant--!” But Applejack stepped forward and held up a hoof.

“Hold on, Ma’am,” she said. She looked at Macmillan. “So that’s what you think? That your House always gets second best… and that us earth ponies are just another bunch of second best. Is that it?” Her words were uncommonly kind.

He wouldn’t look at her. “An’ maybe after seein yore house come out second best so often, maybe you’re wondering if YOU’RE second best, and that’s why they put you here?” He voice was even gentler. He still didn’t look at her, but he nodded. “Now,” she said to the rest of the group, giving them a gimlet eye. “How many of you are feelin’ the same way, but were just skreed to say it out loud?” Slowly, several hands rose in the crowd.

To their surprise, Applejack gave a short laugh. “I think I get how he’s feelin’, Professor,” she said to Sprout. “Believe you me, this ain’t the first time folks have thought that about us Earth ponies. Not by a long shot. Shoot, hunnerts of years ago they used to call us ‘mud ponies,’ said we weren’t nuthin’ cause we couldn’t shoot magic out of horns on our head, or fly, or fiddle faddle with the weather. Even now a lot of ponies in the other two tribes underestimate us.
“But would it help y’all to know we’re just as magical as the other two?” She got several skeptical looks. “Naaaw, I ain’t joshin’ you. It’s just with us Earth ponies, it don’t show on the surface so much. Here...” The room, true to Pomona’s love of all things green and growing, was decorated with planters and flowerpots of all sorts. Applejack scooped some dirt out of one with a water cup. Then she pulled an apple out of her saddlebag, bit it in half with a single chomp, and spit the seeds into the cup. She balanced the cup on her hoof and squinted at it, straining. The dirt filled cup shook, and with a tiny fountain of dirt a seedling shot up out of the soil. In seconds she was holding a food high sapling in her hoof. “We got us a few things up our sleeve,” she said over the exclamations from the other ‘Puffs.

“My word,” Professor Sprout exclaimed, delighted. She took the sapling from Applejack’s hooves and looked it over. “I do believe you’re going to do quite well in Herbology, Applejack.”

“Heh. That ain’t nuthing. Pinkie, show ’em that little trick from the rock farm.”

One of the ‘Puffs looked up from staring at the sapling. “You grow rocks on farms?”

“Wellll, certain kinds of rocks,” Pinkie said. She pulled what looked like a bag of gravel out of her mane (earning herself a few stares), poured it in a pile on the floor, and stuck her hoof in. She grimaced wildly, her face contorting in ridiculous shapes as she pressed down, rolling the gravel under her foot. There was a creaking noise, like ice being pressed in a vise, and the loose pebbles began squeezing together, changing shape, becoming more sparkly and crystalline--

“Merlin, is that a sapphire?” One of the older students reached in and picked up a pebble. It was; it was an uncut sapphire about the size of the tip of her pinky. “And--” she picked up another. “I think this is a ruby!”

“Crystallized aluminum oxides,” Pinkie said. “Not very good quality though; a rock farmer properly cultivates them over months to get the right purity and clarity. But it’s a neat party trick.”

“Earth pony magic works with plants, growing things, with minerals and ores and anything from the earth. Hence the name Earth Pony,” Applejack said with a smirk. “We’re also tougher ’n stronger than the next three unicorns or pegasus combined.

“We also tend to be crackin’ good builders, inventors, potioneers--” she paused to give her little sister a noogie. “ jewelers and blacksmiths. We grow and build and invent everything everypony else uses and depends on. We’re not flashy, but we’re the ones that keep the world workin’. We work hard, we play hard, we stick by our families and our friends. That’s the earth pony way.

“And fun!” Pinkie said, leaning over Applejack’s back.

“And fun!” Pinkie said, leaning over Applejack’s back.

“Those are the things worth havin.’ If other folk don’t appreciate it, well tough luck. An’ if you got made a Hufflepuff, maybe it ain’t because you’re second best.” She gave Macmillan’s arm a gentle pat. “It’s just that you’re somethin’ most other folks hain’t learned to appreciate yet.”

Professor Sprout applauded solemnly. “Well said, Miss Applejack,” she said. “Well said indeed.”
Spike looked at Professor Flitwick and sighed in disgust. “You just had to show her the Ravenclaw tower private library,” he said.

Once Flitwick had opened the door it was all downhill. Twilight had taken one look and had gone into full book mania. She had looted the shelves, piling books around her in multiple stacks and burying her nose in two or three at a time.

Flitwick for his part was looking a bit perturbed. He’d never seen such a manic reader; she made Hermione Granger look positively placid. Nothing he said or did could stir the pony princess and get her to go to bed. “I can’t. I just can’t! An entire library of knowledge from another world-- I just can’t!” Was all she’d say to his requests, pleas, and even threats. He was reluctant to try anything more drastic…

Spike came toddling back in, pushing a tea trolley with, oddly enough for Great Britain, a pot of fresh coffee on it. “Don’t worry, Professor,” he muttered, “I’ve dealt with this before.” He carefully poured out a mug of steaming brew, added three lumps of sugar and some cream, and set it beside the frantically reading pony.

“Oh thank you Spike,” she said. Without looking she levitated the mug and downed it in one gulp. One second passed, then two. She sat up straight and glared in outrage at Spike. “Spike, Did you use those knockout drops in my coffee ag--”

SPLAT. Her head hit the tabletop without even time to blink. Seconds later she was snoring softly. Spike held up the bottle of “creamer” and waggled it softly. “From her Majesty Princess Celestia,” he said. “To be used in cases of Twilight Sparkle only.” He proceeded to drape the snoring pony over his shoulder. “ugh. When she wakes up rested in the morning she’ll have calmed down enough to realize she can’t read the whole library in one sitting.” He struggled to lift her. “Bit of a hand?”

Flitwick chortled and waved his wand. Twilight floated out of the room silently, and up the stairs to the girls’ dorms. “Thanks,” Spike said. He yawned. “I think I’ll head to bed myself.”

Flitwick shook his head as the dragonling headed to the boy’s dorms. “I get the feeling I’ll be glad the Hat sorted you here,” he said.

Snape glowered down at his new first years-- two legged and four legged. “It is late, and you are more than likely already too sleepy to pay much attention, so I will keep this brief. There are a very few important rules in this house. The most important is this: Outside these rooms, you present a united front. In here, you may have your squabbles, your disagreements, your dunderheaded childhood feuds. If you have a difference you wish arbitrated, you will come to me or to your Prefects. If you wish to settle matters in a duel, we have a room for that as well. But outside, you are only Slytherin. You will not carry your squabbles out where others may see them and you will not show any weakness or division in front of the other houses.

There are rules here in Hogwarts; they are listed in your handbooks and on the bulletin board in the
common room. If you are caught you WILL be punished.” Even the first years could hear the
unstated in his voice: first, you had to be caught. “If you are caught and I believe you are
insufficiently punished you will answer to me.” Whether punished for the infraction, or punished for
being so foolish as to get caught, was again left unsaid. “The Great Hall opens for breakfast at seven.
Your first classes are at eight. Do not be tardy.” He swept from the room in a swirl of his cloak.

Only then did the first years dare to breathe again. “Crikey,” someone muttered.

“Well, that was… something,” Rarity said. She approached one of the other students-- a girl with
blonde hair and icy blue eyes… Greengrass, was it?--- “Excuse me, dear,” she said. “Nopony
clarified the sleeping arrangements… I was wondering…”

Daphne looked down at the unicorn coolly and nodded. “Of course. We’ll all be sharing a room
together-- we three, and three others.

“Well, that’s fine I’m sure. Come along, Sweetie.”

Sweetie was standing on the couch by one of the vast picture windows. “Rarity, I think we’re under
the lake! Look--” she pointed at a fish swimming past, just in time for a webbed clawed hand to flash
out of the dark and snatch it away. The rest of the mermaid appeared out of the dark of the water in
the next instant. With their bulging eyes, wide mouths and needle-like teeth, even by the light of day,
mer-folk are an unsettling sight. Three inches from your nose in the dead of night is an outright no-
sell. The little unicorn yeeped and vaulted backwards so violently she somersaulted off the couch
onto the floor.

“WELL that’s enough sighing let’s get to bed AWAY FROM THE WINDOWS--” she galloped past
Rarity and Daphne for the girls’ dorms.

When Daphne and Rarity arrived, Sweetie had found her bed by the trunk at its foot, and was up on
the bed bouncing on the pillowly mattress. “This whole thing is mine?” she squeaked in delight.

“Where are the others?”

Daphne looked around. “Ah,” she said, pointing to a closed door. “They’re in the showers, getting
ready for bed.”

“Oh, excellent!” Rarity said. She pulled her towel and her nighttime beauty products from her trunk.
“I do need to put my mane up. Be back in a few, Sweetie.” She trotted into the bathroom, the door
swinging shut behind her.

“Well that’s the last we’ll see of her for an hour or two,” Sweetie said. She looked up at Daphne as she
continued bouncing. “What’s wrong?”

Daphne Greengrass was a pureblood daughter of a pureblood family, and raised to the fashion. She
was poised, she was reserved, she was dignified and aloof in everything she said and did and she
couldn’t stand it anymore. She snatched the unicorn filly out of the air in mid leap and snuggled her
for dear life. “EEEEEEEEeee you are just too cute to STAND Oh I wish Astoria could see you
now you are the sweetest thing EVER--”

In the next moment, with a desperate wrench of self control, she released the flabbergasted pony and
dropped her back on the mattress. She pointed a threatening finger. “If you dare tell ANYONE that
just happened… I’ll… I’ll deny it to the GRAVE.” With that she turned her back and, cool
disdainful mask back in place, went to open her own trunk and began getting ready for bed.

Sweetie Belle stared and rattled her head. “I have NO idea what the heck that was about,” she
muttered.
Adrian, aka Bayleaf, was a metahuman. He could change at will into a half dozen different forms. In his baseline worgen form he could leap a city street or deadlift a truck by the bumper. He could maneuver in land, sea, or air. He could summon extradimensional energy to smite his enemies or heal his allies, and control (with some limited success) both animals and plants. He could craft weapons that would make a platoon of marines crap their pants. It may not have shown but even in his most minimal form, that of a baseline human, he was beyond pinnacle baseline human ability.

And at lunch it became unsettlingly clear that his first, and biggest hurdle was one for which all his brute powers would be virtually useless: shutting down three epic level Mean Girls set on destroying Taylor Hebert’s life. That was something that was going to require intellect.

The first salvo was early on. They’d found some seats at a corner table; Taylor had packed her own lunch so he left her and his backpack to hold their seats while he waited in line for… he sniffed multiple times. Meatloaf, maybe? While he was standing in line waiting to get a tray, he saw the Gruesome Threesome make their first move out of the corner of his eye. It was a “drive-by” this time. Emma, or Resting Bitch Face as he now thought of her, and two other girls, one a tall athletic black girl with cornrows, the other a petite brown haired girl in a crop top and demin skirt with her hair up in a “cutesy” style, went sidling past Taylor’s table. The black girl made a point of clipping Taylor in the back of her head with her elbow; while Cutesie-Hair shoved his backpack into the floor in passing, obviously thinking it belonged to Taylor. Emma didn’t do anything physical, but he’d managed to learn how to keep his wolfen hearing in his human form, so he clearly heard her as she passed Taylor’s seat:

“Ew.”

Subtle and vicious, like a hat pin driven through your ribs. He gave it an eight out of ten.

He briefly contemplated doing something nasty in retaliation while he was still up, but beyond blasting them with a bolt of moonfire while their backs were turned (which really wouldn’t go over well) he was short on ideas at that second. Instead he took his tray, let the lunch ladies fill it up with whatever it was they were serving, and returned to their table. Already he could see Taylor pulling back inside her shell. That wouldn’t do.

He pretended to spot his bag in the floor, shoved it under the table with a foot and sat down. “The mighty hunter returns with his kill,” he said, dropping his tray on the table. Man, he knew it was a common joke about cafeteria food, but this stuff looked seriously nasty. Some macaroni and cheese of some sort on the side, wrinkled peas, and… he still wasn’t sure if it was meatloaf. “A mercy kill, from the look of it,” he added.

Taylor “snrked” a little, then glanced over at his tray in genuine puzzlement. “What is it?”

Adrian poked it with his fork. “I’m not sure,” he said, “But I think I know what happened to Jimmy Hoffa’s body now.” She’d been in mid-bite of her sandwich roll; her snort of laughter sprayed a few bits of cheese and meat across the table. Face red as a tomato, she swept it up with her hand; Adrian handed her a napkin without a word. “So what are you having?” he asked as if nothing happened.

“Um.” She wiped the corners of her mouth. “Chicken wrap, with lettuce, rice and some mixed shredded cheese. Oh and a little sauce.” She brushed her hood back; the butterfly in her hair fluttered in the cafeteria light.
“Sounds good,” he said earnestly. “...Trade?”

“Not a chance.”

“Come on. We’ll go halvsies. Half your tasty chicken roll for half my Jimmy Hoffa loaf.” She spluttered with laughter into her napkin. He pointed at his macaroni cheese sludge. “I’ll throw in some of this delicious Cream of Cootie, whaddya say?”

“Eww, you are awful--”

A dark-skinned hand slammed down on the table; Taylor jumped in her seat, the smile vanishing from her face. It was Sophia. Flanking her were Madison and Emma, in full Resting Bitch Face mode. She stood there, leaning over their table in a domineering, space-invading pose. “Hey, Herbert. ‘Sup?” Her smile was thin and toothy and about as warm as the ones he’d seen on a shark.

Adrian hadn’t been taken by surprise. He’d been tracking them with his peripheral vision since he’d sat down. They’d been at what he assumed was one of the ‘popular kids’ tables, Emma and Madison shmoozing it up with their social fu while Sophia lounged there like a cheetah on a rich jetsetter’s leash. All three of them had been keeping a spare eye on Taylor; when he’d sat down their look of surprise on their faces had been blatant. Emma’s mouth had even dropped open in surprise. (Really? It was that unusual and outrageous that someone had sat down with Taylor?) The three had begun whispering together-- too quiet for even him to hear-- and eventually gotten up and headed for where they were sitting, social murder clearly on their minds.

Adrian had faked ignorance till they were right at the table. When Hess slammed her hand down he looked up and cheerfully drawled “Well, what can I do you for?”

Sophia just gave him a look. That was right, she was the more physical of the three. It was Emma and Madison who handled the more verbal attacks. “Oh, and who is this?” Madison chirped, all bubbles and sunshine. “C’mom, introduce us, Taylor.”

Sophia, like a good little attack animal, took her handler’s cue. “Yeah Taylor,” she said with a smirk, eyeing him up and down. “Introduce us.”

Adrian felt his eyebrows go up. Now what was that all about? Did she just give him the once-over? He decided to go with a neutral approach first. “Adrian Smith,” he said. “New here. New everywhere, actually.”

“Why are you hanging around with Hebert?” Madison said, giving me a lookover as well. “Really honey, she’s not your type.” She gave Taylor a little sneer.

“...time for a quick jab below the belt. “Hmm, I think I know you,” he said. “Heard your name somewhere... what was it?” he snapped his fingers, pretending to think. “Oh yeah, Massengil.” Taylor had been taking a sip from her water bottle to calm her nerves; she nearly choked on her own spit take. Madison’s face went wide with surprise then puckered up into a scowl.

Adrian decided to push it. “What’s the matter, dear?” he said sweetly. “Are you not feeling... spring time fresh today?”

Taylor went from coughing to choking. Madison’s eyes went wide and her mouth formed a perfect “o;” she looked like someone had slapped the pigtails off her. Emma and Sophia bridled up but Adrian wasn’t through. “Well, it seems Douche Princess has nothing to say,” he snarked. “How about you, Barnes?”
Give her points, she rallied. “We saw Hebert here hanging off of you,” she said, her nose tipped up. “Since you’re new we figured we’d come over here and warn you.”

“Oh really.”

“Yeah really.” Emma tossed her red hair. “Taylor here’s a headcase. She’ll be all friendly like at first, but then she’ll get upset about something-- just any little thing, the poor dear--” she simpered. “And then she’ll be in the Principal’s office, making up all sorts of wild accusations about you. She did it to us...” her smile was sweet as an arsenic-laced cookie. “Just a friendly warning.”

“Oh.” He smiled back just as sweetly. “You mean like, saying you knocked her bag in the floor?” He said, picking up his own backpack and holding it up. He let them see it before setting it down in the chair next to it. Her smile didn’t move, but her eyes glazed. “Or saying you tripped her in the hall and tried to knock her down with a push to the back? I caught your performance in the hallway, Resting Bitch Face. Eight out of ten for effort but a zero for execution. You should leave the physical stuff to your friends.”

Sophia shifted her stance so she was facing him. “You like to live dangerously, don’t ya, Adrian Smith?” Her eyes glittered dangerously.

“Well, kitten--” he slapped his much larger hand down over her relatively slender one where it rested on the table. Scowling she tried to yank her hand away; to her consternation she couldn’t. She tugged again, then harder. It was no use, he was pinning her hand to the table without any apparent effort. “You just may be right. But I’ll tell you one thing I don’t do.” His smile vanished, his face became an expressionless mask but his eyes smoldered.

“I don’t play little girly games. I don’t do this running around little ‘tee hee, he said she said let’s call them names out loud in the cafeteria’ crap. I don’t drop anonymous hate email or scribble crap on someone’s locker and then go running off giggling with my little school friends about how badass and edgy I am. And I don’t put up with useless skanks who do that kind of crap.

“So take Douche Girl, Resting Bitch Face and the rest of your little goldfish poop gang and go be worthless somewhere else.” He lifted his hand; she yanked hers back and glared at him like she wanted to burn holes through his head with her eyes. But the look in his eyes, eyes that a second ago she could have sworn were a cool blue grey but she now saw were flecked with gold, was a kind of dangerous that her cape hindbrain couldn’t ignore. She whirled around and marched off, hackles up and all but radiating vicious anger. Emma and Madison fell in behind her and marched off too, noses high but cheeks flaring red.

“Whoa” came from several nearby tables. There were laughs and catcalls and a few bits of applause, even…everyone loved a free show. Adrian turned his attention back to his alleged lunch. Taylor was hunched over her own meal, looking like a terrified rabbit. “Why did you do that?” she hissed.

He shrugged. “Why not? I was supposed to put up with that crap?” It was important he establish that this was for his own benefit, as well as for hers.

“She won’t let that go,” Taylor said. “None of them will. You don’t know how bad they can make things for you--”

Adrian snorted raucously. “Taylor, they’re a bunch of high school bitches,” he said. “They’ve got three and only three things: money, tits and popularity, and the first two is where they get the last one. And no matter how much of the first two they have, without the last one they’re like a Beverly Hills bimbette without her daddy’s credit card: useless.” He gestured around. “How popular are they really? Did you hear how many people applauded them getting ganked just now?” He stabbed his
meatloaf with a fork. Possibly to make sure it was dead. “All it takes for them to lose it all is for just
one person to not take their crap.”

Taylor shook her head. “You’re a hopeless optimist, in that case.”

“Ehh, shuddup and eat your Jimmy Hoffa Loaf,” he said, pushing the tray at her.

She pushed it back, grinning and wrinkling her nose. “Ew no. You eat it!”

“No you!”

“You!”

“Okay, a compromise, maybe a respectful burial in an unmarked grave out back--”

The day proceeded; Taylor and Adrian shuffled from class to class, discovering they shared
a handful Gladly’s regrettable class, and Mrs. Knott’s for computers, just to name two. For a miracle,
the Gruesome Threesome actually kept their heads down the rest of that day. Adrian was pleased.

Taylor was not. She knew it just meant they were planning.

Taylor was generous. For all their malice the Threesome would never be known for in depth strategy
or, for that matter, an ability to think through long-term consequences. Emma was the closest thing
they had to a tactician. After their fumble at lunch, she knew they had to act fast to re-balance the
scales.

The three were in the bathroom together, skipping out on the last period of the day. “So why not go
after this Adrian bitch’s locker?” Sophia was complaining. “He’s the one who talked back to us...”

“But we might be the first suspects everyone thinks of if we do,” Emma said, carefully touching up
her eyeliner. “We get dissed in the cafeteria, then two hours later he gets his locker trashed?
Blackwell and the teachers may not care but even they wouldn’t be able to pretend they didn’t know,
and I don’t know about you but I don’t wanna spend my afternoon sitting in Blackwell’s office
sucking up to her, trying to get off the hook. Gimme your lip gloss, Madison.” The other girl
obediently handed it over.

Sophia snorted and crossed her arms. “Look at it this way, Soph,” Emma said. “This Adrian guy, he
obviously thinks he’s some sort of white knight or something. Taylor’s already starting to latch onto
him, to hide behind him-- and that’s just after one day!

“But if, while he’s out there on bended knee, promising his lady fair he’ll defend her honor, you
wreck her stuff right under his nose--”

“He’ll look like a chump,” Madison threw in, tucking her rouge in her handbag and blowing herself
a kiss in the mirror.

“Better yet it’ll yank the rug out from under Taylor again. Big bad muscly macho man couldn’t even
keep her safe for 24 hours...She’ll be heartbroken. She’ll probably never trust anyone again.” Emma
sighed, dropping the lip gloss into her own bag and snapping it shut. “Such a tragedy.”
Sophia’s face split in a grin. “Damn, Emma,” she said. “You are one vicious little minx.”

“Don’t I know it. We’d better hustle. Maddie, you’ll stand at one end of the hall, just around the corner, and be lookout...”

Minutes later, they were in the hallway in question. Taylor’s locker was in a short dead-end hallway off to one side. There were no classroom doors in that hall, and none in the main hall that looked in on it. It was the perfect blind spot-- the main reason the three of them had gotten away with so many things they’d pulled on Taylor already.

Madison took up her lookout position just around the corner. Emma however stayed by Sophia’s side. Emma wasn’t on the lookout for teachers; she was busy watching Madison in one of the curved security mirrors at the end of the hall, making sure Maddie didn’t get it in her head to peek at an inopportune moment. It was a good thing Maddie wasn’t particularly bright. “Okay, Soph, she’s totally focused on the classroom doors,” she said. “Go ahead and do your thing.”

Sophia stepped up to Taylor’s locker, a smug smile on her face. “You said the flute, right? In the top compartment?” She said.

“Yeah, it was her Mom’s. She’ll be devastated.”

“Got it.” Sophia grabbed the lock. Her hand suddenly went smokey and transparent, like a shadow given form… the lock along with it. She yanked it off, dropping it to the floor. She opened up the door--

“BIMBO DETECTED! BIMBO DETECTED! THIEVING SKANK ON THE PREMISES!”

The locker lit up from within with a strobing red light and a klaxon, piercingly keen and loud enough to wake the dead, began blaring. Over top of the klaxon the voice continued shouting.

“CRIMINAL TRESSPASS! ATTEMPTED BURGLARY! BREAKING AND ENTERING! HALT WHERE YOU ARE CRIMINAL SCUM!”

Sophia yelled and tumbled backward, slapping her hands over her ears. “The HELL?” she screeched. It was some sort of damned toy-- a robot or something with a police light for a head. It was strobing the hallway with fire-engine lights and blasting out siren noises fit to wake the dead.

Madison hadn’t come running yet, she’d apparently been startled into confusion by the noise and the flashing red lights illuminating the hallway. Emma could see her in the mirror, spinning in a circle in panic. Emma mimicked Sophia, covering her own ears against the deafening noise. “Turn it off, turn it off!” Impulsively, Sophia reached in and grabbed for the toy planning to smash whatever-it-was with her bare fist, if she had to.

This might have gone badly for Obie. It went decidedly worse for Sophia. While Obie was built from Azeroth blueprints, the Agent’s gifts had made Adrian a gifted enough engineer to make certain improvements. The first of course being Obie’s rather attention getting voice. The second being a much more potent power supply.
The third being the tasers implanted in Obie’s stumpy metal hands.

There was a flash of blue-white light and a sound like a tesla coil sparking, and Sophia Hess went flying across the hallway to smack into the lockers there with a bang and fall in a heap to the floor. She was shaking and jittering, and the rubber bands binding her hair braids had come undone, giving her the start of a rather impressive Afro. “Sophia!” Emma cried. She ran to the undercover cape’s side, panicking.

She looked around. She could hear doorways opening and people pouring out in the main hallway, teachers and students alike. Maddie, thank Scion, was still there running interference—crying and yelling and freaking out and taking up everybody’s attention. The janitor’s closet— it was open! She grabbed Sophia under the armpits and dragged her to the closet door. She pulled her inside and shut them both inside a split second before everyone began pouring around the corner to see what in hell all the noise was about.

Mr. Gladly was at the head of the pack. He stood there and stared at the sight: a wide open locker with what looked and sounded like a fire engine going berserk inside. “What in the world…?” he mouthed. Then somebody panicked— or more likely took advantage of an opportunity— and pulled the fire alarm. The mob of curious teenagers suddenly turned into a torrent as they began pouring for the exits, sweeping up the bewildered teachers and staff in their path.

A moment later Adrian and Taylor both, for similar but distinct reasons of their own, squeezed out of the herd and came running around the corner. Both stopped and stared for a moment at the tableau. “All clear, all clear!” Taylor shouted. Obie fell silent; the fire alarms unfortunately continued.

The toe of Taylor’s sneaker caught on something. She looked down and picked it up; it was her combination lock, still closed. “What…?”

Adrian sized the situation up. “Rrright,” he said. He grabbed Obie and stuffed him in his sack. “I think we’re both taking an early day. I’ve got my stuff, you grab yours…”

Taylor nodded; as the saying went, her Momma didn’t raise no fool. She grabbed her flute case and her books, pocketed the lock, and followed Adrian as they hastily—and in a quiet and orderly fashion, of course— blended into the yelling mob of students flowing out into the street.

Eventually the fire alarm stopped, although the danger lights in the hallway kept flashing. The broom closet door rattled. “Ah @$^!!!” Emma’s muffled voice said. “The door must’ve locked when we-- Soph, wake up, you gotta get us out of here. Sophia!”

“Nuh mummy, I duh wanna enter the junior beauty pageant….”

Emma groaned in disgust.

Then the sprinkler system— including the heavy duty sprinklers in the Janitor’s closet— kicked in.

“AAAAAAAAHG!!”
The first week eased on by. Adrian got used to the drag of the daily grind of high school. Each day he went in, put in his six hours, then booked his way down to the Boardwalk, his little vending license in his hot sweaty hand, and set up his little push cart, selling trinkets and toys cribbed from Azeroth… paper zeppelins, little clockwork bugs, comical toy tanks that shot ping pong balls, Creeeepy Crates, widgets that sparkled and spun and went PING and did absolutely nothing… the Sunshine Butterflies sold quite well. When night fell and the streets rolled up, he closed up his cart and trundled it on home-- then beelined to his workshop, where he put in an hour or two assembling gadgets of more serious use. Then to bed, up at six, lather, rinse, repeat.

Things were going well with Taylor as well. Considering all the hurt she’d been put through and the betrayal she’d suffered, he’d feared he would have to spend far too much time earning her trust. Apparently fleeing the authorities after triggering a building wide panic with the strobing, klaxon-voiced evidence in tow was a bonding moment, because she warmed to him rapidly. Already they were, if not fast friends, then at least kindred spirits and fellows-in-arms.

And according to Taylor, she hadn’t been bothered by anything more than a few hostile glares since then. The Threesome were currently laying low, it seemed. He would wager a guess that he was an unknown commodity. The usual routine with anyone attempting to befriend Taylor in the past was that they quickly knuckled under, or were such social dregs (like Greg Veder) that chasing them off wasn’t worth the bother.

Greg Veder. That was someone else he’d like to help, if he could. He’d have to think about that.

Either way, Adrian was outside their usual paradigm. Taylor figured they were regrouping, deciding how to attack next. Adrian figured they might be waiting until their hearing came back. Sophia was still sort of twitchy, days later…

Friday afternoon came and went. The tools were tucked away, the various trinkets and gadgets he was working on shut down and tucked away on their shelves. He lay back in his bed in the rafters of his Lost Workshop and snoozed away the waning day. At midnight though his alarm went off, a gentle chime from a domed clock he’d found during his yard sale frenzy. He woke up, stared at the roof a few inches from his nose, and smiled. His fangs gleamed in the dark. “Time to start cleaning up the neighborhood,” he said to himself, and chuckled.

Bayleaf’s lair wasn’t just in a poor and crime ridden neighborhood. It was located in the heart of the territory of the Archer’s Bridge Merchants. To anyone else with any mind for real estate, this would have been a calamity. To Bayleaf, it was a bonus.

The Archer’s Bridge Merchants were dealers and junkies. Their rank and file were junkies. Their capes were junkies. Their leader and his woman were both junkies. They dealt… and used… every known substance, licit and illicit, known to man, and quite a few more known only to metahumans. Oh, they dipped their rancid toes in everything else too: prostitution, protection, armed robbery, and the like. But it always came back to drugs. Most of them spent the majority of their day wasted, and what little was left either jonesing for their next hit or robbing someone to pay for it.

The utter bafflement was how in the name of all things holy that they functioned at all. Before coming to Brockton Bay, Bayleaf would have sworn that a group-- noone could call it an “organization”-- like the Merchants was simply functionally impossible. Back on the old home Earth,
there were drug lords and barons and gangs of dealers of course, but one of the cardinal rules of those organizations was that if you were in charge, you didn’t sample the merchandise. Pickling your own brain on a regular basis was a shortcut to your empire crumbling around you, that or one of your more temperate lieutenants putting a bullet in the back of your head and taking over the show. These guys on the other hand were running the candy store with both hands in the bins; they should have imploded long before now if for no other reason than that they swallowed, smoked, snorted or injected all the stock.

And yet, despite all this, they not only managed to stay in business, they managed to hold territory against three other gangs, and thwart the Protectorate as well, and still make enough money to keep Skidmark, Squealer and their lieutenants bombed out of their freaking minds.

Which led Bayleaf to one conclusion: Despite all appearances, Skidmark and Squealer were not the ones calling the shots. Someone-- someone with a still-functioning brain with all its original chemicals intact-- was running things, and they were just along for the ride. It would be interesting finding out who.

For now though, he was going to spend a few nights going after the low-hanging fruit. It was time to establish a presence.

Of all the skills downloaded to him, armor crafting had not been included. He could of course take hammer, tongs and anvil (or leather punch and knife, or cloth and thread) and handicraft something, but the Azerothian art of not only creating armor of cloth, leather, and metal but of infusing it on the anvil (or the rack, or the loom) with enhancing attributes was a complete enigma.

But he did have the skill of enchantment. And he could improvise.

The cloth given to Parian had yielded fruit. She had quickly figured out how to incorporate the arcane enhancements into other types of cloth-- (or rather, Bayleaf suspected, her SHARD had….)

She had not only figured out how to make clothing that was self-resizing, but also how to make it stronger, tougher, more durable…

Bayleaf had been busy the past couple of weeks as well. His efforts at disenchantment had yielded a considerable amount of dusts, essences, and shards-- primarily from items of particular age or sentimental value, he noticed, though he suspected some few were the idle trinkets of tinkers; his own scrapped projects had ended up recycled in the same fashion. As an experiment he had crafted several low level enchantments-- plus-ones to armor and the like-- and given them to Parian to experiment with. Within a matter of hours she had begun producing clothing with armor ratings and attribute enhancements he could feel for himself.

It was something of an open secret between them that he was a cape, but she never spoke of it. To be a rogue in Brockton Bay was to have a code of customer confidentiality to rival that of a physician. She was sitting on her clothier discoveries for now, but already she was grateful enough to offer him commissioned work for free. He asked, and discovered to his gratification that she actually DID work with leather from time to time…

He, ahem. didn’t ask.

Then he’d dug out the Enchanted Leather recipe, and things had really gotten interesting.

He hadn’t gone with any Azeroth designs for his costume. They looked, quite frankly, ridiculous, and the pauldrons would have broken his neck the first time he raised his hands over his head. (he suspected the real Azerothians used shoulder pads a bit more subtle.) Instead he and she (very well, MOSTLY she) had crouched over a drawing board and worked out something original.
A hooded leather jerkin, so dark brown as to be almost black. Bracers of the same material, thick as
booteather. Fingerless gloves. Breeches with kneepads to match the ones at his elbows. A wide belt,
with stout buckles. A long hooded cloak. And footwear that, to Parian’s consternation, were
somewhere between boots and sandals, with bared toes. It was stitched with a repeating pattern, a
Celtic knotwork. Parian had thought it fitting.

Everything was lined inside with soft, sheer cloth for comfort… a futuristic fabric invented by a
tinker that fit like silk yet breathed and wicked away moisture like Gore Tex. It had integrated with
the “new weaving technique” so perfectly it was alarming, Parian had told him.

The final addition sort of scared the heck out of him. It was a belt pouch of thick cloth, not much
larger than a fanny pack, designed to hang at his hip. Yet it held something like ten times its
volume., there was only one compartment, and it only held so much before “burping” and spilling
out whatever you put in it, but there it was.

A first generation handy haversack. In just a week’s time. What would she be crafting in two?

He had thanked her profusely, taken the costume home, and set to adding his own improvements.

The cloak had been quickly upgraded into a Parachute Cloak. The design was improved, though;
closer to a modern parasail than the crude four-corner thing the design normally had. Enchantments
for added armor, fireproofing (he KNEW about Lung), and boosts to his “arcane” powers went
everywhere he could fit them.

The haversack got loaded out with a variety of explosives (gnomes and goblins, whaddya gonna
do?)-- flash bombs, fireworks, and the like; several automated decoys; a pile of high-level first aid
bandages (he had BEGGED Parian for the scraps), and his favorite invention thus far-- a Gnomish
Universal Remote.

One last item was added. He had been working on it from the moment he’d found his workshop: his
staff. He he’d bought it at the flea market from a woodcrafter, a bit of extra scrap he’d had no use for.
Bayleaf had taken it, whittled it down and smoothed it, carved maze-like grooves into its entire
length, hardened it in the fire, then hammered silver melted with moonfire into the grooves. A gem,
fused together from the odd crystals and metals he’d collected and probably unidentifiable by any
earth-born gemologist, had been put into the fitting carved at one end. Then he’d slathered it with
every bottled enchantment he’d had left on his shelves, whether they were intended for a weapon or
not.

To his astonishment, they’d stuck. The moonsilver had glowed, then sunk into the wood and
vanished. The gemstone had been covered, engulfed in a knot of wood. To all outward appearance it
was now just a plain, slightly crooked, gnarled piece of fire hardened driftwood. Yet he could feel
the countless enhancements in it whenever he picked it up.

He didn’t know what had driven him to do something so recklessly wasteful, or even just plain
reckless. But he had been driven, motivated by some muse. He’d taken notes, or at least tried to, as
he proceeded… perhaps someday he’d make sense of them. All he knew now was that it was stout,
it fit in his hands perfectly whether human or worgen, it also fit neatly in his haversack without
trying, and he could whack it with all his strength across one of his anvils and it didn’t even crack.

He donned his costume piece by piece, almost reverently. When he’d dropped the last item-- his
staff-- into his haversack and buckled it shut, he looked in the cracked mirror leaning against the
wall. Man. He looked good.

“Showtime,” he said, his teeth gleaming.
There was a whirr-whirr-whirr, and Obie came trotting across the workfloor, his rotating strobe faintly glowing. Bayleaf patted him on the bubblegum machine. “Keep an eye on the place while I’m gone, Obie,” he said. Obie saluted.

A moment later a trapdoor opened on the rooftop of his workshop, and he leapt out. He raced out across the rooftop on all fours and disappeared into the night, looking for the one thing that Brockton Bay provided in surfeit:

Trouble.

“So,” Emily Piggot said, her hands folded across her desk, her expression (as always) sour. “Do you have ANYTHING to report on the unidentified cape that literally dropped out of the sky on us a little over a month ago?” She turned the screen on her desk around so that Armsmaster could see it. “Besides this, I mean.”

Onscreen was a photograph, one that had become famous online and notorious around the Protectorate and PRT offices. It showed a rather interesting double selfie. On one side, his nose almost to the lens, was an enormous wolf-man, his eyes bugged out mouth hanging open and his tongue dangling out of the side of his mouth in a goofy canine grin. Next to him in a near headlock was Armsmaster. What wasn’t half-wrapped in the werewolf’s arm was half-wrapped in woody vines. Armsmaster himself was looking as utterly displeased with the situation as a human being possibly could. His goatee practically radiated anger. “I like the caption on this one,” Piggot said idly. “Hello. I M WulfMan. I hav just met yu and I luv yu.”

Assault let out a muffled snort, then a grunt as his wife Battery elbowed him. “Nothing to report on our side,” she said matter-of-factly. “Of course most of our patrols have been out near Captain’s Hill. Most of the sightings have been in the Docks or the Trainyard.”

“Any eyewitnesses?” Piggot said, not turning a single hair.

“A few,” Miss Militia said. “Most of the sources, though, are rather…”

“Pickled?” Assault ventured. "Ow!"

“I would have gone with ‘embalmed,’” Miss Militia said dryly. She was idly flipping a glowing green butterfly knife in one hand while she talked. “This wolf-man seems to be concentrating his vigilante efforts in Merchant territory, picking off the drug dealers, pimps and other charming underlings Skidmark attracts. He’s also stopped a number of small time robberies and several assaults… but consequently the eyewitnesses are… less than reliable.”

“Need I point out that we have a speedster in the room?” Piggot said, annoyed. “You may not be able to affect him while at full speed, Velocity, but you could still cover the entirety of the Docks in a handful of minutes. Surely you could have spotted him.”

“Not necessarily,” Armsmaster said. “As I said in my report, the cape in question assumed a secondary form that promptly turned invisible-- or so close that I couldn’t tell the difference.”
“Couldn’t you spot him on infrared?” Velocity said, surprised.

“Infrared is still LIGHT, Velocity,” Armsmaster said, his lips pressed thin. “Whatever cloaking method or device he’s using is very effective.” He hesitated. “Either that or he is able to cool himself down to ambient temperature at will… hm.” His eyes unfocused and flickered in the manner that indicated he was taking down notes on his HUD.

“Still…” Piggot said.

“It doesn’t seem to matter,” Miss Militia said. “Somehow, when we’re still blocks away he knows we’re coming. According to the few… ah… chemically non-enhanced eyewitnesses we’ve found, he’ll suddenly bolt for the rooftops or the shadows without warning, just a minute or so before we or the police arrive on the scene.”

“So he somehow knows when we’re coming?”

“That would be indicated, yes.”

“Lovely.” Piggot’s expression was anything but.

“The longest he’s spoken to anyone was one incident last night…”

Clara sprawled on the ground in the trash-strewn alley where the mugger had thrown her. She scrambled backward on her hands and heels, trying to keep her distance from him and from the knife gleaming in his hand. He was raggedy, dressed in clothes that reeked in only the way that could come from someone who never bothered or cared to clean themselves, and his eyes were glazed. “C’mon,” he said, all too confident of how this would go. “There’s nothing in that purse worth dying for.”

A shadow— an enormous one— seemed to detach itself from the wall behind him. Glowing red eyes looked down on him. “Funny,” it growled in a voice as deep as a well. “That’s what she ought to be saying to you.”

The mugger whipped around, knife out. Before he could even move a clawed hand the size of a small shovel whipped out and wrapped around his head. He was lifted off the ground, his screaming muffled by the palm covering his face. He kicked helplessly at the air and lashed out, stabbing blindly one, two, three times— the other hand appeared and grabbed the mugger’s knife hand. There was a crack. The muffled screaming went up an octave, and the monster threw the broken knife away---

“So, some level of invulnerability?"

“Or just body armor.”
“True. Continue.”

The mugger-turned-prey clawed at the monster’s arm with his good hand, to no avail. “All the suffering in this world,” the monster said, his voice as much sorrowful as it was angry, “And you have to add to it. For what? For nothing but a few minute’s poison.” He turned and marched further up the alley. There was a muffled THUMP, and the mugger’s screams ceased. This was followed by a loud squelching crunch— and the monster returned; behind him the unlucky mugger was crammed, headfirst, into a can full of trash. He was alive, or at least still moving feebly.

“Head first in the trash, huh?” Assault was clearly amused.

“It… seems to be his trademark,” Armsmaster admitted reluctantly. “He doesn’t just beat up and secure his prisoners; it seems he has to humiliate them in some fashion as well.”

“I could like this guy,” Assault said.

Clara was scared stiff; too scared to move or even breathe too loud. The monster came closer; in the dim light she saw that he was an enormous wolf-man, dressed in a leather cloak and wielding a wooden staff. He was seven, eight feet tall if he was an inch, and his eyes glowed blood red in the moonlight.

He knelt down and reached for her. She shrieked and cringed. He pulled back. “I’m not going to hurt you, I promise,” he said. “You’re hurt. Let me help.” He reached out again. This time she held still. He pulled out a patch of cloth and wiped at the cut and bruise on her face. It was cool and tingled as he wiped it across her skin. It stuck in place, covering the wound. “There, that should help.” He took her hands, carefully brushing the gravel out of the cuts, and wrapped them in more soothing cloth.

“Do you have a phone?”

“I-I yes, I do.”

“Call the police,” he said. His eyes seemed to squint in amusement. “And next time you go out, carry something a little higher caliber than speed dial.”
“So now he’s encouraging people to arm themselves,” Arsmaster said, in obvious disapproval. "Just what this city needs. A bunch of frightened women running around with firearms."

There was a loud SCHICK-CHACK. Miss Militia’s infinite weapon had changed from a butterfly knife to a pump action shotgun. “Gun control,” she said sourly, “is the proposition that a 98 pound woman should have to fight off a 200 pound rapist with her bare hands.”

Assault leaned over to Battery. “Awk-warrrrrd,” he sing-songed sotto voce.

Piggot growled. “Table that. Back to the point.”

“Thank.. thank y--” But before Clara could finish saying it, the wolfman’s ears pricked up. Without a word he leapt… clear to the rooftop… and vanished.

Mere seconds later, the familiar thrumm of Miss Militia’s motorcycle echoed down the alleyway. She stopped with with a jerk at the mouth of the alley and shone a spotlight down on Clara, making her squint. “What happened here, Ma’am?” She said over the engine roar.

“That incident is typical of all verified encounters with him,” Arsmaster concluded. “He drops out of nowhere, stops the perpetrator cold-- generally leaving him in a humiliating position-- dresses the wounds of the victim, and then vanishes moments before the authorities arrive. Sometimes he strikes so quickly that the eyewitness never actually sees him. There’s just a blur and suddenly the perp is down.” His beard bristled in irritation. “At least those are the cases we know he was involved in…”

Piggot raised an eyebrow. It was the most she’d moved since the start of the meeting. “Pardon?”

“There have been other incidents,” Velocity said. “Odd enough that we think he may be involved. Such as a pack of drug dealers we found, tied to a lamp post, surrounded by ruined baggies of their “product” and in hysterics. They were all high as kites, but they gave the arresting officers what they THOUGHT was a cock-and-bull story about being attacked by an invisible tiger.”

“An invisible tiger…” Piggot said.

“Yes, they couldn’t see it, but they could hear it… and see its paw prints on the ground… they were apparently doing some buying and selling out of an old storage facility when this thing attacked them. Smacked them around, scattered their product all over the place, shredded the tires on their car so they couldn’t get away-- Any of them pulled a gun or knife a huge invisible paw would slap it out of their hands.

“It played cat and mouse with them for about an hour, chasing them up and down that old storage
yard. Every now and then they’d think they lost it, then it would roar right in their ear… it finally threw a phone at their feet and said one word: “Call.” They couldn’t dial 911 fast enough. Then they say there was this gigantic flash of blue-white light, and when they woke up they were all tied to the lamppost with their merchandise spread out all over the place around them.”

“Vicious sense of humor, too,” Assault noted.

“Well that matches Armsmaster’s report of him turning into some sort of invisible creature,” Battery said. “This guy’s an interesting grab bag.”

“His avian form is accounted for too,” Velocity said. “Some perv tried to kidnap a little girl over on the boardwalk. He didn’t make fifty feet with her tucked under his arm before a giant owl dropped out of the sky—”

“A giant OWL?” Piggot’s eyebrows both raised at that one.

“A giant bleepin’ owl,” Velocity said. “It falcon punched the guy and knocked him out.”

“I feel like an excuse for plot exposition, but… “falcon punched?” Battery asked.

“Some birds kill their prey by literally punching them,” Assault told his wife. “They dive down at a hundred miles per, with their feet clenched up in fists like this—” he held his fists out in front of him. “When they hit, WHAM.” Everyone paused. “Hey, I watch Animal Planet, okay?”

“Eyewitnesses say the guy flipped completely over in the air before hitting the ground,” Velocity said. “He’s in the hospital with some nasty skull fractures and one hell of a case of whiplash.”

Assault started chuckling. “I really hope this is all one guy, because he gets better with every story,” he said.

“Please don’t tell me there’s more,” Piggot said.

“Please tell me there is!” Assault said.

It was another street, another mouth of another alley, and another mugging. This time it was a young couple on their way home from a movie. This time the mugger had a gun. “Wallet, watch, jewelry, phone. Come on!”

Bayleaf was on the rooftop. He had accidentally stumbled into a clothesline someone had stretched there, and was untangling himself from a beach blanket they had forgotten to take in. He looked over the edge of the roof, saw the mugging taking place, and had a terrible, awful, wonderful idea…

The young man hastily removed his watch and dug out his wallet. The guy snatched them from his hands with nervous fingers. “Now you too, sister—”

It was then the alley rang with a mighty battle cry.

“BJORRRRRRK!!!”
The mugger spun about, gun at the ready, but he wasn’t fast enough. He was flattened to the pavement by an enormous wall of blubber as a walrus, wearing a beach towel tied around its neck like a cape, lunged out of the alley and bore him to the ground.

The two lovebirds could only gawk in astonishment the one ton aquatic mammal reared up and “orrorked” in triumph. They could see the mugger’s head, arms, and feet sticking out from underneath their bizarre rescuer.

The mugger argghghled and tried to reach for his gun where it had fallen to the sidewalk. Bad mistake. The walrus saw him trying to reach the weapon and proceeded to bounce up and down on top of him.

“HuaghHuaghHuaghHuagh!”

The walrus barked, gave one last bounce, and slapped the gun away from the mugger’s limp hand with a flipper.

The couple stared.

The walrus stared back. It nudged one of the cellphones lying on the sidewalk in their direction.

“Wha, what, who do we call??” The young man stammered, his common sense derailed.

“Call nine-one-one,” the mugger groaned flatly.

“Right right, we need the police,” the young man said, jabbing at the buttons.

“We need an ambulance,” the mugger moaned.

“Are you… some sort of hero?” The girl asked the walrus. By way of reply the walrus reared up, showing the “W” smeared on its chest in white paint.

Sirens started to draw close. The walrus turned and began belly-walking back into the alley. “Thank you...” the girl called out. It looked back, gave her a salute with one flipper, and belly-walked out of sight.

Moments later a squad car, lights going, pulled up to the alley. Up on the rooftop Bayleaf lay on his back, rocking back and forth and biting his own arm to keep from howling with laughter.

Everyone in the meeting room watched Assault warily. He was rocking back and forth, face red as his costume. There was, everyone privately calculated, a good chance he would explode.

“There were further sightings,” Armsmaster went on, as if in pain. “A walrus saved a drowning man out in the bay. And a couple of smugglers in a fishing smack were boarded and routed by an angry walrus in a cape.” He grimaced; the next words came out like he was passing a kidney stone. “He’s already become something of a local meme in the neighborhood; people in the Docks have begun referring to him-- it-- as Wonder Walrus--”

“WONDER WALRUS!!!!” Assault shrieked, toppling over backwards out of his chair. He rolled on the floor, howling and clutching his ribs.
Battery watched him and sighed. “He’ll need a minute,” she said.

Piggot slowly massaged her temples. “Good, because I’LL need a minute,” she said.

Later… MUCH later… after Assault had calmed down enough, they resumed. “So we’ve determined he’s a shapeshifter with at least four forms,” Piggot said. “A wolf-man or beast-man form, an aerial form, that of an owl, a stealth form, of an invisible great cat of some sort, and…. An aquatic form… of a walrus. Shut up, Assault.”

Assault let out a smothered giggle.

“We have one other possible,” Triumph said, speaking up for the first time. “Though… well, I’d include it only because it’s so strange.” His mouth curled up at the corner. “And strange seems to be this guy’s thing.”

Piggot sighed. “Continue.”

“It came in from Panacea, of all people…”

Amy Dallon, the legendary Panacea, slumped and groaned in relief as the door closed behind her. A moment’s privacy, finally. Some days it was just more than she could take, working hour after hour in the hospital, healing the same blasted problems over and over…

Thank whoever was responsible for this space. It was an enclosed courtyard in the middle of the building. Few people used it, especially this late in the fall, and there were few windows looking down on it. She’d taken to sneaking out here to sneak a smoke where nobody would bother, or worse, lecture her about it.

It was a shame noone else came out here though. It was a pretty little garden courtyard. Especially now with the flowers blooming and the green in the trees…

She stopped with the cigarette in her lips, lighter halfway to the tip, and reviewed that thought. Flowers. And green leaves. In early NOVEMBER.

She looked around carefully. What was going on? For one thing, she did NOT remember that tree standing over there. And this faint, misty-green glow over everything. At first she thought it was just the light filtering down through the branches of the tree. Then she realized the light was coming FROM the branches of the tree.

Curiosity overcame common sense. She approached, stealthy as a cat, to see what was going on. Just as she was within arm’s reach, the “tree” lowered its head, looked at her and slowly smiled…”

Piggot facepalmed. “A TREE?”
She realized what she was seeing now. The part she had mistaken for a stump of a bough was actually a long-jawed head, with a craggy face like an old man and glowing green eyes. The two largest boughs were upraised arms. It lowered them. Then it reached out with one leafy hand and plucked the cigarette from where it dangled, forgotten and unlit, from her lower lip. The treant-- there was no other word for it-- fliled the cigarette over its shoulder and slowly shook a finger at her.

“Baaaaad…. Forrrr …. Youuuuu.” It said, smiling at her gently.

Flummoxed beyond words, she fell back on her old standby: snark. “Oh fine, great,” she said, “now the trees are lecturing me on my personal habits. Look, whatever you are, that’s my business and not- ugh. Huuk. HACCK!” While she had been speaking the Treant had laid one hand on her back. There was a strange second glow. The next thing she knew, a violent coughing fit hit her. She doubled over and a wad of phlegm and tar the size of the palm of her hand hit the path between her feet.

“Oh, yuck. Wait, that was in my lungs?” She blinked. “Did you do that?”

The Treant winked at her.

Amy bridled. “All right, buster. What are you doing here??” She demanded.

“Giiiift… of… Eluuuune.” The Treant raised its arms and looked at the sky. It’s glow grew brighter. And brighter.

Panacea suddenly realized something: she felt good. No, really good. Better than she had in days. Her exhaustion was gone, dozens of little aches and pains she’d had in her back, her feet, her legs, all became apparent by their absence. She checked her hand; the scratches she’d gotten from her neighbor’s pet cat the other day were gone completely. Was this what it felt like to be healed? No wonder so many people wanted a touch from her power so badly. She found herself doing something she rarely did; she smiled.

There was a commotion at one of the windows. A little girl was there, in a hospital gown, bouncing up and down waving excitedly.

Amy gawked like a fool. Wasn’t that the little girl on the third floor? The one who had an aneurysm and was in a coma??

“Holy crap,” Velocity said.

“Got that right.” Assault agreed.
“They did a quick survey and eval of everyone at the hospital,” Triumph went on. “There were no real “miracle cures” — no one grew back a lost limb, and most cancers were only diminished, not cured. But scars burns and other wounds were healed, broken bones mended, infections vanished, poisoning cases cleared up instantly… everyone, staff included, experienced at least some uptick on their physical health.

"But an aneurysm?"

"Just a broken vein or artery in the brain," Assault said. "A tiny little wound. Which is what makes them so tragic."

“Did anyone attempt to capture, or at least speak to him?” Armsmaster asked.

Triumph shook his head. “After all the staff, and Panacea, were through running around figuring out what was up with their patients, they found out the Treant had disappeared. The closest thing we have to an eyewitness is a little girl who said ‘the Magic Tree turned into a big bird and flew away.’”

“Which ties him back to our strange visitor from the sky,” Piggot concluded. “Okay, this cape has become priority one. He’s a brute, a changer with who knows how many forms, a stranger with invisibility that fools even infrared cameras, – his healing abilities alone make him absolutely priceless to the Protectorate. We can’t have him getting snatched up by some gang or supervillain team or worse. Recruit him. Offer him whatever it takes. Find him and get him on the team!”

Amy sat up in bed, staring at what lay in her palm by the light of her alarm clock face. She hadn’t told anyone about it; it seemed too important. Shortly before the Treant had flown off, while everyone in the hospital was running around like chickens with their heads cut off, she had gone back out to the little enclosed park to confront him, to try to speak to him.

Before she could say a word, he had taken her hands in his and pressed something into her palm. “Do… Sooomething… Newwww," he’d said. Then he winked again, and vanished in a flash of blue white light. The last she’d seen of him-- though she didn’t know it till later-- was an enormous owl, flying up into the sky.

She had sat up, examining the acorn with her power. To her relief, as well as her disappointment, it was just what it appeared: an ordinary acorn from an ordinary oak tree somewhere. For a while there she’d thought she’d been asked to raise the Treant’s offspring.

But that wasn’t what the treant had said. It had said for her to do something she had been terrified to do since she was a little girl.. to use her powers to do more than just heal. To try something new.

Wouldn’t that be something. She had so many ideas. So many she’d been so afraid to even THINK of. Her power seemed to leap about like a puppy at the very idea. Eager to try.

She looked at the acorn.

Could she? Did she dare?

Carefully, slowly, she opened her power into the acorn. It began to glow…
Chapter 12

The boats glided out onto the lake with barely a ripple. Slowly, majestically, the torch-lit towers of Hogwarts came into view. Behind them, far in the distance, stormclouds rolled. They cut a light-spangled silhouette against the night sky. Oohs and Ahhs greeted the sight. Hagrid smiled broadly, his teeth gleaming in the midst of his beard, and gestured grandly. “There she is...” he said.

Harry stood up in his own boat and gestured equally as grandly. “Camelot!” he pronounced in tones pompous and reverent.

Several of the Muggleborns got the joke and snickered. Hermione couldn’t resist. She stood and faced him, throwing her arms wide. “Camelot!” she replied.

“Camelot!” They said together, turning together to look at the castle.

“It’s only a model,” someone in the throng shouted. Harry gave the unseen speaker a thumbs up while the rest of the muggleborns burst into explosive giggles. Hagrid only looked befuddled, while many of the purebloods looked confused or disdainful as suited their temperament.

“Muggleborns are weird,” Pansy Parkinson was heard muttering. Noone disagreed.

The view didn’t last long; the distant stormclouds had quickly become not-so-distant even as they ascended the stairs from the docks. Lightning flickered, and thunder rumbled, still faint in the distance but closing fast.

“So how does your, um, family deal with vampire hunters?” Hermione had taken the moment to resume asking Harry questions about his vampire family, right up to the doors of the Great Hall.

Harry shrugged. “It’s not really a problem in Wallachia. Anyway, we’re rich, we live in a fortress full of servants and guards and ghasts and gaunts and werewolves and-- well, you get the idea. Anyone who comes sneaking in looking to cause trouble soon finds themselves running OUT.” He thought for a moment. “If you mean regular middle-class vampires, though, I hear most use the Buddy System.”

“The Buddy System?” Ron interjected.

“Yeah,” Harry said cheerfully. “They’ll share a house or a flat with a werewolf or two. The werewolves keep an eye out while the vampire is sleeping during the day, and the vampires keep an eye on the werewolves when the full moon is rising. It’s a very mutually beneficial system, which is always good, Dad says.” Harry shrugged again. “Of course it’s not always werewolves. Sometimes they room with a poltergeist or a ghast or some hobgoblins or what have you. But it’s usually werewolves. We have a sort of a werewolf refugee crisis these days... what with your laws here.”

He gave them both a toothy grin. “Of course there’s always my third Uncle twice removed. Real hermit. Lives in an underground dungeon, with like miles of tunnels under a mountain. He never had any trouble with vampire hunters though...”
Hermione took the bait. “Why not?”

“He floods the tunnels with carbon dioxide,” Harry said. “Vampire hunters need to breathe. Vampires don’t.” He got a faraway look and snickered. “There was one time he replaced all the carbon dioxide canisters with helium… he said the look on that Van Helsing guy’s face before he passed out was priceless.” He pinched his nose and began reciting in a high squeaky voice. “Ach, foul vight, your wicked vays shall end mit-- vat? Vat in himmel? Vat is wrrrrrong mit my voice??--”

Hermione nearly doubled over laughing; Neville and Ron just laughed awkwardly like they weren’t sure they got the joke. “We’ll have to show you a trick with a muggle helium balloon some time,” Harry told them.

Any further conversation was interrupted as Professor McGonngal had appeared. She gave them all a brief lecture on the virtues of the various Houses, how they would be their home away from home, etc. Mention was made of a Sorting, and a test-- which promptly generated some small panic among the student body. The professor though was on a roll and ignored any of the questions the firsties blurted out. “DO take a moment to smarten yourselves up,” McGonnagall said, eyeing a couple of the more disheveled students with stern eyes and pursed lips. “We will be letting you in shortly.” She then vanished back through the door, shutting it behind her with a dull boom.

Hermione fretted aloud that it might be written; had she studied enough? More alarming was Ron’s muttering something about having to wrestle a troll. They didn’t have much time to worry about it though.

There were sudden loud shrieks. Two ghosts had just floated through the wall next to them! The two were arguing aloud about some matter or the other, and didn’t seem to notice as they passed right through the students, throwing several of them into a terrible fright. One of the ghosts, a fat man in a monk’s robe and cassock, seemed to notice them at last and looked down at them with a mellow smile. “Oh my, Firsties,” he said. “Is it really Sorting time again…? I hadn’t realized it was that time again.”

Harry suddenly let out a loud snort, drawing several surprised glances. He gave no explanation though; simply staring at the ghosts through his smoked glasses with a raised eyebrow and a thin smirk on his face.

This seemed to throw the specter off his stride somehow. “ Didn’t mean to frighten you all,” he said with increasingly false cheer. “Bit of a thing, all us ghosts roaming about, it happens from time to time--” he trailed off as Harry’s eyebrow rose further. “Well, er, I… hope to see you in Hufflepuff… my old house… not all of you of course, but um, a good few… nothing wrong with the other--”

The other ghost, a courtly looking fellow with an enormously wide ruffled collar, coughed discreetly into his fist. “Perhaps we should be going,” he said discreetly. “Don’t want to be late...”

“Quite.” With an air of relief the two ghosts fled-- back through the wall they had entered by. Harry stretched out his arms and proceeded to give the departed Departed a slow theatrical clap. “Bravo,” he said dryly. “Nicely staged...”

Hermione gave him a confused and possibly offended look. “What..?”

Harry leaned over to her. “They were winding us up, Hermione,” he said gently.

“What? It’s obvious that was a setup,” he said. “Didn’t know it was that time again,’ my great-grandfather’s false teeth. They’ve obviously been haunting this castle for hundreds of years; they probably know the schedule better than the teachers do.
"And they somehow missed the roomful of people on the other side of that door? ... I can hear their heartbeats from here," he explained. “Ghosts in magical homes and mansions are always doing that to new visitors,” he informed the muggleborn girl. “They just wanted to see how many ickle firsties and muggleborns they could get a rise out of.”

Several students relaxed a bit. Ron even rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe I fell for that,” he muttered. “Da warned me that ghosts are always doing that sort of thing...”

Harry snorted. “They thought that was clever,” he said. “The little initiation ritual the ghosts at my Dad’s castle put newbies through, they would’ve needed to bring out a mop and bucket and fresh undies for everyone.”

McGonagall returned. “Come along, it’s time to begin.” She then led them into the Great Hall, between the rows of tables. Nearly everyone took a moment to gawk at the ceiling, which Hermione informed them was enchanted to look as if it were open to the sky and was now filled end to end with rumbling black clouds. They milled forward in a huddle...

All save for Harry, who strode slowly but confidently ahead of the others, his robes billowing around him in a manner that would be the envy of his future potions teacher, his fanged smile gleaming in the candlelight as faint flickers of lightning strobed in the windows and behind the clouds above. He looked like he belonged there, in a huge, drafty, candlelit castle or one like it; Hermione reflected that he looked every inch a Dark Lord marching up to take his iron throne-- or he would have, if he hadn’t been only eleven years old and so short he’d have needed a step stool to keep his feet from dangling.

Then he and the crowd of firsties gathered up at the front of the room, and the moment was gone and he was just another pale-faced, black-robed Firstie among many.

McGonagall followed them up. She set a wooden stool upon the stage and upon the stool she set a battered old hat. The wrinkles on it creased and crumpled, folding into a face on the side that began to sing:

Oh you may not think I'm pretty,/But don't judge on what you see,/I'll eat myself if you can find/A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,/Your top hats sleek and tall,/For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat/And I can cap them all....

The hat finished its solo number, everyone applauded politely (as one wit once said about a dancing bear, it wasn’t so much that it danced well as that it danced at all) and the sorting began. Students were called, they marched (or crept, or sidled) forward, donned the hat and were sent off to join one of the four tables waiting for them, to cheers from their fellow housemates (and one or two catcalls from their rivals, from time to time.)

“Abbot, Hannah!” A young girl scurried to the stool and donned the hat.

“HUFFLEPUFF!” the hat roared.

Slowly the crowd of firsties thinned, and the tables filled. The stormclouds grew thicker and more turbulent, the lightning more frequent as the wind dashed against the invisible roof. As the sorting stretched on there was a sort of breathless air in the hall that seemed to get thicker by the moment. Everything seemed to be building to a crescendo.
“Orlock-Potter, Hadrian!” McGonagall said, stumbling a bit at the unexpected added syllables. “Er, POTTER, HARRY!”

Thunder BOOMED. Half the people in the room raised an inch out of their seats. When they came back down and caught their breaths, Harry was already seated and the Hat was slipping down over his ears.

_Oooh my_, said the Hat on (and in) Harry’s head. _Quite an… unexpected upbringing you’ve had, Mr. Orlock-Potter._

_I know, right?_ Harry replied. _And just go with Harry Potter. We’re all friends here right?_

_Certainly,_ the Hat chuckled. _Now let’s see… hmm… oh my. My oh my. The Hat sounded… distinctly perturbed as it perused Harry’s memories. My, that IS a lot of torches and pitchforks… how on earth did you fit THAT inside a ballroom?… werewolf rides??… the entire village got a restraining order?? that’s not supposed to explode! It’s not even supposed to be flammable!…_

The Hat muttered to itself for an alarmingly long time. _My word. My word indeed. Well you certainly are a challenge to sort… and thank Merlin once I’ve sorted you you’re someone else’s problem, it added in an ominous undertone._

_So let’s go over them. Ahem. Hufflepuff…_

_The Villagers-With-Torches-and-Pitchforks House,_ Harry contributed facetiously.

_Hm, not what I would have said but I could see them doing that on a bad day, yes,_ the hat said wryly. _Perhaps Ravenclaw…_

_Oooh, the Mad Scientist house,_ Harry said.

_Indeed, they’d either all end up as your minions working down in the lab, or dissecting you to see what makes you tick, the Hat said. And Slytherin--- good heavens no--_

_‘Heaven won’t let me in but Hell is afraid I’d take over,’ right?_ Harry thought with a carnivorous grin.

_‘The school has enough troubles with the House of Snakes without me letting a Mongoose loose inside it,’_ the Hat said witheringly. _‘They are a pitiful tribute to their forefathers. There are some few good ones among them but most count it ‘ambition’ to dream of being the biggest fish in a very small pond… you on the other hand would be a shark among guppies._

_‘So in review, you’d scare Hufflepuff into a perpetual state of panicked mob, Ravenclaw would give you a talent pool of unprincipled geniuses that I shudder to imagine what they’d get up to for you, And you’re completely out of the most cunning Slytherin’s league--- the only house even remotely capable of coping with your habitual state of unruly behavior, reckless risk-taking, complete disregard for law and order and your perpetual aura of imminent chaos with anything resembling aplomb would be--_

_“GRYFFINDOR!”_

_KRA-KA-KA-BADOOM! As the Hat made its pronouncement, a bolt of lightning split the stormy_
night sky overhead, throwing everything in blinding illumination. This time everyone DID jump in their seats. Many screamed. More than one or two even passed out.

*Nice touch,* the Hat said.

*Thanks,* Harry replied. People always seemed to forget that Vampires did have some influence over the weather... He got to his feet, removed the Hat and sketched a sweeping bow, first to the student body, then to McGonagall, then to the teachers seated at the high table behind the unsorted First-years. “It’s an honor to be here,” he said, letting his smoke-bespectacled eyes track meaningfully over the teachers and staff seated there. Some were looking shocked (and slightly deaf), others looked intrigued. The one in the purple turban looked positively sick; the hook-nosed, greasy haired one next to him looked positively livid, his face a barely held wooden mask over seething fury. The Headmaster on the other hand was leaning forward, his chin resting on folded hands, the benevolent, grandfatherly expression on his face not quite reaching his glittering eyes.

“I’m looking forward to working with you all,” Harry finished, his spectacles locking onto the Headmaster’s eyes. “*Some of us have so much to catch up on.*”

Thunder cracked again, and something flickered in the Headmaster’s eyes; something deeply apprehensive. Giving everyone a WIDE, toothy grin, Harry turned about and marched down to the Gryffindor table where two of his three friends from the train already waited.

The celebratory antics at the table were a bit… stilted.

“What was all that about?” Hermione stage-whispered to him as he took a seat.

“What?” Harry said blithely as he tucked his robes around himself. He didn’t look at her.

“*Oh ve haff so much to ketch up on,*” she said. “That!”

“Yeah, Harry,” Neville mumbled under his breath. “For a second there it looked like you were trying to murder the teachers with your eyes. It was kind of creepy.” The round faced boy looked unsettled.

“You do remember me telling you my story on the train, didn’t you?” Harry said a bit testily. “Half the staff at least was in on that little crime. Dumbledore’s the one who dumped me on a doorstep like a newspaper when I was a baby. And McGonagall and that big guy Hagrid helped him do it!”

Hermione and Neville’s mouths formed “o”s of surprise. “How-- how do you know--” Neville asked.

“My parents hired Para Investigators Incorporated when they adopted me,” Harry grunted. “They’re a Private Investigators company. They got Aurors, Muggle detectives, werewolf trackers, a couple of gypsy seers-- the works. They are GOOD at what they do.” His lip twitched. “They got the full story. Dumbledore had Hagrid beat the Aurors to the scene, and snatch me out of the rubble of my parents’ house before their bodies even cooled. Then he and McGonagall--”

“Professor McGonagall,” Hermione said automatically. She regretted it the moment she saw the look he gave her from the corner of his eye.

“And he and McGonagall,” he repeated, “stick a note on me and dump me on my relative’s doorstep in the middle of the night. Then they fly off and leave me there for a rogue ghoulish with the munchies to find an hour later.” He growled a little, pausing to applaud as someone else was Sorted. “Let’s just say they’re not my favorite people in the world.”

“But.. but that breaks about a dozen laws!” Hermione protested, her whispering rising dangerously
loud. “Kidnapping, child endangerment--”

“You better believe Dump-on-my-Door--”

“Harry!”

“--spent a pretty Knut or two keeping his bearded arse out of jail and the story out of the newspapers.” Harry noted. “But the real kicker is this: he did everything in his power to keep Voldemort’s people out of Azkaban, too.”

“What??”

“Oh yeah. That bearded old goat spent a LOT of money and time in the Wizengamot, pleading for leniency for every Death Eater they caught-- and getting more than a few of them off.” He nodded in the direction of the head table, not quite suppressing a sneer. “Kinda makes you wonder whose side he’s really on, don’t it. So, like I said. Not my favorite people in the world.” His smile was pure malevolence. “I intend to make Headmaster Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore’s next seven years as interesting as possible.”

Ron was sorted, and all but ran to sit in the spot next to his friends. “So what were you all whispering about?” he asked. Hermione was looking… distraught for some reason.

“Dinner,” Harry said, his mood changing suddenly. Up at the podium, the Headmaster gave the signal for the Welcoming Feast to begin. Instantly the tables were filled to groaning with food of every sort.

There were trays, platters, and bowls heaped high, with pitchers of pumpkin juice dispersed here and there in between-- save right in front of Harry’s own place; there, a pitcher of something considerably thicker and darker colored waited for him. He filled a silver goblet that had materialized from somewhere and saluted his friends. “Dig in,” he said. “We got big days ahead of us.”

“Okay,” Harry said as he set out the potion-making kit at their desk. “Before he gets here and gives us our first potion to do, we’d better sort this out. I’ll handle the mixing and adding, you handle the cutting and measuring.”

“Why do you get to do the mixing?” Ron protested, half joking.

“Because I’m the Vampire Prince, and it’s my turn to be Doctor Frankenstein,” Harry said. “And you know what that leaves you to be.”

Ron grinned. They’d spent the weekend watching old black and white horror ‘moo-vees’ on one of Harry’s electronic gadgets. “I dunno, but I’ve got a hunch.”

Harry stared at him through his smoked glasses. “That was bad, and you should feel bad,” he said.

“Aw, it was funny.”

“It was terrible. I should bite you for that. I should have Lurch bite you for that. Lurch, where are you? Come over here and bite him.”
“Good thing he’s still up in the tower attic.”

“Nuts, thwarted again.” Harry snapped his fingers.

The door to the dungeon laboratory (Dungeon Lab. Harry approved of the aesthetics, if not the practicality) boomed shut. Severus Snape, Potions master, glided across the room to stand behind his podium. He glowered at the class over his hook nose for several seconds as if waiting for silence (there was no need; you could have already heard a pin drop.) Once he was certain he’d set the dramatic mood firmly enough, he began to take attendance.

Eventually he arrived at Harry’s name. It couldn’t have been more obvious he had an axe to grind if he’d been projecting it to the back row in an operetta. He gave the vampire boy a gimlet stare. “Ah. Mister Potter. Our new… celebrity.” He drawled the last word almost luxuriously. He scowled suddenly, as Harry hadn’t ceased arranging the potion-making equipment on their table as he spoke. “Pay attention to me, boy!” he snapped. “Don’t think your fame buys you any leniency with me!”

Harry’s hands stilled. Ron felt his growing anger at Snape for tweaking his friend about his “fame” suddenly replaced by a vague nervousness. Harry was TOO still; unnaturally so. Ron was put in mind of an ambush predator about to strike. “Are you talking about that whole ‘boy-who-lived’ thing, Sir?” Harry said politely. “Because I’m pretty sure Wallachian Princes don’t make the news much here.”

Snape seethed. Snape was a small, mean and petty man. He had ruined his own life with his bigotries and hatreds, and had spent the last twelve years taking his bitterness out on everyone around him—especially his luckless students. Every day of his misery he still blamed on everyone but himself, but especially his childhood nemesis, James Potter. He had been filled with bitter gall to learn that his old nemesis’ spawn was going to attend Hogwarts'. His discovery that the son of James Potter was now some sort of foreign royalty had nearly thrown him into an apoplexy. His only comfort had been the knowledge that the pampered brat would be at his mercy as one of his students, and he fully intended to flay and eviscerate the boy with his tongue at every opportunity.

“Every inch your disreputable father’s son, I see,” he said. “Spoiled, disrespectful and arrogant from start to finish. A pity your mother had to suffer the indignity of knowing -- look at me when I’m speaking to you, boy!” he barked. “And-- take off those ridiculous tinted glasses this minute!”

“…As you wish, sir.” A chill settled over the room that had nothing to do with the dungeon damp. It might have been a figment of imagination, but everyone who had been there agreed later that as Harry had looked up and removed his spectacles, every open candleflame and cauldron burner had dimmed and guttered, throwing the room into flickering shadow.

As for Snape, he found himself nearly swallowing his tongue as two burning emerald eyes limned in coal red latched onto his. The moment the spectacles had come off he had of course lashed out with his Legilimency at the boy-- it was a favorite trick of his when dealing with those he considered impertinent or disrespectful; peeling loose their surface thoughts and then dropping them in the ensuing conversation, making it look like he could read the victim like a book and that they could get nothing past him, flaying them alive with their own insecurities. This time though it was a different story. He did not break through the weak walls of a child's mind, into a treasure vault of tumbled-together deeply private memories. No, it was as if his probe had fallen into an empty room-- or perhaps more aptly, a black and bottomless well. All the room around them faded to black and he could not look away from the boy’s eyes.

“You stupid prick,” the miniature version of James Potter-- and yet more, oh so much more-- chuckled at him, gloating. “You actually tried to use Legilimency on a VAMPIRE PRINCE?”
Snape made a gargling noise. “Oh, don’t worry, Gargamel,” the boy sneered, stepping out from behind his desk. “None of the other Smurfs will hear. This is all in your mind right now; noone else will hear or see a thing. … Then again, that’s probably not too comforting right now is it? Seeing as you just insulted me AND my dead Mother and Father in one breath.” Snape realized he was sitting behind his desk, the boy somehow looming impossibly huge over him, glowing red-green eyes riveting his soul in place.

“Let me make the immediate future real simple for you, Professor Snape. I know all about you and my mother. When my parents adopted me they employed a passel of private investigators; they wanted to know everything possible about the baby they’d just turned and adopted. So yeah, I know you and my mother were childhood friends. I know that you and my parents were classmates, and that you spent seven years pining away after her, even though she was a ‘mudblood.’ I know you were RIVALS with my father for her, long after it was clear you had no chance.

“Let me spell it out. SHE WAS NEVER GOING TO F$@#%^ YOU.”

Snape made noises of outrage at the profanity. How dare this brat sully the--- “No no no, get it straight,” Harry said. "I'm a Vampire Prince and I'm in your MIND, dumbass. You're an open book to me. Hell, you're a wall mural. You weren't in love with her. You COVETED HER. You thought that because you found her first, before anyone else in the wizarding world did, you somehow had DIBS on her.

But she was NEVER going to do you. She was NEVER going to be yours. She was a muggleborn, you pot-stirring retard, and you joined the Death Eaters… a bunch of people who killed muggleborns for shits and giggles. You were a neonazi skinhead trying to get in the pants of a jew. What did you THINK was going to happen when a nicer guy came along?”

Snape tried to rise from his chair and found he couldn’t. “Nicer Guy?? James Potter..was an arrogant.. bully...” Snape rasped, seething as he struggled.

“Why? Because he pulled pranks and picked on YOU and your Death Eater pals? What part of ‘I Was a Teenage Magical Nazi’ doesn’t REGISTER with you??” Harry snarled back, literally eyes blazing. “I'm in your head, dumbass. And even before that my parents had investigators backtracking my life, and my parent's lives, and the lives of everyone tied to them... the Death Eaters, the Order of the Phoenix, everything. It pays to have paranoid royalty for parents. I knew your school records even before you tried to poke me in the brain.

"Yeah, they harassed and picked on you-- and your Death Eater Youth Club friends-- and you DESERVED EVERY MINUTE OF IT!"

His pale hand lashed out and sank into Snape’s forehead. Snape could feel him digging through the bookshelves and filing cabinets of his mind, rifling through memories Snape had thought carefully hidden and locked away by his Occlumency. When Harry’s hand reappeared, it was holding a fistful of manila folders. Harry waved them in his face, flipping through them at random. “Terrorizing muggleborn firsties! Casting curses and hexes on half-bloods and ‘blood traitors!’ Hazing, extorting, blackmailing—trying to get another student expelled for lycanthropy— dabbling with Dark magic, even filling your textbook margins with dark curses to use on your enemies... And lookee here-- "he held up a page that looked like it had been torn from a potions textbook. "Your personal favorite spell. 'Sectumsempra.' You’d go to the infirmary with your skin turned green or your hair turned to a clown wig; my father and his friends went to the healer looking like you threw bags of razor blades at them. You really were a little piece of shit. And you wonder why you were James Potters’ favorite target?” He threw the folders at Snape’s chest.

“My Dad may have been a jerk jock, but he got better. You on the other hand ran off to join
Voldemort before the ink was even dry on your diploma. Oh yeah, I knew you were a ‘former’ Death Eater before I even got on the Express. My parents weren’t about to send me anywhere one of Voldemort’s trained monkeys lived without a warning ahead of time.”

He planted his hands on the desk and leaned forward till he was almost nose-to-crooked-nose with Snape, and smiled like a shark at a baby leg buffet. “You were a Death Eater, one of Voldemort’s favorites-- and yet here you are, WORKING FOR DUMBLEDORE. Who bent over backwards double to keep your greasy butt out of Azkaban. My Dad really wanted to know why-- it bugs him when people who tried to kill family members don’t get prison time-- but all he got out of GeezerBeard the Great was ‘Snape has my complete trust,” over and over.

“You know what I think that means? I think that means that the reason Dumbledore knew down to the minute when to come fetch me from my dead parents was because YOU knew. And you did nothing to prevent it.” His smile vanished. “Here, let me replay you one of MY memories,” he said, waving his robes like a cloak in the air. The room filled with dark.

Then there were voices. A man, and a woman. A child crying. Then another voice; chilling and cruel.

“He’s coming! Take Harry, I’ll hold him off--”

“No, please! Take me, but please spare Harry--”

“Stand aside woman, I promised I would spare you--”

“No!”

Then a flash of green light, and silence.

The room reappeared; Harry glowering with naked hate at the potions professor. “Is that what he promised you?” he said, his voice getting louder and louder. “Is that what you asked of him? That he spare my mother? For YOU to claim?”

“I… tried.. to save her…” Snape choked, his own denial and self-deception gagging him.

“My FATHER tried to save her! And me! He stood between Voldemort and us and DIED FIGHTING. You didn't try to save her. You tried to save her for yourself.”
Harry hissed. “You hid off in a corner and tried to manipulate other people into saving her for you. What did you think was going to happen, huh? That she was going to see you standing there, come running to you with her arms wide open, trip over me and my father’s corpses and land on your dick?” Snape made a strangled, anguished sound. “Do you think she’d like you better NOW-- after you’ve spent TEN YEARS tormenting kids, and whining about how unfair it was that someone else got the piece of ass you were after in high school? When you just tried to DUMP on me for looking like my dead father?"

A taloned hand grabbed the man by his throat and lifted him into the air. “You were a DEATH EATER. You knew he was coming for my family. You knew when, and where, down to the MINUTE. And all you did was try and play both sides against the middle, and pitch Voldemort and Dumbledore at each other so you could pick up the pieces. You killed my mother the same as if you stuck your own wand in her mouth and blew her brains out.”

Snape made a sound like a dying animal. Here, in his own mind, he couldn't escape the truth-- the truth that had been echoing inside his own skull for over a decade. Harry pulled him in close. The whole world was filled with those burning red-green eyes.

“Here’s the deal, Snape. You try and get up on your hind legs and act like a MAMMAL. You stop terrorizing the kids in your classes, or playing favorites with the Snakes while harassing the Lions. You manage to go seven years and don’t try to bully my friends, or my House, or ME, and MAYBE, just MAYBE, I’ll leave in seven years and NOT gut you like a trout. Sound good? Yeah, I thought so.”

“But just in case you think I’m bluffing...”

The blackness receded briefly. Snape slumped behind the desk in his mindscape, gasping for air, eyes round. Harry fished in his pocket and pulled something out, and set it on the desk between them. It was a rubber duck. A rubber duck with a widows peak, and a little black cape, and tiny little vampire fangs in its smiling bill.

Snape stared. “This is my friend Mister Quackers,” Harry said. “He’s a good friend of mine, ever since I was one year old and took my first bath. He’s going to be staying with you now. If you act up-- if you start being mean to kids, or grading their work unfairly-- and you KNOW its unfair-- or you start docking points for petty reasons or anything like that... well, Mr. Quackers will be VERY UPSET WITH YOU.”

Some of Snape’s old attitude came back. He was an Occlumens and Legilimens; he wasn’t about to be intimidated by some silly post-hypnotic suggestion. He could wipe such things from his mind as casually as a breeze. “You impertinent, arrogant, spoiled little son of a mudblood shit--”

Suddenly the fist-sized rubber duck was gone. In its place was a gigantic, two thousand pound ball of webbed feet, feathers and hate squatting on his desk, its entire mass heaving with every deep, rasping breath.

Snape tried to evaporate it with his Occlumency. He might as well have tried to move the Rock of Gibraltar by blowing on it through a straw. The Duck of Hell glared down over its fanged beak at him with beady, hellish eyes.

“Woopsie. You said the M word.” the damned Potter boy sniggered. “That means the duck comes down.”
The duck lunged. Snape screamed.

The students were gathered around Snape’s desk. It had been a strange class indeed; in mid tirade the Professor had suddenly slumped over. A couple of quick-thinking Slytherins and Gryffindors had caught him and lowered him into his seat behind his desk, where he’d sat ever since, staring into space across his desk.

That had been about five minutes ago. The class forgotten, the students were now gathered around the desk. Some looked as if they were debating whether to fetch Madame Pomfrey, the healer; others looked as if they were debating whether to seize the day and draw something on Snape’s slack face with their quills. Ron and Hermione, however, were looking as if they wanted to interrogate Harry, who was staring off into a corner and whistling innocently.

“What should we do?” Hermione said.

Harry looked at her. He looked at Snape. Wordlessly he reached into a pocket, pulled out of all things a rubber ducky and set it on the desk in front of the Professor.

Snape’s rolling eyes drifted down and locked on the ducky. His shriek of horror nearly sent the class running for the far side of the room. “Professor Snape! Are you all right??” Draco Malfoy said.

Snape continue to stare at the duck, his back rigid and his hands clawing at the arms of his chair. “CLASS DISMISSED !!” he squealed in a high falsetto. Every student froze and stared at this pronouncement. “I SAID CLASS DISMISSED! NOW! GET OUT!!” Students hastily began cramming their things into their bookbags and fleeing for the door. “AND DEAR GOD TAKE THE DUCK WITH YOU!!” He shrilled at their fleeing backs. Crabbe and Goyle hastily grabbed for the tiny rubber toy and hustled out the door, clutching it between them in an awkward two-man carry.

The last student barely made it out the door before it slammed and locked behind them. Hermione, Ron and Neville all stared at Harry; their demand for an explanation was as plain as day on their faces.

So naturally Harry ignored it. “Well, that was an interesting first class,” he said cheerfully. “Can’t wait to see what happens next time, can you?”

“I think I could,” Neville said weakly. He was still clutching his chest. His heart had nearly burst through it when Snape screamed.

“Lunch it is, then? Lunch sounds good,” Ron proffered.

“Yes,” Hermione said faintly. “Lunch.”
The teachers poured in through the shattered bathroom door. The sight that greeted them was horrific. Quirrel slumped to the floor, clutching his chest; McGonagall got rather faint herself—though she’d deny it. Sprawled amongst the shattered remains of the girl’s lavatory was a mountain troll. It was very large, very foul and seeing as its skull was cracked with its own club and its throat had been ripped out clear to the spine, very, very dead. Blood was sprayed everywhere—the walls, the floor, even here and there on the ceiling, over the shattered remains of several sinks and toilet stalls and over three students…

One of whom was slumped over a toilet, noisily emptying the contents of his stomach. The other two on the other hand seemed to be ARGUING, of all things, even as grue and gore dripped from them. “IS THIS HOW YOU GIRL GENIUSES HANDLE THINGS?” Harry was yelling. “Running off to the bathroom to howl all day like Moaning Myrtle? Were you hoping to end up like her, is that it?”

Hermione’s face was tear and snot streaked, but she was giving as good as she got. “He didn’t have to say those mean things about me—” she squaled.

“Oh yeah, in a PRIVATE CONVERSATION which you OVERHEARD,” Harry snapped. “Eavesdroppers rarely hear anything they LIKE, Hermione. What’d you EXPECT him to say? You showed him up, then you lectured him like a little boy at the top of your voice in front of everyone like you were his MOTHER. You embarrassed him in front of the entire class! You’re always doing that to Ron and Neville and me, nagging us, lecturing us, trying to boss us around, your nose stuck in the air about how much smarter you are than everyone else—”

Hermione made a sound that reminded McGonagall of Eliza Doolittle in My Fair Lady. “If you all don’t want to be friends anymore you should have just SAID—”

Harry threw his arms wide, spattering the gawking teachers with a few drops of grue. “WHY WOULD WE BE HERE IF YOU WEREN’T OUR FRIEND?” he bellowed.

“Ron is always—”

“Ron is the one who sounded the charge when nobody knew where you were!” Harry said. “I was too busy trying to keep BumbleShmuck from sending half the school down to the basement where the TROLL WAS!—Oh, hey, Professor McGonagall,” he said, seemingly just now noticing her. He turned to her and gave her a beaming smile. It was not a comforting sight with all the blood covering his chest and chin. “You missed all the action.”

“Minerva, what—” Professor Flitwick finally caught up, stumbling through the doorway and gaping up at the carnage. “Ye gods and little fishes, it’s on the ceiling…”

“What…” McGonagall felt her gorge rise; the smell of troll was not improved by death. She forced it down and went on. “Harry-- what happened here??”

“Well.” Harry took on the air of someone giving a presentation. “Hermione here embarrassed Ron in class earlier today— you remember, Professor Flitwick…”

“Indeed I do,” Flitwick said. He was half goblin; he wasn’t therefore too distracted by the gore. He reflected with some mild disgruntlement that someone was going to have to take Miss Granger aside and explain to her exactly who should be lecturing whom in his class...

“Well she overheard Ron grousing about it and got all upset, came up here to do the girl thing and bawl about it in a bathroom stall.” Harry paused and glared at Hermione. “For TWELVE HOURS.” Hermione withered a little. “So when Professor Quirrel—” He waved to the DADA teacher still sitting on the floor, clutching his chest—“came in yelling about the Troll, We realized… well, Ron
was the first to realize.. Hermione wasn’t there. He was REAL wound up about it, blamed himself and insisted he had to do something…. So we sent Neville to tell you what was up, and went tearing off to try and find Hermione before the troll did.” He looked around then held up a thumb and forefinger, an inch apart. “Missed it by thaaaat much.”

“Did… anything… happen to you?” McGonagall said faintly.

Harry scratched his head and looked around. “More like WE happened to IT,” he said. “We got here just as it got through the bathroom door-- we tried chucking things at it to distract it, but Hermione kept screaming and it kept going for her, so Ron used a Leviosa on its club, smashed its skull in.”

“Ah, see? Now I knew he could get it eventually,” Flitwick beamed. “Ten points to Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley.”

“Yurgh,” said the bathroom stall.

“But it wasn’t going down… I guess trolls are like cockroaches, they can keep going for ages without a brain?… so I climbed up its back and ripped its throat out with my teeth.” He gave the teachers a rather bloody smile. They blanched.

Ron came staggering out of the stall, wiping his mouth. “thuh-that was awful,” he said. He looked over at Hermione. “Mione, I’m sorry,” he said. “Are you okay? You aren’t hurt, are you? I-I couldn’t live with myself if…”

Hermione, her face streaked with tears and snot and her clothes streaked with blood, looked over at Ron. Her eyes melted. “You mean that…?” she said feebly.

Harry held up a finger. “Not to be rude but I think you should all know,” he said cheerfully, “That, speaking as a vampire, troll tastes even worse than it smells. Scuse me--” he lunged for one of the remaining stalls, nearly plunging headlong down the commode.

Snape and Dumbledore were the next to arrive. Snape for some reason was limping badly and looking thunderous. Dumbledore was looking grandfatherly. Both, however, now looked poleaxed.

“What in heaven’s name…”Dumbledore said, staring in awe at the carnage.

“HHYYYUARRRLGGALLLLLPPPPHHH!” Said Harry.

Be sure and check out My Patreon and My Home Website for more of my original art and other work...
Izuku trudged home from school, his head hung low and his mood in the pits. It had been another wretched day. His classmates had mocked him, his former best friend had knocked him around and torched his notebook… even the schoolteacher had belittled him for admitting he wanted to go to U.A. and become a Pro Hero.

The most depressing part of the whole thing was that this was the sort of day he’d come to expect ever since he’d discovered that he was Quirkless.

For the past 100 years, superhuman powers… Quirks… had existed. Nearly eighty percent of the population had some form of Quirk; a handful of them had powers impressive enough to become Pro-Heroes-- superheroes by any other name. But Izuku was part of the dwindling remainder who had nothing.

He’d wanted to be a Hero since he was old enough to know what a Hero was. It had shattered him when the doctors had revealed he had the extra toe joint, the genetic marker that identified him as Quirkless. But deep down he had continued to cling to hope-- that maybe the doctors were wrong, that maybe he was a late bloomer… or that there would be some treatment, some cure, some alternative… He’d kept making his “Hero notebooks,” analyzing the pro Heroes and their Quirks “for the future,” kept hoping…

But he was feeling short on hope today.

He started to turn to take the underpass that led to his neighborhood… when something caught his eye. A loose paper stapled to a nearby power pole, flapping in a breeze. It was an odd bit of paper, almost like parchment; the writing looked hand brushed, almost antiquated. Curious he stepped over and pulled it off the pole.

And that’s where everything changed. In another lifetime there had been no flier. He had walked on down the tunnel and into an encounter with a villain, and a hero, that had set him on the course for destiny as the heir of All Might and the wielder of the most powerful Quirk on Earth, One for All.

This time though those events would not unfold.

He held the flier up; it was a bulletin, announcing the grand opening of a shop just down the road… No, if he was reading it right, it was more like a little collection of shops, all in one building. “World
of Crafts? The Smithy? The Tinker’s Bench? Jeweler’s Pagoda? Oddments and Oddities? Buy Sell Trade? Hmm,” he muttered. They even had a little dining area, it said. The blurb boasted of the stores’ varied wares, but what caught his attention was--

“A wide and varied collection of Hero merchandise and artifacts,” he read aloud, a smile spreading on his face for the first time that day. What the heck, even a little window shopping would certainly lift his mood. And there were several coupons printed on the back…

Decision made, he turned to the right and kept walking down the street, right past the underpass and off in the direction of the address on the flier.

It bears noting that Midoriya Izuku was in fact a very intelligent and highly observant boy. So it might have been his uplifted mood that could be blamed for it, but he never noticed that the flier that had caught his attention, the one that had flapped about as if in a stiff breeze, had been doing so even though the air was completely still.

He found the shop easily enough; it was a wooden door with a stained-glass window, squeezed between a quick-mart and a small walk-in restaurant. Its only advertisement was a wooden sign proclaiming it “The Lost Workshop.” For all its unobtrusiveness, it stood out among the sliding glass and aluminum doors lining the street. “Odd, must be a mistake in the zoning ordinance or something,” Izuku muttered.

The door jingled merrily as he stepped inside. He found himself in a pleasant, brightly lit if somewhat jam-packed, curiosity shoppe— the standing sign inside the door proclaimed it to be World of Crafts, “Subsidiary of the Lost Workshop, Azeroth Ltd.” And the place truly was packed with crafts. Model planes and zeppelins and other aircraft ranging from the mundane to the utterly fanciful hung from the ceiling; toy robots scuttled across the floor in a surprisingly lifelike fashion. Trinkets of all sorts filled the shelves, oddly steampunk-ish toys and tools; paint sets in almost unsettlingly bright colors, and parchments that proved to have strange textures under his fingertips; displays of handcrafted jewelry that glowed in the warm light. In a place of pride was a display of jewelry butterflies under bell jars made of glass and copper wire and gems that actually moved, slowly flapping their wings. He peered closely at those and made a mental note to buy one for his mother, if they weren’t too expensive--

“Those are solar powered,” a feminine voice said. He jumped and turned around. At the back of the store, next to the cash register, stood a young lady not much older than himself. She was dressed in
coveralls and a sweatshirt, and had short blonde hair in a pixie cut and a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. She seemed to be fiddling with a pricing gun... She gave him a smile that reminded him of a fox, somehow. “It’s the wings,” she went on. “They’re actually little glass solar panels. So long as light shines on them the little solenoid in the body moves and makes the wings flap.”

She set the pricing gun down with a sigh and looked at him. “Sorry I didn’t speak up earlier,” she said. “I was messing with that thing. Gotta convert all the prices on the crockery from francs to yen. What a pain. Welcome to World of Crafts, I’m Lisa Wilbourn what can I… do… you… for?” She trailed off oddly, her smile fading. Her eyes roved up and down over him as she spoke in the most disturbing fashion.

Izuku hesitated. “Um, I saw on your flyer here--” he held it up in front of himself defensively-- “if this is the wrong store I apologize--”

“Oh no no no, this is the right place,” Lisa said, waving her hand. “This is just the front shop. At least THIS week,” she muttered. Ignoring Izuku’s puzzled frown she went on. “We have a few nifty things here, but I get the feeling you ain’t seeing what you’re wanting.”

Taking her hint, he took a breath. “It says here you have… displays of hero equipment and... artifacts?”

Lisa’s eyes sparkled and her vixen-like smile spread back across her face. “Ahhh,” she said. “I see you’re in the market for the exceptionally rare.” She pointed to a door behind her. It was a solid wooden door with the words “the Lost Workshop” carved into it. “The rest of-- well, everything-- is through that door. Go on, feel free to go anywhere you wish...” she waved him to the door. Bowing politely, he edged past her and stepped through. “Oh, and hold onto those coupons!” she called after him as the door shut.

The moment the door closed she hustled over to the register and pressed the button on the odd little brass-belled intercom there. Her own Power was buzzing in her brain with the info she’d picked up giving him the once over.

**Young asian male, age 14. Middle to lower-middle class.**

**Green hair, natural color.**

**Ambitious, hopeful, brave, honest, compassionate, innocent...**

**Quirkless.**

**Bullied for Quirklessness.**
Desires one thing: to be a true Hero.

She spoke into the horn-shaped mouthpiece. “Bayleaf, this is Lisa. We got a live one. Green eyes, green hair.. I sent him on back.”

“What? You sure?”

“Boss, the kid has such a noble spirit it hurts. He’s the kind of good and heroic and innocent that I’ve never seen. And life is absolutely punching him in the face for it. He needs our help-- he deserves it, if anyone does.”

“Okay, I’ll pass the word on, make sure everyone keeps an eye on him till he makes the Choice.”

“And Boss? That poor little Cinnamon Bun better walk outta here with the absolute BEST we have or so help me, wolf boy, I’ll wait until you’re asleep one day and shave you BALD.”

“Okay, okay! I said we’d set him up, didn’t I?” The voice at the other end sounded amused… but it was clear he didn’t doubt she’d keep her word.

The moment Izuku stepped through the door he found himself gaping in astonishment. He had expected a storeroom or something similar; instead he found himself standing in a small roofed-over courtyard. Benches were scattered here and there, as were a few glassed-in displays. A fountain bubbled in the center. Doors and halls and stairways leading both up and down branched off from the courtyard in every direction.. some going several stories down, or up.

“How is this possible?” he gasped. “This should be overlapping the stores on either side...”

He looked up at the ceiling some three stories up and realized that the soft light filling the room was not coming from lanterns or fluorescents, but from a canopy of glowing vines and leaves.
This was NOT a normal shopping plaza.

He walked around, looking at the free-standing displays. The items under glass were eclectic: a shield patterned in red and white stripes with a large star in the center; a cracked warhammer; a bright green bow with a quiver full of green fletched arrows; a row of rings in bell jars, each glowing a different color of the rainbow; a boomerang carved in the shape of a bat… The plaques on each display told him very little; frustratingly they were all in English.

And more vexing, there were no signs or maps to the rest of the place. Shrugging, he picked a hallway at random and moved on.

The first store he stumbled into was a jeweler’s. He took one look at the glittering rings and necklaces on display and knew everything there was too rich for his blood. He gave an apologetic bow to the man with the fox Quirk sitting at his workbench and departed.

The next was, as best he could tell, an art gallery. Ink paintings lined every wall, scrolls were piled high in the corners, and sets of paints, brushes and canvases were on sale. Izuku imagined Katsuki catching him unawares with his arms full of paintings and parchment, and cringed at the mental image of the resulting conflagration. The panda lady running the shop tried to persuade him to perhaps buy at least a little memento-- she particularly tried to push him into buying a tiny glass vial of decorative sand, for some reason-- but he brushed aside her stilted Chinese as politely as he could and bowed his way out.

As the shoppes grew more exotic, so did the displays. An entire wall of swords, some of them so oddly shaped or ridiculously huge that they had to be impossible to wield. A single wand or baton, like a stage magician might use, sealed under a bell jar… he could make out the English words “Holly” and “Phoenix,” but nothing else. A top hat alongside a starry wizard’s hat, with a plastic carrot hanging out of it for some reason. A wall display holding a bow with no string, a shield, a crude wooden club, a cloak, a bo staff, and another wizard’s hat, this one unadorned…

What’s more, it almost seemed like the corridors and doorways were changing place, moving about as he wandered around.

He was starting to get rather turned around when he heard the clanging. “Hammers on anvils?” Curious, he followed his ears to yet another door around yet another corner.

On the other side was a full blown blacksmith shop. It was enormous, with four different forges along the back wall going hot, each one’s flames burning with a different strange color. (But where was the smoke? He’d seen no chimneys outside!) A warehouse’s worth of medieval armor and
weapons of every description were scattered about, standing on manikins or hanging from racks, gleaming dully in the firelight.

Standing by one of the anvils in the open area around the furnaces was a tall blonde man with broad shoulders and chest and arms knotted with muscle. He was stripped to the waist and wearing a leather apron and gloves, and was hammering dutifully away at a glowing ingot of metal. He looked up as Izuku walked in-- heaven only knew how he’d heard Izuku over the din of his own hammer-- and nodded. “Welcome!” he said with a wave and a smile worthy of All Might. “Afraid I’ll be busy with this for a bit… Feel free to look around!” With that he returned to his hammering.

Despite the sweltering heat, Izuku did just that. He wandered among the suits of armor, fascinated. Every type was here; Eastern style, European style, some styles and forms from places-- he had no idea… the weapons were just as widely assorted. He had a guess now as to where some of the weapons on display around the rest of the complex came from.

As he worked his way through the room, he came across another door. It was ajar and Izuku could feel a cool breeze wafting through. That was definitely the ticket; it WAS getting seriously stuffy in the blonde man’s workshop.

The room beyond was a large square chamber with a stone floor and illuminated with more of those strange glowing lamp-plants, quiet, well lit and cool. There were no furnishings and none of the ubiquitous galleria-type displays. The only decoration was a circular pattern etched in the floor---

“Oh, neat, a labyrinth!” Izuku said with a chuckle. A labyrinth it was; a looping, repeating circular path that turned around and doubled back on itself over and over till it ended at the center. “Monks used to walk these while they were doing their meditations… I suppose this is that guy’s meditation room?” Amused, he stepped to the beginning of the labyrinth path.

The lines engraved in the stone floor began to glow on either side of his feet.

He almost jumped back out. Almost. But his curiosity at the display kept his feet on the path like they were glued. He inched forward; the glow spread to match his progress. “Cool,” he said.

He proceeded along the path, the glow following his heels-- till suddenly the path ahead of his toes glowed red. He stopped in surprise. Words appeared in the stone floor before him, the letters glowing red.
In English, darn it.

He read the words, painfully translating each one in his head. “I am sworn to Valor.” It sounded like something All Might would say...

There was a sound like stone sliding on stone. The letters turned from red to gold. Izuku blinked. “I guess this means I go on?” He walked further along the maze-path. More letters appeared at his feet.

“My heart... shall know... shall know only... virtue.” Again there was the sound of stone-on-stone, again the letters changed color. He proceeded on.

By the third time he was in the swing of things.

“My blade shall defend the helpless...” The words gleamed gold.

“My Might shall uphold the weak...” The sliding sound was louder. But there was no way he was stopping now.

“My word shall speak only truth---” he was almost at the center of the maze. He realized that the sliding sound he’d heard had been the center of the floor opening up.

“My Wrath shall undo the wicked!” from the hole in the floor rose up a stone plinth. Mounted atop it were a plain, one handed sword and an undecorated kite shield. Beneath the shield was a plaque; the letters on it burned red. Heart pounding, Izuku read them aloud.

“So let the code... for.. forever shine... so let my heart hold them bright!”

The words melted and changed, shifting from ember red to molten gold.

*Thou hast spoken true.*

*Take up thy sword and thy shield--*

*Paladin.”*
Hands trembling, Izuku took the shield and fitted it over his own arm, took the hilt of the sword and lifted it up.

Then light, blinding, searing, pure and terrible, fell from above, spearing through him and igniting him body and soul with living flame.

He woke up sprawled out in an overstuffed chair.

Groaning and rubbing his head, he sat up. A moment’s panicked self-inventory indicated all his bodily parts were still attached. “What the hell was that?” he croaked.

He shook his head and looked around-- he was back in the World of Crafts shop, sitting, yes, in an overstuffed chair behind the counter. Seated on a stool next to the register was the blonde freckled girl from before. She was smiling at him. “I see you’ve made your choice,” she said. She patted the sword and shield lying on the counter next to her.

“Choice?” Izuku said, utterly lost.

She picked up a leather satchel sitting next to the sword, then dropped it. “Special bonus today, you get one of our patented Handy Haversacks along with your purchase. (I took the liberty of tearing off the appropriate coupon.) He watched in amazement as she stuck the sword and shield into the Haversack, which was far too small to hold either, without any problem. She held up a couple of booklets. “Instruction manuals. Important, you WILL need to read them.” She popped those into the Haversack as well.

She folded her hands in her lap. “Now comes the topic of payment.”

“Payment?” Izuku sputtered. “but-but I--”

“Ah ah ah! No refunds, exchanges, or substitutions,” she chided, waving a finger. “Of course if you’re a little low on Yen at the moment, we DO barter and trade...”

Izuku rubbed his head. This girl was fast-talking so hard it was making him dizzy. “Trade?”

“Certainly. Whaddya got?”

Izuku decided to play along with the confusing girl. He cast about; his school backpack was right next to the cushy chair he was sunk in. Wordlessly he dumped the contents out on the counter. The girl poked through the contents with her finger, her face blank. Izuku grimaced to himself. He had a few hundred yen in his wallet… maybe if he threw in his watch…?

He didn’t really care if it didn’t make sense. All of reality had stopped making sense the moment he’d stepped through that door into a workshop-slash-store complex that was bigger on the inside than on the outside… he would agree to just about anything she said. He just wanted an exit, and now.

“Ah! Bingo!” She reached out and plucked up… his Hero notebook? “Perfect,” she smirked,
flipping through the burned, water-stained pages. “Hold on a minute.” She hopped down off her stool and stepped through a door that he could have sworn wasn’t there a second ago. He heard a whirring sound that went on for a minute or two, then she returned. She handed him a fistful of loose pages. “Had to Xerox the thing,” she said. “Whaat? You didn’t think we were going to leave you without your notes did ya? You’ll need those!

“The original, however—” she fanned herself with the scorched notebook, smirking. “That, we keep.” She shoveled the rest of the contents of his backpack, including the backpack, into the Haversack. She picked up the Haversack and held it out to him. “Pro tip, the key word for your Haversack is ‘Equip.’” She said the word in English. “Just say it out loud and Bob’s your Uncle.”

“Eq--?” a delicate finger pressed his lips shut. “No no, honey, not now, only when you NEED it, understand?”

Izuku nodded… then shook his head. “…May I go now please?” Izuku pleaded feebly.

“Sure, cute stuff!” she said cheerfully. “Don’t worry, you’ll figure it all out. Just read the manuals. And if you need anything else… well, you have our card.” She stuck a business card in his shirt pocket and put the strap of his new haversack over his shoulder. “Be sure and tell your friends about us. Bye!”

The door jangled, and he was out on the street. He spun about to try and get one last word in-- a question, a complaint, he didn’t know-- only to find the door was missing. Not only was the door missing, but the space the door had been IN was missing… the store and the restaurant were now flush with each other, not an inch of space between them.

“…..Ohhhhhkay,” Izuku said. “Okay. Okay. It’s time to go home now...” He turned on his heel and walked-- very BRISKLY-- in the direction of home.

He was three blocks from home when he saw the explosions.

Some motivation, some strange instinct drove him to detour in the direction the chaos was coming from. When he arrived, crowds had already gathered. But he could clearly see a villain rampaging in the middle of the street… a villain with some sort of slime Quirk, that gave him a body of living ooze. There were several heroes there but they were being held at bay by the fires and by the explosive blasts being released by his panicked captive, a yellow-haired kid in a school uniform--


He was moving before he even realized it. Kacchan was a jerk, Kacchan was a bully, Kacchan had made his life miserable for years-- but none of that mattered. He had lost Kacchan as a friend years ago but he wasn’t about to lose Kacchan to death at the hands of a villain.

He never even noticed the golden glow starting to halo his body as he ran. Something heavy filled his right hand; lacking any other plan he threw it at the monster’s head--

A golden hammer of light leapt from his fingertips and rocketed into the slime Villain’s face. The villain’s head and a huge chunk of his upper torso exploded in a wet spray. Slime sizzled at the touch of the light. Izuku stood there, gaping in astonishment at what he’d done.

Had that really been him??

The mountain of sludge undulated and rippled in agony. “You little bastard!” the slime villain screamed. He pulled himself together and raised a slimy fist the size of an anvil to crush the brat that had hurt him. Izuku raised his arm to shield his head. Purely on reflex he blurted out the word the
sales girl had told him:

“Equip!!”

The slime villain’s enormous fist flashed down— and splattered harmlessly on the adamantine shield on Izuku’s arm. His other hand, wielding a simple one-handed European sword, flashed up. The blade was simple, unadorned, barely sharp enough to cut butter… it’s glowing edge sheared through the slime villain’s semisolid arm like a razor through silk. The villain screamed as his smoking “arm” fell to the ground and splashed into a bubbling puddle.

“What did you do to me??” he screamed at Izuku.

Izuku said nothing. He could see Kacchan, still half-submerged in the slime villain’s body, his eyes filled with fear and confusion.

*Let my wrath undo the wicked.*

Izuku hefted his shield, leveled his blazing sword, screamed and charged.

An hour or so later, Midoriya Izuku staggered through the front door of his and his mother’s apartment. He was rumpled and disheveled, his clothes were spattered with a rather disgusting mung and were anyone standing close enough they’d smell smoke. A blunt one-handed sword dangled from his right hand; an unadorned kite shield hung from his left arm.

His mother jumped up from the sofa. She had been riveted to the TV set, watching the news of the nearby villain attack unfold. Her cellphone fell from her hand, forgotten. “Izuku! Where have you been? There was a villain attack not five blocks from here—” she ran over to fuss over her son, patting him down to look for injuries. “What happened to you? I’ve been calling everyone, trying to find where you were—”

“Sorry, Mom,” Izuku said. He sounded dazed. “I stopped off at a new store on the way home…” He looked at her. “Oh yeah, and then a villain attacked… I had to save Kacchan from him…”

“WHAAAT?”

“…It’s okay, there were Pro Heros there— though they didn’t do much… and then All Might showed up and finished the bad guy off, so everything was fine anyway…” He kicked off his shoes and started walking to his room. He looked over his shoulder and gave her an odd smile. “Oh, by the way, I got my Quirk today.”

Inko gasped. “How…?”

“I think I bought it at the store.” He pulled a flier— one with a rectangle torn out of one corner— out of his pocket and let it fall to the floor from nerveless fingers. “Sorry… Scuse me. I kinda gotta go lie down and… process things.” His door closed with a click.

Inko stood there, openmouthed and speechless, staring at her son’s bedroom door.
Izuku carefully propped his sword and shield up on his dresser and flopped down across his bed. To his surprise his mother didn’t come charging in demanding explanations… he’d said he needed some time, so she took him at his word. Mom was good like that.

After what felt like several hours he stirred himself and sat up. He opened up his Haversack and dug around inside.

His arm went WAY deeper than it should have… yet he couldn’t find anything! Baffled, he grabbed the bag and flipped it over. He shook it firmly. “Come on, I saw her put all that stuff in there… empty already!”

He then remembered how the shield and sword had leapt into his hands, and had a moment of brilliance. “Empty!” he said, this time in English.

The Haversack let out a faint burping sound, and suddenly his schoolbooks, papers, and backpack were piled on the floor at his feet. The last thing to come out were the booklets the sales girl had tossed in. He picked the first one up.

The title was in English too, dammit. He sighed… he saw a great deal of slow, tiresome translation in his future. “Black… blacksmithing. Arm and Arm? No… Arms… and Armor. Huh.” He reached for the second.

“Jewels and… Jewelrycrafting…?”

The third had a picture of a pickaxe on the cover. “Mining and Met- Metallurgy...” He set it next to the others on the bed and reached for the next.

“Han… Handy Haversack Owner’s Manual.’ Heh. Definitely reading THAT cover to cover...”

When he picked up the last one his breath caught. On the cover was a picture of a sword and shield mounted on a pedestal. “So You Want… So You Want to be a Paladin.”

The card the girl had slipped in his shirt pocket fell out of his pocket when he bent over and fluttered to the floor. He picked it up: it was plain manila cardstock with the legend “The Lost Workshop” printed across it. As he watched, ink crawled across the bottom of the page and formed into numbers-- a telephone number. He grabbed his cellphone off his nightstand and dialed.

One ring… Two… he held his breath.

Klick. “Why hellooo, Izuku-san. --Is ‘san’ right? I’m still figuring out all those honorifics. So you’re ready to barter for the REST of the equipment set, hmm?”

Izuku had no idea how someone could smirk over the telephone. Nevertheless his own eager grin matched the one in her voice. “Oh, I think so, yes...”

Five minutes later he was stuffing the last of his notebooks, his All Might collectibles, and a few other items into his bottomless Haversack and memorizing the new address slowly writing itself
across the bottom of the business card. “Mom-- I know I have a lot to explain, but there’s this store I’ve got to show you…”

The U.A. admissions practical was proving far more than Uraraka Ochako was prepared for. The chaos, the noise, the explosions… she had been prepared for some mayhem and violence-- No Uraraka was a wilting hothouse flower, after all-- but the sheer magnitude of it had thrown her.

She had held her own, for sure; using her Quirk, Zero Gravity, to send dozens of robots hurtling into the sky and then plummeting to their destruction. But in all the anarchy she’d gotten too far ahead of the main body of applicants. She was isolated, there were one and two pointers closing from every direction, and the nausea from her Quirk backlash was getting too severe to ignore--

Then the Zero Pointer had appeared and all Hell had broken loose.

The gigantic building-sized robot (what were the school staff THINKING?) had come rumbling around the corner, smashing its house-sized fists into the towers on either side of the street and sending clouds of dust and chunks of rubble flying. The students had, wisely, panicked and bolted. Uraraka hadn’t dodged fast enough. A concrete wall had toppled, knocking her to the ground and pinning her by her leg. Even if she had time to levitate the concrete off her, she couldn’t flee. If she was to judge by the pain her ankle was shattered. The Zero Pointer was coming straight towards her, and the dratted one and two pointers were still closing in, oblivious to their own inevitable stomping. She could see their red eyes glowing as they locked onto her.

“TARGET LOCKED,” a dozen robotic voices announced at once.

CLANG. CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANGCLANG CLANG. Without warning a shining golden something streaked out of nowhere, decapitating the first robot. It rapidly ricocheted from robot to robot, leaving shattered metal and flying sparks in its wake. Six, seven, eight robots fell in less time than it took to say it.

She barely tracked it with her eyes. A gauntleted hand snatched the whirring death-device … a gleaming silver kite shield, with no mark or heraldry on it… out of the air. The hand slipped the shield onto an arm. It was a male figure, decked out in gleaming silver and white plate armor. A blood red cape, tattered at the edges from hard combat, billowed from his pauldroned shoulders, and she could just make out curls of emerald-green hair peeking out from under the rim of his open-faced helmet. The boyish face was at contrast with the burning fervor in the wide green eyes.

It was-- oh what was his name?? Deku, the boy from the front gate! The one she’d saved from a trip and fall. He’d been charming and shy, and thanked her profusely for catching him with her power. He’d put on quite the comedy routine at the admissions desk, too-- they’d ordered him to empty the leather haversack he carried, and he’d proceeded to pull a small mountain of odds and ends out and pile them on the desk in front of everyone. Some of it was obvious support gear-- pieces of armor, weapons-- but some was ridiculous. Notebooks, action figures and collectibles, hammer and tongs, a jeweler’s kit, a rubber duck, a whole cherry pie… At one point he’d pulled out some sort of mechanized ANVIL, of all things.

The teachers had nearly lost their minds when he revealed this wasn’t his Quirk… it was just an odd property of the Haversack itself. They’d broken down at that point and let him past, labeling the whole mess as “support gear.” Then they’d nearly had an aneurysm when he said something in
English, snapped his fingers, and the bag had instantly refilled itself with everything he’d unloaded—finishing with a tidy burp. He’d just shrugged, given everyone a goofy smile, and went on in to take the written exam.

She’d had to run to the bathroom, she’d come so close to peeing herself laughing.

There was no shy goofy smile now. She’d never seen an expression so fierce on anyone so young.

The remaining robots-- wisely for them, she thought-- retargeted on this new threat. It did them little good. With a yell he flung something from one hand… it turned into a blazing golden hammer that began streaking around the armored boy in a rapidly widening spiral. Even as the spectral warhammer began smashing robots one after the other he firmed his grip on his sword and charged the lone three pointer in the center of the mob. The sword flamed with light and carved through the battle-bot’s armor like it was butter.

As the last one-pointer hit the ground in pieces, there was a tremendous boom and a cloud of dust rolled down the street. She realized he’d inflicted all this destruction in less time than it took for the Zero Pointer to take a single step. He sheathed his sword and ran to her side. He grabbed the edge of the concrete and lifted; she screamed in pain as the block shifted wrong, grinding her already broken ankle. He looked at her with desperate eyes; he’d obviously realized there wasn’t enough time to move the rubble off her leg without crushing it.

“Can you float it?” he shouted at her. She shook her head. It was at least a ton of cement block-- far more than she could lift on the dregs of her power. He looked at her, looked at the oncoming Zero Pointer. “Can you float ME?” he shouted. She nodded; she could manage that-- at least for a few seconds--

He held out his hand to her. “Hit me!” She grabbed his hand and infused him with her power… enough to get past the armor to the person underneath. She swooned, dizzy and nauseous. “Pray this works,” he said. He hefted his sword, ran forward a couple of steps, then kicked off as hard as he could from the ground.

She watched from where she lay prone on the pavement as he rocketed into the air, rising up to meet the Zero Pointer. She strained to hold her Quirk a bit longer. He was up to its knee… up to its waist, then what passed for its chest--

His sword traced a blazing streak across the Zero Pointer’s chest. The armor plate split like paper. He seized a handhold just as her control broke. “R-release!” she choked.

He grabbed the edges of the rip in both gauntleted fists and pulled. With a painful squeal of tormented metal the split widened. Once it was as wide as his shoulders, he manifested another blazing warhammer. This one was so bright Ochako had to squint to look at it. He wound up--

“SMITE… EVIL!!”

And flung the hammer into the Zero Pointer’s open chest. Sparks flew and smoke spurted; explosions and the sounds of damaged machinery tearing itself apart echoed from the steel leviathan. He leapt away just as the metal monster toppled backward, spewing smoke and sparks and oil from every seam.

And the boy that killed it was plummeting through the air in freefall. Ochako reached out with one hand, thinking in her delirium that somehow she could reach across the distance, hit him with her Quirk in the split second before he struck the ground--
Then his cloak billowed out. He slowed, falling gently to the ground and landing on one knee unharmed. She heard him let out a whoosh of air in relief. “Excellent, the parachute cloak worked-- Hold on--” He got to his feet and ran to her side. “Come on, you people!” he shouted at the students standing around staring. “Help me get this off her leg!”

In a few moments he had four or five other candidates gathered around getting a grip on the stone. “One, two, three--” with a grunt they heaved, lifting the broken wall. A boy with tape dispensers for elbows took her by the armpits and dragged her out from underneath. They dropped the wall with a crash. Applause and backslaps went around.

“Oh wow,” the tape dispenser boy said when he saw her mangled leg. “That looks nasty. Someone get Recovery Girl!”

“I got it,” Deku said. He went down one knee next to her, doffed his helmet and gently placed one hand on her leg. “Okay, take a deep breath,” he said. “Healing bones can be… weird.” She blinked and obeyed.

His hand on her leg began to glow. The glow brightened and began to spread down into her leg. The pain vanished. She flinched at the crack and pop as bones realigned themselves and fused back together, and torn tendons and ligaments knitted back together. There was no pain-- but he was right, it felt DISTURBING. But at the same time the light was so soothing…

When the glow faded away, save for the tattered leg of her tracksuit, her leg was like new. He gave her a hand; blushing she accepted and he lifted her to her feet effortlessly. “Whoa,” someone said. That seemed to the the consensus from the rest as well.

The green haired boy gave them all an awkward grin. “Well while I’m at it--” He lifted one hand over his head, the palm facing the sky. There was a faint THOOM, and a cone of light seemed to fall out of the air on him. The pavement beneath his feet glowed and rivulets of light spread out across the asphalt. All around him scrapes, bruises, cuts and other injuries faded away. “Wow, awesome! Thanks,” said one blonde kid with a lightning bolt in his hair, giving the greenette a thumbs up.

“Oh, merci beaucoup,” said another.

“Truly manly of you, bro,” a redhead boy with shark teeth said, flexing his healed arm.

“One side, let me through children, help is on the way--” A tiny grey haired woman in a doctor’s coat and leaning on a cane shaped like a syringe came hobbling up. “Who’s injured here? I… oh!” The moment she stepped into the glowing circle her eyes went wide behind her hero visor. “My word… my sinuses cleared up!” She held up a hand and wiggled her fingers experimentally. “And my arthritis hasn’t felt this good in years.”

Deku greeted her with a wide smile worthy of All Might. “Recovery Girl! Hi, I’m a big fan. Everything’s okay here…”

Recovery Girl looked around at the glowing area and the healed students. “So this was your doing?” she exclaimed, her eyebrows rising. She gave Ochako’s ankle a quick examination, then looked over some of the other healed applicants. “Good work, my boy,” she said, pleased. “Nice to see another healing Quirk in the field for once.”

“That’s not all he does,” someone said reverently. The downed Zero Pointer burped out another minor explosion.

“So I see,” Recovery Girl said. “Holy Moly.” She adjusted her visor. “Well, thanks to you I’ve got a
“Little head start on patching everyone up for a change. Crazy staff,” she grumbled to herself. “Giant robots! Against teenagers! They’re all half mad, I tell you, and I won’t say which half...”

“Do you need some help?” the armored teen said. “I can do some more healing--”

“Oh no, I’m afraid not, dearie,” Recovery Girl said. “You’re not even close to licensed yet. All this...” she waved around with her cane-- “we can let slide as First Aid, but we’d both get in trouble if I had an unlicensed Hero tagging along, doing healing on people...” she sounded annoyed and regretful.

“Sorry,” the green haired boy said-- and he sounded it.

“Don’t worry, dearie,” she said. “You’ll be healing folk and saving lives all over soon enough. I’ve seen a lot of great Pro Heros in the making and you’re certainly on the way.” She handed out packets of vitamin gummies to everyone there, out of habit more than anything, then wandered off. She had several more testing arenas to check for the wounded yet.

Ochako tapped the boy on one of his pauldrons. “Um... Deku?”

He looked at her and winced. “Ah, that’s not my name--” he said.

“Oh! I heard that other boy--” she stammered.

He rolled his eyes. “A former friend,” he said. “The nickname wasn’t exactly made in kindness.”

“I’m sorry--”

“It’s okay,” he sighed. “What was it?”

“I... I just wanted to thank you,” she said. “You, you saved my life--” the enormity of it was just starting to hit her.

He gave her a half-smile. “Heheh. Well, it’s only fair,” he said. “You saved me from getting my face flattened.”

She blinked. “Oh-- the, ah, tripping--” she giggled then blushed.

“The tripping thing, yeah.”

They both paused, both seeming to realize that they were actually speaking to someone of the opposite sex and that it was supposed to be rather awkward. “...My name’s Uraraka Ochako,” she said. “But you can call me Ochako.”

He gave her a smile as warm as the sun. “Midoriya Izuku,” he said. “Call me Izuku.”

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This one’s been buzzing around the back of my head for weeks. I couldn’t stop until I had it typed out and posted.

Now, let’s see how many people spot ALL the hidden references in the story... ;)
Izuku hadn’t expected to be a hero that day. Of course he hadn’t expected much out of that day to begin with; maybe see a hero battle out in the city, add a few pages to his “Hero Notes for the Future;” maybe have some katsudon for dinner when he got home.. maybe get past Kacchan without getting beat up today… but definitely, not expecting to be a hero.

His expectations were definitely overturned. On the last few blocks to his home he found himself walking behind an oddly dressed elderly gentleman. He had long white hair down to his shoulders and an even longer white beard. He was wearing a suit at least a hundred years out of style, a bowler derby that probably had never been in style, pince nez glasses, an overcoat that draped down nearly to his ankles, and was walking with a staff-- not a cane, an actual staff that was tall as himself. He was moving at a sedate pace down the sidewalk, as if he had a thousand years to get where he was going and didn’t care if he took all of them.

Izuku dawdled back about a half a block.. he didn’t want to worry the old man; some people got jittery around teenagers, especially ones treading on their heels. It wasn’t like Izuku was in any hurry, anyway. But the old man seemed to be moving slower still, almost as if he was looking for something or waiting for someone to catch up with him. Perhaps he should give his mother a call to let her know he might be late--

He groaned silently to himself when the old man took the turnoff to go through the underpass. Was he going to have to follow the old man all the way home like this? He just needed to bite the bullet and hurry past the old gentleman-- be sure and apologize, of course-- then hurry on home…

He’d just entered the tunnel himself when something horrible burst up out of the sewer and attacked the old man. It was a gigantic mound of slime, with bulging eyeballs and a ragged mouth full of teeth. The old man fell down with a cry, and the slime engulfed him.

“Hah! You’re a bit old and wheezy, but you’ll do for a skinsuit till I can find something better,” the slime chortled, gurgling.

Izuku was already moving. He charged towards the villain and his struggling victim. “VILLAIN ATTACK! VILLAIN ATTACK! SOMEBODY HELP!” He flung his bookbag at the villain’s face; it struck the monster in one of his bulging eyes, bursting open and scattering papers everywhere.

“AAAggh! My eye--” The slime monster’s grip loosened; Izuku was close enough to hear the old man gasp for air before the slime engulfed him again.
I gotta get him to let go of the old man--His eyes! His eyes are his vulnerable point. What have I got that will hurt his eyes?? Izuku’s hand dug around through his jacket pocket even as he clawed at the sludge gripping the old man with the other. He felt something soft and plastic under his fingertips--

A packet of sriracha sauce from his lunch.

Oh gods oh gods I’ve seen Kacchan do this stupid prank a dozen times I hope I get it right-- He whipped the tiny condiment packet out, pointed it at the villain’s eyes, and squeezed it in his fist. The seam burst and a needle thin stream of Huy Fong’s Finest sprayed across the villain’s distended eyeballs.

“AAAAAAHHHH, my EEEYYYYYEEEESSS!!” The Slime-Man screamed fit to burst Izuku’s eardrums. Thrashing in agony he flung both his hostages away and retreated to a corner, sucking his eyes in and contracting himself into a roiling ball, trying to rinse his eyes out inside his own body.

Both Izuku and the elderly man hit the pavement hard; Izuku felt his own head crack hard against a concrete pillar. Stars exploded in his eyes. He shook off the starbursts and looked around woozily; the old man was lying nearby. He was spattered with filth and his hat and eyeglasses were gone, but Izuku could hear him moaning faintly. Thank heaven.

Unfortunately in the time Izuku had regained his senses, the villain had recuperated as well. He glared at Izuku with eyes so bloodshot they looked like boiled bacon. “I’m gonna KILL you kid,” he hissed like boiling pudding. “And I’m gonna do it SLOW.” He leaped across the tunnel--

“DETROIIIT… SMAAAASH!!”

There was a boom like thunder in a bottle and a torrent of wind ripped through the underpass. It caught the slime villain in mid-leap and ripped him apart, spattering him the length of the tunnel. Unfortunately it also caught Izuku and the old man. They tumbled several yards, Izuku doing his best to catch and shield the old man til he finally caught yet another glancing blow on his head, and all went dark..

He woke up who knew how many minutes later, lying out in the sun and staring up at someone… blonde… and LARGE… His vision cleared--

“All MIGHT?” he squawked. He sat up and scooted back. It was… the Symbol of Peace himself, the greatest hero in Japan and probably the world.
Holy cow. He’d been rescued by ALL MIGHT. This was AWESOME!! “All Might, I can’t believe it, thank you so much, I’m your biggest fan, I have so many things I want to--”

All Might laughed and held up his hand. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, there, young man! Stop and take a breath!” Izuku obeyed, panting as he realized he’d nearly passed out again from forgetting to inhale. “I’m glad to see you’re okay. You were out for quite a bit...”

Izuku looked around. “Wait… where’s the villain??” Or… whatever’s left of him, he thought squeamishly.

All Might let out a booming laugh. “No need to worry about him.” He held up a two liter soda bottle filled with brownish sludge. Izuku could see a pair of eyeballs floating inside.

“That’s all that’s left of him??”

All Might coughed. “Um, yes. It seems when he loses enough fluid mass the rest of him sort of, er, shrivels up like a slug...”

“Eugh.”

There was a quavering moan. Izuku looked around; the oddly-dressed old man was sitting nearby, arms wrapped around himself and looking distressed. “Oh, please help me, I, I don’t know what’s going on,” he moaned. “Please help an old man...”

Izuku got to his feet and went over to him. “Oh gosh. Are you okay, sir? Are you hurt?” The old man only mumbled something and clung to Izuku’s sleeves. “All Might, what should we do?”

All Might started to speak, but before he could say a word a beeping noise interrupted him. He pulled out his cellphone and looked at it. He flinched and grimaced briefly. “I… ahem. I’m afraid I have to get this villain to lockup as quickly as possible,” he said. “before he recuperates and starts getting fiesty, aheh.” He looked at the phone again and winced. “Maybe even faster,” he muttered. He tucked the bottle into the pocket of his cargo pants.

“But--!” Izuku gestured to the old man.
All Might rested his massive hands on Izuku’s shoulders. “Young man…”

“Midoriya. Izuku.”

“Young Midoriya, I’m going to have to entrust you with something, okay?” Mute, Izuku nodded. “Great. I need you to look after this elderly gentlemen, escort him home… or to the hospital, as needed. I’m afraid I can’t stick around to do it and leaping across the city with an elderly man in my arms-- well--” he hesitated. “Can you do that for me?”

Izuku nodded mutely again. “Great! And now I must bid you farewell, young man. I expect to see you become a great Hero in the future!” With that, he crouched down and leapt away.

“Wait, All Might! But I don’t--” by the time Izuku had spoken All Might was a dot in the distance. Izuku sighed and let his outstretched hand drop. It didn’t really matter. It wasn’t like All Might would tell him anything he hadn’t heard already anyway.

The old man whimpered again. Izuku realized his glasses and hat and cane were missing. He led the old man to a nearby curb and helped him sit down. “Wait here sir, please,” he said. Izuku ran back down the tunnel. A quick search and he’d found the man’s belongings; he found his own backpack with little trouble as well and took a few minutes scooping his tattered schoolwork back into it. He sighed as he tossed the bedraggled Hero notebook in on top and closed it. Wasted dreams, that.

When he returned to the old man and handed over the hat and cane and spectacles, he seemed a lot calmer. The old man scanned the skies as he put on his hat and pinc-nez, squinting. “He gone?” he said in a surprisingly calm and level voice.

Izuku blinked. “Uh, All Might? Yes, he’s probably halfway across the city by now.”

The old man grunted. “Good. For a minute there I thought he was gonna poach you out from under me.” He sounded almost amused.

What? “Uhh, sir… maybe we should take a little walk to the Emergency room and let the doctors check us over,” he said kindly. “We both took a pretty hard tumble. They might want to check for a concussion…”
“Kind of you to think of that,” the old man said. “Pity Man-Mountain there didn’t think about that.” He squinted at the sky again, this time in mild disapproval. “Don’t be too hard on him lad; he had his reasons for running off. Anyway, no need for the hospital. Here...” he dug in his longcoat pockets and pulled out something that looked like a pen with a purple light at the tip. He held it up to Izuku’s face. “Now hold still.”

“What--” The old man clicked the pen. A wide beam of purple light scanned up and down Izuku’s head. The headache he’d been feeling disappeared. The old man stepped back and clicked the pen again, letting the beam play over Izuku’s body. Dozens of aches, bruises, and scrapes vanished. Not only that, but the slime from the villain’s attack evaporated as well, leaving Izuku’s clothes spotless.

“That’s amazing!” Izuku stammered. “How…? What…?”

“Miniaturized version of the Purple Ray from the Amazons on Themyscira,” the old man said as he scanned it over himself. “Heals, cures, disinfects and sanitizes. Let’s hear it for micro-technology. The original version would have filled an eighteen-wheeler.” He stuck the miracle device back in his pocket. “Now come along, Izuku,” he said. “We’ve got a subway to catch.”


The old man paused. “What? Oh, I’m sorry. I keep forgetting all those formalities and honorifics. I’m a bit new to Japan. Well, THIS Japan…. No, I was pretty new to the other one too..” he muttered absently. “Nevermind. Is Izuku too informal? Midoriya then. Come along--”

“But sir-- your name?”

The old man looked back in surprise, then smiled. “Oh of course. Call me Batson. Billy Batson. Or William if you prefer.” His eyes twinkled like a mischievous child’s and years seemed to fall from his face. “Anyway, come along, Young Midoriya. Like I said… Subway to catch.” He hefted his walking staff and started off back down the tunnel they’d just escaped.

Too confused to disobey, Izuku trotted after him. “but Sir… Batson-sama… there isn’t… any… subway.. down… here?” There in the middle of the tunnel wall, the wall he would have sworn had nothing more than dirt and graffiti on it a minute ago, was a steel door with the word “Subway” painted on it in English and Kanji. Mister Batson opened the door and gave Izuku a smile before stepping through. Feeling dizzier than he had when his head had hit the concrete, Izuku followed.
There was a short flight of stairs that ended in a small subway platform. The ticket window was closed and the illuminated signs were scrolling... well... nothing. Just gibberish and random symbols. A subway train was pulling up at that precise moment; it came to a halt just as the mysterious Mr. Batson’s toes lined up with the edge of the platform.

The doors whooshed open. “Come along Midoriya-- no, don’t worry about the ticket, it’s covered, come along--” Izuku stumbled after him, the doors whooshing shut on his heels. He looked around; the car they were in was empty save for themselves. *And that’s the most uncanny thing so far*, he thought in amusement. *An empty train car in Japan on a workday afternoon...*

Mr. Batson sat down, then tapped the seat across from him with his staff. “Take a seat lad,” he said. “It’s a fairly short ride but I wouldn’t want to spend it standing.” Izuku sat. Just as his butt hit the chair, the train began moving. The lights and the announcement signs flickered oddly, and the windows began to frost over.

Izuku felt his heart rate jump. “What is all this? What is this about?” he demanded.

Mr. Batson smiled through his snowy beard. “Well, my boy, it’s quite simple,” he said. “You’ve been chosen.”

“C-Chosen? By who?”

Mr. Batson patted his beard over his chest. “Well-- by me.” He sat back a bit. “I believe a few explanations are in order.”

“No kidding,” Izuku muttered, glancing at the frosted over windows. Some decidedly strange lights and silhouettes were flashing by behind the frost.

“I may not look it, young man, but I was once a Hero myself... what you fellows today call a “Pro-Hero,” actually. One of Earth’s great champions. Got my start at about your age, too.”

“Which one?” Izuku asked.

Mr. Batson sighed and rolled his eyes. “You wouldn’t have heard of me. It was a LONG time ago... plus, it... wasn’t around here.”
Izuku squinted suspiciously. “Who?”

Mr. Batson held up a placating hand. “They used to call me Captain Marvel.” He snorted. “Till some corporate sharks stole the name out from under me and gave it to their public relations figurehead-- a plank-faced woman with a chip on her shoulder and a pole up her keester who thought everyone should kiss her foot because she was ‘the first great Woman Hero.’” He snorted again. “Wonder Woman, Black Canary, the Wasp and the She-Hulk sure got a horse laugh out of that.”

“I’ve not heard of any of those heroes,” Izuku said.

“Not surprising. When I say my career was ‘long ago and far away’ I’m not exaggerating. Between time travel, alternate dimensions, and various cosmic hiccups, I first got in the game, oh...” he counted on his fingers for a moment. “About three, four hundred years ago.”

Izuku gawped. He should have cried “bull,” but there was just something about the man that made it impossible not to believe him. “But the first child with a Quirk was born a hundred years ago--”

Mr. Batson held up a finger. “Correction: the first one they know about was born a hundred years ago.” He lowered his hand. “More aptly, the first one they know about on this Earth.”

“This… Earth?”

“You going to repeat everything I say back to me?” Mr. Batson chuckled. “Yes. In case you missed what I said about ‘alternate universes’ and didn’t catch the hint. I’m from... a few universes over, that-a-way. Different Universe, different Earth-- same in many regards, but different in some fascinating ones as well.

“Anyway, as I was saying... where was I? Oh yes, three or four hundred years. Not a bad run, I’d think. But it was getting along in years and I was long overdue to find my successor, as my predecessor had passed it down to me.”

Izuku wasn’t a dumb boy. He silently pointed to himself. Mr. Batson clapped his wrinkled hands. “Bravo! You picked up the clue ball,” he chuckled.
“But why me?”

Mr. Batson laughed. “Goodness, your innocence is just so refreshing,” he said. “Izuku… may I call you Izuku now? Izuku, you, an unquirked boy, have shown a barmy old man more compassion, patience, and courage… not to mention competence under fire… than I’ve seen out of the last ten Pro Heroes I’ve seen this week combined.”

“Even All Might?”

Mr. Batson’s smile was suddenly a little sad. “We’ll give him a pass,” he said. “He’s got troubles… terrible troubles that you don’t know about… that kept him from sticking around. Try not to hold it against him.” He shifted in his seat. “But all said and done, Izuku, I am fully confident that you are more than worthy to wield the power I’m passing down to you.” The train squealed to a halt; Mr. Batson was on his feet and standing at the door before it had even halted. The door whooshed open.

“The power of SHAZAM.”

Izuku stepped out of the subway car. They were standing on a rocky plateau—no, they weren’t. Izuku looked up, down, left, right— they were standing on a titanic boulder, a flying mountain! It floated in the midst of a starry void that stretched out overhead… and underneath… Izuku skipped hastily away from the edge and towards the safer center. “Oh, sorry,” Mr. Batson mumbled. “I’ve forgotten how unsettling that is the first time. Anyway, welcome to—” he swept his arms out in a grand gesture.

“THE ROCK OF ETERNITY.”

“The rock of eternity,” Izuku whispered reverently.

Mr. Batson looked slightly embarrassed and dropped his arms. “Well, er, one bit of it anyway,” he said. “Sort of inherited it from my predecessor… he chipped it off the old block and, well, here it is.”

“What happened to him?” Izuku asked.

“Oh, he’s off somewhere… contemplating the omniverse, or something,” Batson said waving his hand. “Come on.” He led Izuku along a path that headed towards the center of the rocky terrain. On either side were seven odd statues, grotesqueries. “The Deadly Sins, or the Enemies of Mankind,”
Mr. Batson said. “Gluttony, Sloth, Greed, Envy, Wrath, Lust, Pride, Deceit, Injustice…” he named some of them as they passed.

“I thought there were only seven Deadly Sins,” Izuku said.

“Well, most people only NAME seven,” Batson said. “Wanted to keep the number symbolic, or the like. My predecessor and I quibbled over whether ‘lust’ or ‘injustice’ should be number seven, and then we quibbled about ‘Deceit’, and whether Gluttony and Greed were really the same thing… so we just put them all up.” He rolled his eyes. “Good thing we stopped. If we’d kept at it we would have covered the rock with the world’s ugliest lawn gnome collection. Either way, these are the Enemies of Man... and YOUR enemies. Beware them, they will do you nothing but harm.”

The path ended at a circular tableau. Seven pillars stood around the edge. On each one a name was carved. Mr. Batson stopped in the center and pointed to the first pillar. The name engraved there lit up, one letter at a time. “The Wisdom of Solomon!”

The second one lit up with a flash. “The strength of Hercules!”

The third flashed. “The stamina of Atlas!”

Flash. “The power of Zeus!”

Flash. “The invulnerability of Achilles!”

Flash. “The swiftness of Mercury!”

A wind began circling, tousling their hair. Batson stood there, his white hair and beard flying; he no longer looked like a mild mannered little old man-- he looked like a wizard, or a shaman, or a wise man-- an Ancient, in every sense of the word. He pointed his staff at Izuku.

“By this word, do I grant you the power I inherited! To you I pass down what was passed down to me--

“THE POWER OF SHAZAM!”
Lightning leapt from the pillars, down to the old man, limning him in crackling light. It crawled down the length of the staff and leapt, pencil-thin, to strike Izuku in the forehead. For the briefest of seconds Izuku felt electricity crackling through him, from the crown of his head down and out through his toes and fingertips… then it stopped. Batson lowered his staff; he seemed to sag a bit, suddenly looking a touch older and far more tired. But he looked up and gave Izuku a confident smile.

“Now,” he said. “Say the name.” He pointed to the pillars. The first letter of each still glowed.

Izuku wet his lips and took a deep breath.

“SHAZAM!”

A bolt fell from the starry void above and struck Izuku. He felt an explosion of power--

He staggered, and blinked. “Quite the rush, eh?” Batson chuckled. Izuku looked over and down at him--

Down-- at him--

He was looking down at the top of the old man’s head.

“How,” Batson said. He gestured at a nearby outcropping of rock. Water flowed down its side, rippled, smoothed, became a silvery mirror. Izuku looked into it and saw his reflection.

Izuku stammered in shock and looked himself over. He was TALL. He had to be at least two meters tall now, broad shouldered, and rippling with muscle. He was dressed in a deep red bodysuit, with golden metallic boots, bracers, and belt. A glowing, gold-trimmed lightning bolt trailed down his broad chest. There was a cape adorning his shoulders, white with gold trim-- a quick examination revealed that it was actually sort of a cowl, with a hood. That would come in handy in bad weather, he couldn’t help thinking while the rest of his brain gibbered in fanboy hysterics. He still had his mop of curly green hair, but now it reached down to the nape of his neck. And his face… he could still see himself in that boyish face. It certainly still had the freckles.

“Not bad, huh?”
Izuku couldn’t help flexing at the mirror a bit. “In-- Incredible,” he agreed.

“Okay, now say it again.”

“Incredible?”

Batson snerked. “That joke never quits being funny. No, kid-- the other--”

“What? Oh, Shazam?”

Another crack of thunder and bolt of lightning, and ordinary Izuku was standing there again. He patted himself over, not sure if he was relieved or disappointed. “Oh, oh, I get it, I change whenever I say--”

A wrinkled hand clapped over his mouth. “Ah, you might want to learn to be careful about saying ‘the Magic Word’ all the time,” Batson said. Izuku nodded meekly. Batson let his hand drop. “When you’re the Big Red Cheese, you’re just about indestructible. But when you switch back, you’re just another squishy mortal, got it?” He glanced up. “Oh, and be careful about saying that INDOORS. The Lightning isn’t picky about what it passes through on its way to you.” He shook his head. “I ruined more ceilings in our old house that way… heh. It’s a good thing you don’t have to necessarily do the secret identity thing here. Old Supes might have gotten away with changing in telephone booths, but people tend to notice when lightning starts striking in a residential neighborhood on a regular basis…” He gazed off into nowhere in nostalgia.

“I’ll remember that,” Izuku said. He flexed his skinny arms experimentally, and flicked his fingers. Sparks of electricity ran up and down his digits.

“What’s that?” Batson peered at his fingers. Izuku flicked them again. “Well well,” Batson said in amusement. “It looks like you can access a smidgen of your powers even in your mortal form. That’ll come in handy in a pinch.” He walked over to the center of the amphitheater again. A throne of stone grew up behind him and he sat down. “Dang it, forgot the cushions--” a few plush pillows appeared and he settled in with a sigh. “Now, say the magic word again, Izuku my boy.”

Izuku complied; Another lightning bolt and roll of thunder and he stood before him, empowered again. “Gonna have to pick out a new name,” Batson muttered. “Dratted lawyers. Just-- Just call yourself ‘The Marvel’ for now.”
Izuku nodded, grinning. “That works.”

“Okay. I’m gonna be sending you home now-- but before you go I’m going to do something MY predecessor didn’t do and darn well OUGHT to have done before he sent me on my way.” He gave Izuku a wry smile, his eyes twinkling again. “I’m gonna tell you what your powers are and how they work.”

It was twilight when Izuku finally came home. Inko was frantic; where had her baby boy gotten to?? She nearly had a heart attack from relief when he crashed through the front door. “Mom! Mom, I--”

“Izuku, where have you BEEN?” she cried, rushing to him. “Not a word, not a CALL--”

Izuku did something that made her blink. He laughed. “I was kind of out of phone range,” he said. “REALLY out of phone range. I’m sorry, but it’s okay, really-- I’ve got something to show you--”

“Izuku, what were you doing that took you out of cell phone range? Where WERE you? What HAPPENED?”

Izuku laughed again. She’d never seen him so cheerful, not in ages! “If you’ll come outside, I’ll SHOW you,” he said in exasperation. “Come on--” he tugged her hand, then turned and ran out the door. Baffled, she followed.

By the time she got her shoes on and out on the patio, he was already down in the parking lot. He stood in the middle of the asphalt, arms spread wide and looking up at her with a wide beaming smile on his face. “Hey Mom, remember all those times when I was real little and I’d go ‘Mommy, Mommy, watch me!’?” He laughed.

“Well, Mom-- WATCH THIS!”

“SHAZAM!!”

And thunder and lightning split the sky--
It had been an unusual admissions exam day. Even for U.A.

The teachers and staff sat in the observation lounge, watching on dozens of giant screens as the hopeful applicants tore their way through scores of low-grade battle-bots, all of them hoping to make a high enough score or a big enough impression to win one of the coveted Hero Course class seats. This was typical.

What was not so typical was what was going down in exam arena A. One student in particular was giving the onlooking teachers and judges fits. Particularly, they were going nuts placing wagers on what the boy’s Quirk actually was.

“It’s gotta be some form of electrical Quirk!” someone argued.

“But that doesn’t account for the flight--”

“And that TRANSFORMATION,” someone added.

Nedzu, the school’s rat-dog-bear-whatever principal, listened to them argue. He pulled up the boy’s file and looked it over. Izuku Midoriya, age fourteen, Green hair, green eyes, freckles, fairly high grades, etcetera… but under Quirk the boy had written, then crossed out several options, only to finally write a single nonsense word in English.

Shizzle?-- No, SHAZAM.

What an odd word. Nedzu was rather fond of Scrabble, played it in several languages even-- but even his encyclopedic knowledge of words and phrases was turning up a blank.

Young Midoriya’s behavior had been odd right from the outset of the Practical. The moment the doors opened, he had run backwards, away from them. It was clear though a moment later that what he was doing was getting a safe distance from the other students. The moment he was a few meters away from the mob, he stopped, shouted something, and-- for lack of a better description-- was immolated in a bolt of lightning. Lightning from out of the clear blue sky.
Then it got really interesting. The skinny green-haired boy in a cheap track suit had been replaced by a red-and-gold suited, green-haired man some six feet tall and sporting the build of an Olympian. He had jumped and flown... FLOWN... over the packed crowd of students and dived into the arena, smashing robots left and right with his fists, his feet and yes, more lightning, this time blasted from his fingertips.

From there he’d been all over the testing zone, flying up and diving down to smash groups of one, two and three pointers. Nedzu was fairly certain he’d seen bursts of super-speed from the boy as well as he raced on foot here and there. He was raking in the points hand over fist. he was also earning quite a few of the secret “rescue” points, coming to other applicants’ aid, preventing robotic ambushes, tanking lasers and missile rounds for other students and the like.

He wasn’t getting much gratitude though. Partly because of the highly competitive nature of the Practical-- a factor that Nedzu always found to be a source of disappointment. But also because young Midoriya seemed to be...

Well...

A little bit of a klutz. Nedzu turned on the audio and listened in.

“Hey watch it!”

“Oops--”

“That was MY kill!”

“--Sorry--”

“You did that on purpose!”

“No, I didn’t mean to--”

“Owwww!”
“Oh gosh, sorry, sorry sorry sorry--” Izuku pulled a bandage roll out of the first aid kit under his cape (thank GOODNESS his mother insisted on him carrying it!) and hastily wrapped the arm of the student he’d clipped with a stop sign. He flew off before the guy could yell any more.

This was not going good. He’d trained, and trained, but he still wasn’t USED to being in this over-large, overpowered body. He was mopping the floor with the robots, sure, but a lot of people were getting dinged with collateral damage in the process. Punching out a three pointer meant flaming debris went EVERYwhere, and lightning was danged hard to control… Several times he’d had to rescue people from his own blunders. Thank Mercury for Super Speed at least.

Then the earth shook and the buildings trembled and everything REALLY went to crap.

Clouds of dust boiled down the streets. Applicants ran, coughing and choking and dodging rubble. Izuku snagged a basketball sized chunk of concrete before it could crush one purple-haired kid’s head, blocked a shower of broken glass with his back before it could fall on a couple of students, then flew up out of the dust cloud to get his bearings.

Less than a block over an enormous robot, big as the buildings on either side, had risen up out of the street intersection like a vengeful subterranean monster. It was now rumbling down the street, smashing the buildings on either side with its fists. Someone with a wind Quirk had managed to blow the dustclouds back. Izuku could see hero course applicants fleeing in a mob--

He could also see one girl in the street, her legs pinned under a slab of concrete.

Ochaco strained, trying to reach around so she could use her Quirk on the rubble pinning her. Every time she shifted her broken leg sent agony ripping through her. She was trapped--

Golden boots hit the street next to her. “Are you okay? Hold on, I’ll get you out of there!” She looked up. It was the flying… kind of clumsy… applicant who’d been all over the place during the exam.

“My leg..” she whimpered.

“Let me get this--” he bent down and grabbed the slab pinning her.
“Lift with your legs, not your back!” she yelped, dozens of hours around her parent’s construction business coming to the fore.

“Right-- got it--” he shifted his stance and the enormous slab of concrete and mortar rose. She watched in astonishment as he raised it up…

The Zero Pointer slammed its fist into the street. The ground shook, and the green-haired boy staggered. Ochaco screamed and shielded her head, convinced that he was going to drop it.

He didn’t drop it. He staggered a step, shifted his grip and glared in rage at the Zero Pointer. “STOP THAT, YOU STUPID--!” He gripped the concrete slab, spun in a circle and THREW it at the giant robot. It streaked toward the robot like a discus, striking it in the torso and punching straight through it. The mechanical leviathan stood there for a moment, as if it were astonished at what happened to it. Then slowly it toppled over to one side, flattening the faux-building next to it. A moment later explosions ripped through it as its internal mechanisms decided that yes, this DID qualify as a critical engineering failure and detonated.

Ochaco gaped in awe at the destruction. She looked up at her rescuer. He was standing there, poking his index fingers together and looking for all the world like a little boy who’d just pitched a baseball through someone’s window. He looked at her, chagrined. “Weeeeee…. Weren’t supposed to destroy those things, were we...” he said.

Ochaco smothered a snicker. “No,” she said. “But--”

The boy-- he was so clearly a boy, for all he was grown big as a man-- cringed. “Oh, man, I hope they don’t BILL me for it!” he whimpered.

That was too much. Ochaco sputtered and let loose a belly laugh. “Haahahaha-- owww.” She clutched her calf. Yup, her ankle was busted for sure.

“Oh here, let me help..” he knelt down and fiddled with her work boot. “I think we’re supposed to get this shoe off...” he struggled with the laces for a moment. “Ah, freaking--” He stopped and glared at his hands. “Stupid giant MAN HANDS!” He stood up and backed up a few steps.

“SHAZAM!”
There was a blinding flash of light and a crash of thunder, and the heroic red and gold figure was replaced by a teenage boy in a track suit. He dropped back to his knees and finished unlacing the boot, pulling it off carefully. “There… we go…”

“You… and him… you’re…?” Ochaco said. She winced as her foot slid free of the shoe.

“Yeah, that’s me,” he said. “I shapeshift.”

“But you… and lightning. And super strength-- and you flew!” Ochaco babbled.

He nodded and rubbed the back of his head, embarrassed. “Yeah. I have more than one power. But it’s still all one… thing...” he waved a hand. “It’s complicated.”

“I bet.” Ochako murmured.

“Any injuries, dears? Oh, here we are--” An elderly woman in a labcoat came weaving through the crowd. “ah, no need for first aid, young man, I’ve got it covered…” Recovery Girl leaned over and gave Ochako a kiss on the brow. Almost instantly the shattered ankle reformed, healthy as new. “You’ll need to rest up a bit, dear,” Recovery Girl said, handing Ochako a baggie of gummi vitamins. “My healing draws on YOUR energy, not mine.”

“Yes ma’am,” Ochako said obediently. She looked up at Izuku. “Oh, I’m sorry-- my name is Uraraka Ochako. Thank you for saving me!”

Izuku blushed. “J-just glad to help,” he said. “Oh, and I’m Izuku. Midoriya Izuku.”

“Really?” Recovery Girl said. “Midoriya Izuku?” At Izuku’s nod she said, “Well you’d best head right on over to the principal’s office. Nedzu-sama has a few things to discuss with you.” With that ominous pronouncement she tottered off.

Izuku gulped. It wasn’t just his hair that was green. “Oh boy,” he said.
“Well, young Midoriya,” Principal Nedzu said, sipping his tea. “You’ve created quite a stir.”

“Yessir?” Midoriya mumbled. He glanced around the room. The entire teaching staff of U.A., some of the most famous Pro Heros in Japan, were gathered in the room. Midnight. Vlad. Ectoplasm. Present Mic. Eraserhead. Cementoss. Even ALL MIGHT. All silent. All staring at him. If he hadn’t been sweating bullets, Izuku would have been going into a fanboy freakout hard enough to explode.

“I can see you’re quite anxious about this little meeting,” Nedzu said, his expression and voice cheerful as ever. “So let’s cut some of the tension shall we? First off, we’ll bend the rules a bit and let you know right now: you scored 75 Villain points in the Practical. More than enough to put you in first place and secure a seat in the Hero Course.”

Izuku’s face lit up like the morning sun. “I did it?” he said. “I’m IN?”

Nedzu held up a paw and motioned for him to calm down. Izuku clamped down on his exuberance and held his breath. “We should also add that there was another, hidden metric,” he said. “Rescue points. You earned another hundred and twenty points in this manner, coming to the aid of other applicants in distress.” He waved to the monitors on the wall. As Izuku watched they lit up, each one displaying a different moment when Izuku had literally saved someone’s neck… including the moment he’d rescued the Gravity girl. “These, I must tell you, are the ones we look for most keenly. They demonstrate a true heroic mindset, one value we deeply treasure here in U.A.”

Izuku let out a puff of air and seemed to deflate a little. “Sir.. you probably need to delete a lot of those rescue points,” he said soberly. Nedzu cocked his head quizzically. “A lot of those rescues….” Izuku hung his head and looked up at the Principal. “A lot of them were me having to rescue someone from one of my bungles.”

“We noticed,” Cementoss said. “And it doesn’t change my opinion any.” Now it was Izuku’s turn to look puzzled. “Kid, you would be AMAZED at how often Pro Heroes have “bungles” like that,” Cementoss went on. He gave All Might a meaningful look. The Pillar of Peace coughed and looked off at nothing. “There are Pros out there who will tear up the scenery, cause all sorts of collateral damage and injuries and not give a darn.”

Someone coughed. It sounded a lot like “ENDEAVOR”.

“No lie,” Cementoss said, unashamed. “That jackass would burn down half a neighborhood chasing a gas-station robber and not even stick around to count the number of people he left homeless or in
“It says a lot to me that you tried to clean up after yourself.”

“Hm. Perhaps we should add a new category of secret points,” Principal Nedzu said. “Salvage points? Cleaning-Up-After-Oneself points? Ah, but that’s for later. Rest assured, with more training you will have fewer awkward moments like this.” He took a moment to refill his cup. “But now to address the point that I’m sure is dwelling on young Midoriya’s mind the most:

“The issue of the nature of his powers.”

Izuku stammered. “Sir… I…”

Nedzu held up a paw. “Midoriya Izuku, For your own safety and well being you need to be informed that the policy of both the U.A., the Japanese government, and of the Law concerning the nature and origins of your powers is thus:

“We don’t give a darn.”

“Whu?” Izuku blurted. He blinked.

It was then that All Might spoke. “Young Midoriya, I am sure you are aware of the common wisdom about powers and the nature of Quirks,” he said, steepling his fingers in front of him. “Everyone, at least eighty percent, that is, gets a single Quirk which grants them a particular power. These powers are passed down to those people’s offspring, combining genetically into new, different, but related Quirks. Correct?”

“Er, yes?”

“That is the common wisdom, yes.” All Might sat back. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“Firstly,” Vlad King said. “Nobody has really figured out, in a solid way, how Powers function, how they’re passed on, why they change, or even how they work. There are multiple examples around the world of people who seem to break the ‘one Quirk, one Power’ rule.”
“Todoroki Shoto, Endeavor’s son, for example” Ectoplasm said. “He controls both fire AND ice. There are many Quirk Experts who would swear that he has two Quirks, not one.”

“Then there’s the Tenya family,” Vlad added. “They have engines in their arms and legs that run on orange juice. One look at them makes the average biochemist want to crawl off in a corner and cry themselves to sleep.” Several of the teachers chuckled.

“And the genetics issue is even worse,” Midnight said. “The way Quirks are passed on violates everything learned about genetics since Gregor Mendel. You can identify your average geneticist these days by the chronic hangover.”

“And it’s not bandied about but there are countless cases of people who gain powers other than by a Quirk,” Nedzu said, resuming control of the conversation. “Genetic experiments. Cybernetic implants. Use of body-altering chemicals…” he dunked a biscuit thoughtfully. “There was that one fellow who claimed to get his powers from a green rock that fell from space…” He crunched the cookie and washed it down with a splash of tea.

“The point is, young man, the Quirk classification is just that.. a system. Designed less by scientists and more by harried bureaucrats who desperately wanted to fit everything in this mad new world into tidy little boxes. And guess what, the boxes leaked. And they are VERY busy ignoring that.

“The powers that be don’t WANT to investigate every odd little anomalous power that doesn’t fit in the system. In fact, the reaction of the last group of politicians who we asked about investigating anomalous quirks was, verbatim, “Oh Jesus, Buddha, Hare Krishna and Bob Ross, please NO.”” Someone let out a snort. “So long as we stick a label on you and give them someplace to put your file, they won’t care. So you can rest easy; noone’s going to cart you off to some secret government lab or anything of the like.”

Izuku felt himself sag in relief as the bear-dog-mouse’s words registered. Still… “Do you… that is, U.A. Do you want to know where my powers come from?”

All Might coughed. “You’re not the only one with secrets, Young Midoriya,” he said. “Unless it’s something you need to let us know for your own safety or the safety of the school, your secrets are your own.”

Midnight crossed one shapely leg over the other and rested her laced fingers on her knee. “Is there anything like that we should know?” she asked. Izuku shook his head.
All Might looked almost apologetic for asking. “Is it actually multiple Quirks--”

“All no,” Izuku said. To his puzzlement All Might looked relieved? “Actually, it’s a sort of singular power set, handed down as a legacy…” All Might, and several others, started at that. Several of them shot glances at All Might before catching themselves. Strange.

Present Mic turned to Eraserhead, who looked extremely disgusted. “Come on, pay up,” Present Mic cackled, holding out a hand. Eraserhead scowled and started counting 1000 yen notes into the sonic Pro Hero’s palm.

All Might cut Izuku off. “In that case I withdraw the question,” he said. “We’ll just say that yours isn’t the first such case we’ve heard of… and we know the dangers of having too many people knowing the details.” Well. That wasn’t ominous.

“All no,” Izuku said. To his puzzlement All Might looked relieved? “Actually, it’s a sort of singular power set, handed down as a legacy…” All Might, and several others, started at that. Several of them shot glances at All Might before catching themselves. Strange.

“Moving on to less tense subjects,” Nedzu said. “As it’s rather important to how your education shall go-- What exactly ARE your powers?”

Izuku took a deep breath. “Well…”

It was the first day of class. The students of 1-A were fitted out in their gym gear and lined up outside. Their homeroom teacher, Eraserhead, had just informed them they were to take a Quirk Apprehension Test. Some of the students looked nervous. Katsuki looked surly. Izuku looked cheerful and calm. Eraserhead looked like someone had dumped him out of bed five minutes ago and then beaten him with a bedwarmer.

Aizawa looked over his students. “Let’s get started. Izuku, since you were the highest score in the Admissions test--”

Bakugao (metaphorically, for once) exploded. “What?? Deku?? The TOP SCORE??”

Aizawa looked at him as if he hated wasting the energy to do so. “Didn’t you read the scoresheet? How illogical of you.”
“BULLSHIT!” Bakugao yelled. “THIS Quirkless little NOTHING beat MY SCORE??” He stomped over to where Izuku stood, hands popping and sparking, and rammed a finger into Izuku’s chest hard enough to make him rock backwards. “All right, I’ve had it! What lousy cheat TRICK did you PULL to get in to U.A., you Quirkless BUTTRAG? TELL ME!!!” He cupped one hand into a claw, letting his Quirk pop larger and louder explosions in his palm, threatening.

Izuku did something that should have made Katsuki turn tail and run: he smiled. “Sure, Kacchan, I’ll tell you!” He put his hands behind his back and leaned in.

“….shazam.”

...

...

...

A minute or so later, Katsuki was still standing there. He hadn’t been electrocuted-- Izuku had practiced till he knew the exact safe distance-- but it had been close. His hair was smoking, and was looking rather more frizzed than usual. There was still nothing but spots before his eyes, he could hear nothing but a faint ringing noise, his muscles were still spasming and his undershorts were full of something unpleasant.

Aizawa looked him over and sighed. “Uraraka, please levitate him over to Recovery Girl’s office,” he said. “We’ll let you catch up when you get back.” The girl complied, and began towing Bakugao behind her like an epileptic balloon. “Midoriya?” He tossed one of the softballs to the red-and-gold suited Olympian. “Like I said, you go first.”

“Yessir.”

“And Midoriya? Please don’t Thunderbolt any more of your classmates?”

“Of course not sir.” Midoriya gave him an innocent smile, stepped up and threw the ball into orbit.
“Go on, young man,” the old woman said with a smile. She tipped up the jewelry case so Izuku could see the contents better. “Pick one out. My gift to you.”

Izuku hesitated. “Ma’am, that’s very kind of you but--”

The tiny wrinkled woman smiled at him. “After what you did? It’s only right that I should thank you. Go on. I insist.”

It had been an eventful half hour. Izuku had been on his way to school, enjoying the warm weather when he’d stumbled across a crime in the happening. A street punk-- a leather-jacketed tough with an enormous drill bit for a pompadour-- was shaking down a craft vendor’s cart for money. “All your cash, old lady,” he’d snarled. “Snap it up!” He revved the drill on his head, making it scream menacingly.

The owner of the cart, a tiny old woman with her greying hair in a bun, had been terrified. “Please, it’s only morning-- I haven’t sold anything yet--” she’d held up the money box she’d been using in lieu of a register. Snarling, the thug had snatched the steel box from her hands and run for it, his drill whirling. “Outta the way!”

Izuku hadn’t even had to think about it. As the thief ran past he’d whipped out one foot and snagged the runner’s ankle. Drill-Head had completely lost all balance and gone sailing headfirst into a lamp post. There’d been a sound like an electric pencil sharpener choking on a crayon, and the would-be bandit was left kneeling on the sidewalk, stuck to the pole by the drill on his forehead.

A nearby pedestrian had seen the whole thing and (after he and everyone else had finally quit laughing) called the police. They’d arrived, taken everyone’s testimony, given the cart lady her money box back, congratulated Izuku on his quick thinking and were now in the process of extracting the street tough from the lamp post. Izuku had watched for a few minutes, snickering to himself, till the cart lady had gotten his attention.

“That was brave of you, my boy,” she said, beaming at him. “You’ve got the makings of a Hero in you.”

Izuku stammered and flushed. “Th-thank you for saying so,” he said, rubbing his arm. “It’s… not likely I’ll be one though.” She cocked her head like a bird. “I… don’t have a Quirk,” he muttered,
flushing harder as he admitted his most embarrassing flaw.

To his surprise the woman scoffed. “Psh. As if a Quirk had anything to do with being a hero.” She gestured to the thug, who was being escorted to a squad car. He was cuffed and had what looked like a huge foam cork stuck over the drill on his head. “That one had a Quirk-- did that make HIM a hero?”

Izuku snickered again. “To be fair, it kind of look he got the bottom of the barrel for Quirks,” he said.

The little old woman laughed merrily. “True enough. Aiyah, a drill? On his head? Not exactly All Might, was he?” she tittered a bit more as the squad car drove off. “Still, it’s the heart and the deeds that make a hero, not the tools or the talents.” She regarded him, eyes glittering. “Here, let me say thank you.” She picked up one of the glass top boxes on her cart and opened the lid. Inside were some of the bits of homemade jewelry she was hawking. “One of my totem pendants,” she said. “For free.”

Embarrassed, Izuku refused. But she insisted. “Think of it as a promotional, then,” she pressed. “Go on, pick one out. It’s a gift from me to you.”

Izuku hesitated. He didn’t want to offend her by turning down the gift. He wasn’t a jewelry sort of guy, but maybe his mother would like it…? He looked in the box.

The old lady had all sorts of hand-made jewelry: necklaces, rings, bracelets… this box was full of pendants crafted out of silver, no bigger than his thumbprint and dangling from leather thongs. Each one had a different stylized animal engraved on it. He saw a bat, a spider, a fierce looking badger-like creature, a turtle…

There was one though that seemed to stand out for some reason; perhaps a bit shinier than the others… it had a rabbit or hare, caught in mid-leap. Perfect. Even if he didn’t wear it (Kacchan would mock him mercilessly) his mother would like it. He reached out and picked it out with a thumb and forefinger. “This one is lovely,” he said as he hefted it in his palm. “It-- ouch!” He nearly dropped it, barely catching it by the thong with his other hand as something stung his palm.

“Oh! Did you hurt yourself dear?” the lady asked. “Ah! Did I not polish that one right? A sharp corner--”
“No, no, I’m fine,” Izuku said. He shook his hand and looked at his palm. There was no cut. A pinched nerve, maybe? He did have some odd pins-and-needles sensations in his palm. He looked at the pendant. No, there was no sharp edge or point on it anywhere, it was polished as smooth as the others. Though it did seem to have lost some of its luster now that it was out of the velvet lined box…

“Ah, the rabbit,” the cart lady said. “…Interesting choice. Very interesting.” Her eyes twinkled oddly. Izuku stared at her with a raised eyebrow as she put the box away. Somewhere a bell tolled. She looked up sharply. “Oh dear, I’ve kept you. You’d best hurry, my boy, you don’t want to be late for school…”

Izuku started and picked up his backpack. “Oh, and thank you for the gift,” he said, bowing politely. The old lady reached up and patted his cheek.

“It was my pleasure, Midoriya-san,” she said. She made shooing motions. “Go on, go go go,” she said.

Izuku laughed and ran off. She watched until he turned a corner and disappeared from sight. He would be blocks away before he’d wonder when he had told her his name. “Yes, an interesting choice indeed…. Oh Prince of a Thousand Enemies.”

A moment later, there was no sign the little old lady or her cart had ever been there.

By all rights, Izuku should have been late. But from the moment he’d left the cart-lady behind, he’d been moving. The streets and buildings seemed to fly past. He’d taken up running a little.. after school, to try and get more in (heroic) shape. But he’d had no idea he was improving so much. He should have arrived at least ten minutes late; instead he’d arrived with a minute to spare, barely even breathing hard either! It’d been a good start to the day.

The good vibe hadn’t lasted, of course. Oh, it was a typical enough day. The classes were tedious, the clock was slow, the schoolwork demanding, his classmates were standoffish and disdainful to ‘the Quirkless kid’ and Kacchan was a jerk.
But things were… off. For some reason as the day went on, Izuku found himself feeling more and more restless. Jittery, even. His leg was constantly twitching, his toe tapping. The sounds of the school seemed a little noisier, the lights a little brighter, the writing and pictures in the book a little sharper. It was making it hard to pay attention to anything.

On top of that, he kept getting that… sensation, he could only think of it as the feeling one got when someone was watching you. Or when someone was about to poke you, or punch you, or throw something at your head-- you couldn’t see them but you could just HEAR it coming in the bottom of your hearing, FEEL it on your skin. Only it was going on all day, and it seemed to be coming from everywhere. He’d in fact had a few close shaves, twisting out of the way of an elbow meant for his ribs, skipping over a foot that would have tripped him… but that only made him more on edge.

And that weird pins and needles sensation had spread up from his hand, all the way up his arm.

Then came the pinnacle of the day: their homeroom teacher, on the final hour of the day, asking them what their plans were for their career. Every kid there, naturally, had all but shouted their ambition to be a pro-hero. Even the dork with the neck-stretching power and the kid with a pencil for a head. Kacchan had mocked them all, told them he was the only one who’d applied to U.A. who even had a hope of getting in…

Then their teacher (the traitorous bastard) had informed everyone that “Midoriya” had applied to U.A. as well. The class had exploded into laughter. All except Kacchan of course; the hot-tempered blonde promptly took it as an insult-- to HIM-- that Izuku had dared to apply to HIS future Hero school.

“What?” he roared. He burst up out of his chair and stomped to the back of the room where Izuku was sitting. “DEKU, YOU WORTHLESS--”

<danger!>

SPAK!

WHUMP.

The classroom fell silent in shock as Katsuki Bakugao slumped to the floor, unconscious. Izuku stood there, half-risen out of his chair, and stared at his raised fist. The moment Kacchan had stepped within arm’s reach Izuku’s fist had shot up in a blur, striking the explosive bully right on the chin and
knocking him out.

The rest of the class stared in awe. Midoriya had cold-cocked Bakugao. “No way,” someone breathed.

“Midoriya!!” the teacher yelped, half in shock, half in outrage. “What--”

“I-I don’t know!” Izuku babbled, his eyes wide and teary. “He just lunged at me and my arm moved--”

“Someone go fetch the school nurse,” the teacher commanded. “Get Mr. Bakugao off the floor, you two--” The students singled out hastened to obey. “Midoriya, I don’t know what’s gotten into you...”

Izuku wasn’t listening; it wasn’t like he was inclined to listen to the old hypocrite anyway. How many times had Kacchan punched or kicked him or blown his stuff up? But he was blocking the teacher out; the old fart was barely registering on his senses anyway. His eyes darted around the classroom. He could feel all their eyes on him-- some were stunned, but some of Kacchan’s “friends” were angry with him. He could smell it in the air, feel their eyes boring into his skin, the promise of blows yet to come--

The bell for the end of the school day rang. Izuku grabbed his bag and bolted. He ignored the teacher’s shouts for him to come back and didn’t slow down till he was on the street.

Izuku blindly followed the route home, letting memory guide his feet. He thought he would be able to calm down if he got away from the classroom, away from that aura of THREAT hanging in the air, but out here it was worse. The streets were noisy, deafening almost. The city air smelled bitter and sharp. He could feel that “eyes on his skin” sensation from dozens of places, waxing and waning. And pins-and-needles had started to spread across his back-- was that a warning sign? Was he sick? Poisoned?

<Something rushing towards him, dangerDangerDANGER->

Izuku made a hysterical leap backward. Without noticing it he’d stepped off the curb at the corner. A split second later an electric car whizzed past, barely missing his toes by inches.

How had he known it was coming?
The pins and needles suddenly rushed over his whole body, growing and growing. It felt like he’d been caught out in a sleet of steel needles. His arms clamped around his middle as cramps tore through his guts, his sides, his arms, his legs. With a half-groan, half-scream of pain and panic he fell to the sidewalk curled in a ball.

A whining din filled his ears. Over the deafening sound he could faintly hear people’s voices. People were gathering around him where he lay. “H-help me...” he gasped. Then, mercifully, he blacked out.

“In the news today, it appears that trade talks with the United States, England and Canada will be moving in a positive direction, now that the Diet has passed the Quirk Laws Reformation act, removing one of the major hurdles towards open trade with Nations who objected to the older standing laws on human rights grounds. With the passing of these reformations, many of the laws governing Quirk use-- such as the ones forbidding public use-- have been diminished or revoked entirely, easing the burden on law enforcement...”

Izuku slowly woke to the droning voice of the news caster. He wasn’t on the pavement anymore. He was lying in a bed, thin blankets up to his chest. He sniffed; he could smell cleaners and astringents, that old familiar hospital smell. Bleagh, his mouth tasted like paste. He twitched his ears toward the sound of the TV--

He replayed that thought again. What did I just do?

Blearily he rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms and looked around. Yes, he was in a hospital bed… He sat up and looked down at himself. Thick white fur covered his arms.

His scream brought people running.

Inko Midoriya had been up all night. She’d sat by her baby’s bedside till the sun had come up and till it set again, and refused to move; the hospital staff had wisely acceded to her wish to stay. She had only stepped away once every few hours to freshen up and to fetch something to eat from the hospital cafeteria.
She’d just gone to get another cup of the hospital’s lamentable coffee when she heard Izuku scream. The nurse and the on-call doctor barely beat her to the door.

They found him standing in the middle of the room next to the toppled hospital bed. He was hunched over, staring at his hands in front of his face and shaking in terror. The moment everyone piled in he whipped around and stared at them with wide eyes. “STAY BACK!” he shrilled. He looked ready to do incredible violence to anyone who didn’t.

The doctor and the nurse and the orderlies froze. Inko didn’t. She shoved past them and headed straight for her baby boy. “Izuku!”

He shied back. “Mom, don’t come near me! Don’t -- I don’t know what--”

What he didn’t know got smothered as his mother wrapped him in her arms. “It’s okay baby, it’s okay,” she crooned. “Thank heaven you’re awake...” as she rocked him back and forth the tension slowly ebbed out of him. The medical staff relaxed as he calmed down. “Mom??” he croaked, tears rolling out of his eyes. “What happened to me??”

Inko pulled back to look him in the eye and wiped her eyes with her palm. Her face was wet with tears too, but she was smiling. “Izuku, it looks like your Quirk came in,” she said. She laughed wetly. “But it wasn’t quite what any of us were expecting.”

She turned him around to face the window. It was dark outside, so he could see the reflection of the room’s interior in the glass. His mother was there...

Standing next to her in the reflection was a five foot tall, anthropomorphic rabbit.

They calmed him down, gave him something to eat and drink, and persuaded him to at least sit on the bed for safety’s sake. After the initial panic and confusion had quieted down, they had persuaded both of them to let him stay overnight for observation. Exhausted by the ordeal they both agreed. Despite everything Izuku had slept like the dead.
The next morning they moved on to something Izuku never expected to deal with: Quirk analysis. They’d wheeled him down to the Quirk Analysis offices on the fourth floor, given him a loose sweatshirt and sweatpants to wear his mother had brought with her, and let him step into the lavatory to get dressed.

He took the opportunity to look himself over. The first thing he noticed when he stripped off the hospital gown was that he was toned. He’d gone from a teenage stick figure to a swimmer’s build overnight. “Holy cow,” he murmured, flexing a bit in the mirror.

He was covered head to toe in white fur, save only for the top of his head where his unmistakeable mop of green curls still grew. His legs were long and powerful, and his feet had elongated out into rabbit-like paws, with four pink-padded toes and thick claws instead of nails. While he could rest his long feet flat on the floor—he’d stood up for a bit to try walking about—he was more comfortable standing on his toes and the padded ball of his foot.

His hands were more paw like as well. The fingers were thick and stubby, with fat tips and pads on his fingertips and palms, and again thick sharp claws had replaced the nails.

His face was still recognizable…. His large emotional green eyes were the same, any way. But his nose and chin had pushed out into a short muzzle, and his nose was now a pink triangle that twitched as he breathed. Thin, almost invisible whiskers sprouted from his cheeks where his freckles once were. His upper lip was cleft, and he had two notable buck teeth just visible under his upper lip. His ears were stretched out into enormous lapine ones, as long as his own forearm. And his whole face was of course covered in soft downy white fur.

Yes, he did have a little cotton tail. Good grief. He shook his head till his ears flopped and finished pulling on the sweatclothes. “Admire yourself later,” he muttered to himself. “Find out what happened to you first.”

He stepped out into the examination room. His mother was there, as well as a doctor he hadn’t seen… the Quirk specialist, he guessed. “Well, young man,” he said. “It’s not often I get to evaluate a “new” Quirk on someone your age. In fact I daresay it’s something of a first… but step over here and let’s see what’s what.” He pulled out a stethoscope and a-- what did you call those gadgets for looking in someone’s ear? “Hop up on this table...”

The examination had gone on for some time. It had been exhaustive. Izuku had been put through all sorts of scanners, then subjected to treadmills, grip testers, dozens of other kinds of measuring devices and exercise equipment. The less said about the samples the doctor had taken, the better.
It was midafternoon and Izuku had just about reached the limits of his patience when the inspection stopped and the doctor FINALLY started making his analysis.

“…Enhanced hearing, sense of smell…Also enhanced eyesight, as well as tapetum lucidum… er, eye-shine… not something seen in actual rabbits, oddly enough, though it does occur from time to time in even baseline human beings,” the doctor went on. “He’ll have excellent far sight as well as keen night vision.”

“His reflexes are off the chart. His aerobic oxygen consumption is better than an old-era Olympic marathon runner. His physical strength is--”

“Doctor,” Izuku’s mother said patiently. “Is there anything…medical…we need to know about his changes? Um, food allergies, medical needs, that sort of thing?”

“Oh. Of course, that is a concern for parents with most mutation Quirks, yes.” He clicked something on his tablet. “Let’s see here, toxicology report, gastric etc… Well, he’s healthy as a horse, so no worries about that. His digestive tract is still baseline, so an ordinary diet is perfectly fine for him…though you may want to add more protein and more leafy greens to it. He won’t have to deal with a rabbit’s gastric tract.” He gave Izuku a look. “For which he should be VERY grateful.”

Izuku looked at him askance. “Why?”

“Let’s just say you don’t want to know what rabbits have to do to completely digest their food and leave it at that,” the doctor said. “Also, get something to chew on. You’ll have an urge to. Your teeth will tend to grow continually, and chewing will keep them down. Some sticks of apple wood or maple will do. Ah, don’t swallow the splinters though. Add lots of hard things like crunchy fruits and nuts to your diet too.”

Izuku nodded, but his mind was on other things. “Doctor. What kind of Quirk do I have, exactly?” He swallowed. “I… I’m pretty sure it’s not a transformative Quirk. I’ve been trying to change back all day, but it’s not worked yet.”

The doctor sighed and nodded. “Unsurprising. There are other biological indicators that it’s not a transformative Quirk. Your appearance, at least, is due to a mutation Quirk, albeit an extremely abnormally late appearing one. This form, IS your form.”
Izuku took a deep breath, then let it out. He could see his mother biting her lip in worry. “It’s, I-- I’ll be okay,” he said. “I’ll just have to adjust, right? I adjusted to being Quirkless, I can adjust to, well, this.” He waved his hands at himself.

“Another thing,” the Doctor said. “This isn’t precisely your only Quirk.”

Izuku’s ears swiveled forward. “Not my only Quirk?” He looked at the doctor as if he’d grown a second head.

“Allow me to explain.” The doctor trundled over to a chart hanging on the wall, depicting the three types of Quirks. “Now it’s commonly taught that there are three types of Quirk-- Emittive, where you emit some type of force, energy, or matter; Transformative where you can change your own physiognomy, and Mutation, where your body is permanently altered from the norm. We all get one Quirk, which we inherit from one parent or the other or is made from the merging of their Quirks into a new form. Right?” The Midoriyas nodded.

“Bunk,” the doctor said flatly. “It’s a crappy, flawed classification system that has so many exceptions to the rule that you wonder how the hell they came up with the rules in the first place. You’ve seen countless people with mutations-- people with bird heads, or cat ears, or what have you- who also can shoot fireballs from their armpits or talk to squirrels or make rainclouds appear. So what the hell do you call that?

“There’s also the fact that inherited Quirks change from generation to generation, growing stronger and more complex… or the people who inherit a combination of two Quirks more potent than the parents, or that is totally different from either… the idea that two distinct genetic traits could mish-mosh into a single new one is a notion fit to make any competent geneticist tear his hair out. But you see all those things happening all the time with Quirks. People with multiple powers, people with mutation AND transformative or Emittive, people more powerful than both their parents combined tenfold…”

“That’s proof of the Quirk Singularity, isn’t it?” Izuku said. He twitched. The idea that someday Quirks would grow so powerful that nobody who had them would be able to control them was… disturbing.

The doctor snorted. “That’s also bunk,” he said. “Made up by ignorant gormless morons who don’t know how to draw a bell curve.” He held up his digital tablet and pulled out a stylus. “After the Radiant Baby was born, both the percentage of people born with Quirks and the power of the average Quirk accelerated rapidly.” He drew an upward swooping line in red on the chart showing on his tablet screen. “Which is exactly what you’d expect. It’s like lighting a campfire: Once you get it going, at first it accelerates rapidly.
“However, since about thirty years ago, both those numbers have been decelerating.” He continued the line, tapering it off till it was almost level. “For instance, Endeavor is scary powerful— a big leap ahead of other Fire Quirks that preceded him. And his son is more powerful than him… but not by nearly as much of a margin. Power levels are leveling out.

And the percentage of Quirk holders to non-holders is stabilizing as well. We went from less than one percent to nearly seventy percent in the first fifty years, but it’s taken the last fifty years to reach eighty. Barring deliberate scientific intervention, we’ll always have a certain minority of Quirkless in society, maybe one or two percent, but it’ll probably take another fifty years to reach it.

“Plus, while Emittive and Transformative Quirks are becoming more powerful, Mutation quirks-- the kind that make the body faster, stronger, tougher-- are also becoming more powerful and more prevalent. And we’re seeing more people with seeming Mutation Quirks, like yourself, who also have a Quirk in another category. Now it seems to me that implies our powers are changing to become stronger, but our bodies are changing to become tough enough to handle it.

“So sorry, the QuirkPocalypse has been postponed for the foreseeable future,” He said dryly. He stuck the stylus in his lab coat pocket and stuck the tablet under his arm. “But back to your issue. As I was saying, you essentially have a second Quirk. Or a sub-Quirk, if you like. An Emittive one, technically. Remember the test with the tennis balls?”

“Yes, I remember the tennis balls,” Izuku said ruefully. They’d had him walk into a room and promptly set a couple of tennis ball serving machines on him. He’d barely managed to dodge the volleys of hurtling fuzzy green projectiles, and just a few seconds of fire had left him panting.

“Don’t you think it odd for anyone to be able to dodge over a hundred tennis balls at high velocity?” the doctor smiled. Izuku jerked. “Young man, I’ve noticed that since you walked in you’ve been… well not twitchy but tense. Alert. Constantly looking about, those ears of yours on more of a swivel than your head. Care to explain why?”

“Sorry,” Izuku said, rubbing his arm to smooth out the fur. “I’m kind of jumpy. I’m kind of picked on at school a bit and so I sort’ve gotten… hyper attentive.”

“But even here? In a quiet hospital examination room? Izuku, take a seat, would you? Relax a moment.” Izuku sat on a nearby stool. The doctor sat on his wheeled stool and leaned toward him, looking at him closely. “Okay, rest, and focus on how you feel. Tell me, how do you feel right now?”
“Like I’m being watched,” Izuku grumbled. His ears folded back. “I’ve felt like that all day. It keeps coming and going—”

“Good, good. Focus on that feeling,” the doctor said. “Now I want you to close your eyes and take a deep breath. “ Izuku frowned, but obeyed. He heard the doctor walking around till he was standing behind him. “Good. Now let it out. Good. Now Izuku, imagine that you’re in a forest. A forest at night. Focus on it, visualize it as clearly as you can. Describe it to me.” I

Izuku’s brow furrowed. “It’s twilight, all shadows. There’s a little moonlight. I can’t see much, but I can hear things… frogs and crickets and night birds… but---” he shivered a bit. “I can hear things moving around in the brush. Snakes in the grass… animals hunting in the undergrowth….”

“Dangerous ones?”

“They could be,” he said. To his own surprise he was a little fearful.

“Point to one. Don’t open your eyes, just point to one.”

Izuku raised a hand and pointed.

“Now point to another.” His hand drifted up and to the left.

“And another?” Izuku’s hand swiveled to point off further to the right. His imagination filled in the sound; it was much larger and was growling this time.

“And now—”

“Aaah!” Izuku’s eyes snapped open. He spun about and whipped his hand up. The tennis ball thwacked into the palm of his hand an inch from his face. It took him a moment to realize what had happened; While Izuku had been talking the doctor had tiptoed over to the equipment cabinet, picked up a tennis ball and flung it at Izuku’s head, full force. Izuku dropped the ball; it rolled across the floor to the doctor’s feet. He picked it up and bobbled it in one hand.

“That, is your other Quirk,” the doctor said. “You have a Danger Sense. You are subconsciously aware of anything around you based on how potentially or immediately dangerous it is.”
“You figured all that out, just from throwing a tennis ball?” Inko piped up in disbelief.

The doctor nodded. “Tell me Izuku, what did it feel like when I whipped this ball at your head?”

Izuku thought it over, fishing for the words. “Did you ever see a jump-scare video? Like, you know it’s coming, you can tell-- then boom, whatever it is jumps out at you and it gets you anyway? Even if you’ve seen it a dozen times already? Kind of like that.”

The doctor nodded. “You sensed imminent danger, when I was preparing to throw the ball-- then it went to ‘jump scare’ when I actually threw it.” He looked around the room. “Allow me to add that earlier, when you pointed towards the ‘dangerous sounds’ in our mental exercise, you first pointed to a biohazard disposal box on the wall we use for dirty needles, then a bottle of toxin we keep in the upper cabinet…. and then through my office door at my desk-- where I keep a loaded gun in a locked drawer.” The Midoriya’s eyes widened at this tidbit. “Your Danger Sense is very comprehensive; it picks up both immediate threats and also more abstract dangers.”

“And scares the crap out of me with them?” Izuku said, distressed. “Is that it for me? A Quirk that… that lets me get scared all the time and run away?” Inko got to her feet and went to comfort him. “Is that how I’m supposed to live? Always afraid? Always feeling like I’m surrounded by a thousand enemies? What kind of use is a Hero like that?”

“Izuku,” the doctor said.

“What-- AAAH!” WHAP. Once again, Izuku snagged the ball out of the air without even looking-- this time barely inches from his and his mother’s head.

“Doctor!!” Inko yelped.

“Dunno, seems kind of useful to me,” the doctor said coolly.

Izuku gripped the ball. “That could have hit my mother, you know,” he said angrily.

The doctor looked him over. “No, no, I don’t think it would have,” he said, unruffled by the rabbit-boy’s glare. “You’d never let it.” He smiled oddly. “Surrounded by a thousand enemies, eh?” His voice took on the air of someone reciting something.
“All the world shall be your enemy,

Oh Prince of a Thousand Enemies,

And if they catch you, they will kill you.

But first-- they must catch you.”

He got to his feet and took back the ball. “As I tell all my Quirk patients, ‘it isn’t what you have, it’s what you do with it.’ Some people would be useless clods, even with All Might’s power. Some great Pro Heroes have Quirks you can barely notice. You’ve got an odd powerset, one that most people would disregard at first glance. But if a brave, honorable and most of all SMART kid like you can’t make something out of this, I’ll eat my medical degree.”

Izuku leaned back into his mother’s arms. The doctor’s remark about being a ‘smart kid’ goaded him. For the first time he started applying his clever, deductive, Quirk-analyzing skills to himself.

Hearing, scent, eyesight, reflexes… a ‘danger sense’… it’s not the individual powers, it’s the synergy, he realized. Like when two heroes with complementary Quirks work together. And all my powers are complementary…

The doctor was tossing the tennis ball up and down in one hand. Izuku’s paw whipped out and snapped it out of the air in mid toss. “Yeah,” he said. A smile started to grow on his face. “I think you’re right. Maybe I can make something of this.”

It was early evening in Golden Week. Something swift and white raced across the rooftops of Musafutu. If you were in the street and listened, you might hear racing footsteps; if you happened to glance up at the right time you might see a white blur flash from rooftop to rooftop in a single leap.

But, as Izuku had learned, few people looked up.

After Izuku’s metamorphosis, Izuku’s mother had made the decision to pull him out of school for what was left of the school year. He was homeschooling, taking his classes and exams at home by computer instead, and spending the rest of the time adapting to his new body and his new Quirk.
Or, in Izuku’s parlance: training.

Thanks to the Quirk Law Reformation-- or, as some wiseapples were calling it, “the Great Government Cranial Rectal Extraction”-- laws about public use of Quirks had been relaxed. Izuku could go out and push his new abilities to the limit without fear of getting arrested for “Quirk use in Public” anymore…. As could everyone else. In fact, down in the streets below Izuku could see people celebrating their newfound freedom, using their Quirks to put on firework or other aerial displays ostensibly for the holiday, performing stunts with their powers, or just using them openly without apprehension-- here a fellow using his pyrokinesis to light his pipe; there a lady levitating her holiday purchases along behind her.

Izuku, for his part, was running the rooftops, stretching his legs. It hadn’t taken him long to discover that he was fast on foot-- he wasn’t sure HOW fast, but he could easily outrace cars on the street. He’d soon taken to doing his running overhead to avoid the traffic below, pedestrian or otherwise. The uneven terrain provided an extra challenge he thoroughly enjoyed.

And it didn’t even really slow him down. With his powerful legs and enhanced agility and reflexes, he’d taken to parkour with breathtaking ease. Oh, he was no parkour beast, not yet-- but his sheer quirk-enhanced natural talent let him leap, flip and vault over, under, and through obstacles without missing a stride, run up vertical walls, leap across alleys and city streets hundreds of feet up as readily as other people walked across them down below.

He stopped to catch his breath on a pagoda-themed roof, and rubbed a cool towelette over his face and arms and ears (he didn’t exactly sweat the way a baseline human did anymore.) The exercise had treated him well. In the course of a couple of months he had gone from toned to ripped. He had solid pecs and washboard abs, his arms and legs were corded with muscle you could see even through his white fur. He would never be a muscled hulk but he was still solidly built and whipcord lean.

The doctor had been right; he’d adapted to his danger sense. The mental image the Quirk doctor had given him, of visualizing himself alone in a forest at night, had let him adjust quickly. He became the rabbit in the forest; the endless litany of cries of danger became rustles in the grass, movement in the leaves overhead, the sound of paws on forest floor and the faint growls of predators in the night. He was surrounded, but hidden; alert but unafraid. He could track them all; he could see and hear and smell the dangerous thing long before it could sense him. They passed him in the night and he remained.

Still, he had the unfortunate habit of striking out in reflex at anything burst onto his danger sense too suddenly. Or if it DIDN’T set off his danger sense and just popped out of nowhere…
“Hey there--”

“AHHH!”

Which could have been extremely unfortunate for the young man who popped out of nowhere behind him. Izuku lashed out with three lightning-fast punches and then leapt backward, nearly going off the edge of the roof. It took him half a second to realize that not one of his punches had landed. The stranger had dodged them all.

The target in question was crouched in a defensive stance, holding his hands up. “Whoa whoa whoa, I come in peace! Holy cow, stranger, you’ve got reflexes like a cobra!”

He was a young man about Izuku’s age, blonde, with narrow dark eyes. He was dressed in a karate gi-- black belt, Izuku noted-- and had a tufted tail that was as thick as his leg and long as he was tall. It twitched behind him in agitation.

“Where did you come from??” Izuku snapped, his heart still racing a bit. The blonde kid pointed behind himself at an open trapdoor, then pointed down.

“You’re standing on top of my grandfather’s dojo,” he said, giving Izuku a half smile.

Izuku relaxed a bit, embarrassed. “S-Sorry. I didn’t mean to trespass--”

The blonde waved his hand in dismissal. “No, it’s okay. Just doing a little rooftop running, huh?” Izuku nodded. “Yeah, I know. Awesome neighborhood for it. I was kind of planning on doing a little myself later.” he stood up and leaned back, balancing on his tail. “So what’s your name?”

“Midoriya Izuku,” Izuku said. “And yours?”

“Ojiro Mashirao,” the blonde said. “Welcome to Ojiro-Do Martial Arts studio.” He nodded. “So what brings you through the neighborhood tonight?”

Izuku rubbed the back of his head. “Just trying to get in a little training,” he said. “I-I’m looking to apply to U.A.” The admission exams were nine months away at this point, a cloud looming on the
“Oh, you too?” Ojiro sounded approving. “Aiming for that myself. Gotta say, with reflexes like that, you’ve got a pretty good shot.”

“Uh, thanks,” Izuku said. “Nothing like you, though. I mean I’ve never seen anyone dodge like that-”

“I’ve never seen anyone throw three punches in a half-second,” Ojiro said, his eyebrows raised. “Gotta say, though, your form was really sloppy.”

Izuku winced, ears drooping. “Haven’t gotten a lot of professional training,” he mumbled.

Ojiro cocked his head to one side. “You looking to change that?” he said. “We always have an opening in our classes. You got a lot of raw ability. I bet we could whip you into passable shape in nine months.”

Izuku’s straightened, ears perked up. (Ojiro had to suppress a snicker.) “That’d be great--” he hesitated, one ear going back. “But.. I’m not sure I could afford the fee...”

“For a fellow U.A. hopeful?” Ojiro said. “I think we can work something out. If you don’t mind sweeping a few floors or helping me look after the brats when we have the junior classes, we could swing you an employee discount. Besides I could always use a sparring partner.”

“For real? That’d be great!” Izuku said, enthused. He held out his hand to seal the deal. “Call me Izuku.”

Ojiro grinned. “Call me Mashirao.” He gripped Izuku’s hand and shook it.

And that was how Izuku made his first friend, and got his start at the dojo.
Nine months later, Izuku stood in the front door of his and his mother’s apartment. His suit was clean and pressed, his mop of green curls was combed as best as possible, his backpack had his Hero notebooks, his track suit, and a few bits of gear gifted him by the Ojiro dojo patriarch. His feet were bare… but when you’re a rabbit-man, good-fitting shoes are more of a hypothetical.

His mother fussed over him, straightening his tie one last time. “Oh Izuku, I’m so proud of you,” she said. “You’ve come so far… If only your father were here to see this...” Her eyes got weepy. “My special little guy.”

“Oh never mind me. You just go out there and knock their socks off. Okay?” She smiled up at him tearfully. “Good luck, sweetie.” She grabbed him in a firm hug.

“I love you too, Mom.” He hugged her back.

They stood there for several seconds. “…Mom? I gotta go.”

Inko held on and rubbed her cheek into his. “Mmmm. Soft and fluffy...”

“I had to do that just once more. Go on, go on. You don’t want to miss your bus!” He bounded down to the parking lot, waving goodbye over his shoulder.

Inko smiled and waved. She sniffled a bit, then closed the door.

Izuku stood and looked up at the front gates of U.A. This was it. Months of training, and studying; countless hours sparring with Ojiro, practicing blocks, punches, kicks, and throws; countless more hours sweeping floors, washing windows, wiping little noses and bandaging little knees and trying to
keep exuberant little rugrats from half-killing each other… it all came down to this.

He was about to apply to U.A., the single most prestigious Hero school in Japan.

He was about to start his journey on becoming a Pro Hero.

He marched up the steps and promptly snagged one of his oversized feet on something.

He was about to flatten his face on the pavement. “Crap” was all the time he had to think--

Just before his cute little pink nose smashed into the concrete, he halted in midair. “Whaaa?” He flailed about a bit, confused as to why the hell he was FLOATING.

“Sorry,” someone said. “Just didn’t want to hurt yourself!” Someone pushed him upright. It was a girl. A rather cute one, with large eyes, pink dots on each cheek and brown hair in a bob cut. She put her fingers together. “Release!” his feet thumped back down on the pavement.

“Uh, thank you,” he said, mumbling a bit. He watched her, and resisted the urge to roll his eyes when the moment came…. The moment when her polite smile started to grow and her eyes started to sparkle. The moment that seemed to happen with most small children and with most women no matter what age: that moment it dawned on them--- giant cute fluffy bunny person right in front of me! This tended to be followed (in the case of older girls and women) with attempts to pet his ears, hugs and (usually in the case of small children and bolder females) outright glompings.

It wasn’t so bad he supposed, but it got kind of awkward sometimes.

To his relief… he supposed… she kept her hands to herself. Though he did notice she had to clamp them together behind herself, and sort of bounced on her toes in glee. “My, I’ve never seen a Quirk, um, quite like--”

“A giant bunny?” Izuku said. He couldn’t quite keep the longsuffering amusement out of his voice.

She blushed a bit. “I’m sorry, that must get tiresome-- I mean--”
Izuku shrugged it off, or tried to. The inside of his ears got a little red though. “Y-you get used to it, I suppose.”

The girl coughed. “Still, I--”

“No really--”

A familiar voice bellowed in Izuku’s hypersensitive ears. “I SAID GET OUT OF THE WAY, EXTRAS--!”

“AAAH!”

SPAK

WHUMP.

Once again, Izuku found himself standing staring at his outstretched fist. Sprawled out on the sidewalk at his feet, his eyes slightly crossed, was a familiar looking spiky-haired blonde boy. Izuku looked again. Yes, it was Bakugao. The brunette next to Izuku gasped, hands to her mouth.

“...Oh my gosh--! What...?”

“How does he keep sneaking up on me??” Izuku mumbled aloud. Carefully he reached down and patted Bakugao’s cheek with his palm. “It’s probably because he goes from zero to explosion in less than a second,” Izuku speculated, muttering to himself. “Too fast for my danger sense to pick up...”

“Should we get help?” the girl said.

Bakugao moaned faintly and stirred. “Uh, no,” Izuku said. He pulled a cold-pack out of his backpack and dropped it next to Bakugao’s head. “In fact, we should probably get as far away as soon as possible.” He grabbed the girl by the elbow and steered her towards the U.A. examination building.
“But-- we really should help him--” she protested.

“No, in fact that would be a bad idea,” Izuku told her without slowing. “In fact, helping him tends to make him angrier.”

“You know him?”

Izuku looked back. Some luckless soul was bending over to try and help the explosive boy to his feet. Izuku quickly turned a corner. A moment later several explosions interspersed with swear words split the air. “Oh, I’m familiar with him...” he said casually, grimacing.

The girl looked over her shoulder, her eyes going wide at the plume of smoke rising behind them. “Right,” she said, grimacing back at him. “Time to go.” She broke into trot. “Good luck at the exams!”

“Good luck yourself!” Izuku double checked the building number on his admission slip and headed off in the other direction. With any luck he’d be in a different testing room than Kacchan.

Izuku stood with the mob at the entrance to the practical exam arena. He bobbed in place on his digitigrade feet, trying to warm up and stretch his calves a bit. He’d gotten a few odd looks, not to mention a few snickers from the other applicants. He had to face it, a five and a half foot tall rabbit, even a lean and buff one, does not look particularly intimidating.

“What’s he gonna do, chuck easter eggs at them?” he heard some witling say. He steadfastly ignored them.

They weren’t allowed very much in the way of gear for the practical, so he’d kept it simple. A plain tank top, gym shorts, and a headband to keep his mane of green hair out of his eyes. A first aid kit in a mini backpack on his back. Elbow and knee pads.
Ojiro’s grandfather had gifted him with a couple of items as well. He had a pair of specially-made sandals strapped to his elongated feet, with thick soles that stretched from his footpad up to his upturned “heel.” A second pad covered the top of his foot, almost like a shin guard. The two were laced together around his foot with tough leather straps.

But the finest piece of gear he’d been given were a pair of black fingerless gloves. Again, they were custom made; they had to be with his claws and thick, stubby fingers. They were based off of ancient greek boxing gloves known as the Cestus. They were stout leather; each one had a thick plate across the knuckles, with three large metal studs to further focus the force of a blow. Izuku’s lightning-fast kicks and punches meant that most of the martial arts training they’d given him had been lifted from Savate—French kickboxing. With these knuckledusters on he could do some serious damage.

Easter eggs his fluffy white tail.

The enormous doors swung open. Everyone paused in surprise. “GO! WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?” Present Mic’s voice boomed over the intercom. “HERO BATTLES DON’T GET A STARTING BELL! GO GO GO!”

Izuku took a deep breath, dashed forward, leapt OVER the roaring mob elbowing its way in, and charged for the first two-pointer.

“And here we go,” Power Loader said. “Another round of mindless mass property destruction in the name of higher education.”

Snipe, who was sitting next to him, chuckled and elbowed him. “Bet it’s a load o’ laughs watchin’ those younguns smashin’ all those bots you built, ain’t it?” he said.

The staff of U.A. were gathered in the observation lounge, overseeing the events in the Practical by way of dozens of enormous screens mounted on the wall. As well as judging the students and distributing points, the teachers were engaged in the time-honored traditions of placing wagers with each other and griping about the quality of students this year. “I wouldn’t mind so much,” Power Loader grumped, “If a few more of them were a bit more clever about it and didn’t just go about trying to smash them all like beer cans.” An explosion filled one of the screens and he winced. “That Bakugao kid is making extra months of work for me all by himself. Darn it, I built shutdown switches, fail points and removable power supplies into them for a reason!”
On another screen another three pointer mysteriously powered down. Footprints-- from bare feet-- could be seen trailing away from it. Power Loader pointed. “Now there, that Invisible girl used her brains and hit the power down switch. Did you see that?’’

“Technically, no,” Midnight quipped. She reached for more popcorn. “We do get what you’re saying though, darling. So few of the applicants show any cunning or cleverness about it. Most just go for the ‘Hulk Smash’ routine.” She watched as one of the applicants tried to punch out a one-pointer… and staggered back, howling and pain and clutching his broken fist. “Even when they’re not suited for it,” she noted, wincing.

“And this surprises you?” A grumpy, sleepy voice noted. Eraserhead had apparently woken back up and was putting his two cents in. “The whole test is biased toward brute force, and Quirks suited for it. Always has been to some degree. And biased against--”

“Powers like yours?” Midnight cooed. “Or mine, for that matter? There IS a path onto the hero course for those like us, you know, Eraser dear. We both got on it ourselves.” It was true. They’d even been classmates. A power that let you spray soporific dust from your skin or temporarily turn off other people’s Quirks wasn’t much use against robots; they’d both had to go through General Studies and then climb the ladder to the Hero course.

“It’s still illogical,” Eraserhead grumbled, settling down into his sleeping bag and ready to doze off again.

“Hm. The rabbit child is doing fairly well,” Cementoss rumbled. On a screen in the corner they saw a white rabbit with a thatch of curly green hair on his head take out a three pointer with a savage kick. “Holy… kicked its head right off.”

“ I think that is actually the most damage I’ve seen him do,” Principal Nedzu said. The Bear-Dog-Rat sipped his tea. “He has been very cunning about things… he takes to the rooftops, uses the high ground to spot a robot or two on their own, drops down, administers a few well-placed blows to disable the robot, then flees. He’s racked up a fairly impressive number of villain points with minimal collateral.” The boy onscreen disabled another two pointer with a punch to the joint in each of its spindly legs, leaping over and under it to deliver each strike with ruthless precision. Another blow crippled the weaponized “scorpion tail;” he then dug about till he found the shutdown switch and turned the metal beast off.

“Uh oh, looks like he outsmarted himself,” Midnight said. While the rabbit boy had been taking out the two pointer, a half-dozen more one and two pointers had closed in. He crouched atop the downed robot on all fours, ears laid back. “Oh, poor bunny. Looks like he’s done for.”
Then the rabbit moved.

The bots opened fire. Stun rounds, “lasers” and mini missiles flew. None of them came close to touching the rabbit-morph. He was over, under, around and through them, drawing their fire into each other, sending them careening into one another, smashing photoreceptors and crushing weapon ports with precision jackhammer blows. A pair of one pointers found their blows landing on a two-pointer instead of their target. A two pointer unloaded its weapons into a one-pointer’s mechanical face. Several bots tangled together in each others limbs and exposed wires, crashing to the ground.

In less than a minute all of the robots were down, spewing smoke and sparks. The rabbit-morph applicant had raced away, leaving the machines to burn.

“Holy crap,” Ectoplasm said.

Power Loader gawked at the screen, hands out in claws, beseeching. “How the hell did he DO that??” he squawked.

Izuku dove through a window in one of the faux-buildings, taking cover in the shadows as a three-pointer rumbled past. He dove back out, raced up behind it, slid underneath between the rumbling treads and hit the shutdown switch. The tank-sized machine rumbled to a halt. “Whoever designed these things was tricky,” Izuku panted. “An off switch on the underbelly? Who thinks like that?”

He slid back out and got to his feet. He needed to parkour up and get topside again; he couldn’t see or hear any more bots on this street, couldn’t feel the warning cry of DANGER anywhere nearby--

The ground rumbled and shook. Izuku’s danger sense went berserk; the entire WORLD filled with the psychic scream of panic he associated with his power. He clutched his ears and staggered. What the hell was happening?

Clouds of concrete dust exploded into the air not a block over. Rising up out of the clouds, looming taller than the buildings, came a robot. Izuku felt his heart shrink to a dot, unable to beat. THE ZERO POINTER. “Are they out of their MINDS?” he screamed aloud.
Around the corner up ahead came a screaming mob of panicked students. Present Mic had told them it wasn’t worth it to fight the Zero Pointer, and it seemed like everyone present heartily agreed with that assessment. Everyone was fleeing, and the Zero Pointer was pursuing, its enormous treads crushing everything.

The thundering horde bore down on him. His danger sense spiked towards him from a dozen directions. Izuku kipped up onto a fire escape to get out of the way. From there he could see to the back of the crowd, just barely keeping ahead of the destruction. He saw the brown-haired girl at the back--

She stumbled. The Zero Pointer smashed its fist into one of the buildings. He saw the front wall of the building begin to topple. The girl was right in its path…

There was no need to think. Izuku braced his feet against the wall behind him, crouched and launched himself like an arrow from a bow. He flew over the heads of the crowd, streaking towards the girl, hurdling straight into the roaring maw of the lion, into the screaming wall of DANGER--

He hit the ground, tumbled, gained his feet. He scooped up the girl and leapt back in the other direction as hard as he could. The falling wall slammed into the ground mere inches from his toes. He hit the ground running, the girl in his arms in a bridal carry. But the buildings on either side were crumbling, falling, stone falling like rain. He dodged left, right, leapt back a step then forward, talons striking from the sky, serpents striking from the grass--

And then they were clear of the dust and the stone rain, the lumbering Zero Pointer falling behind them. Izuku felt his toes dig into grass. They’d reached some sort of municipal park in the middle of the faux-city. He tumbled to the grass, him and the girl tumbling and rolling over one another till they came to a halt.

They sprawled in the grass for a moment, both panting for air and coughing up rockdust. “A-are we safe?” the girl said finally.

Izuku struggled to sit up. There were applicants scattered everywhere here. The Zero Pointer was over three blocks away, but it was still rolling towards them. He could feel the wall of DANGER approaching, a lion relentlessly stalking its way across the plain towards them.

The horn sounded. The Zero Pointer stopped and shut down, sagging down like a puppet with its strings cut. Izuku sighed in relief, a sigh that was echoed by the girl. He flopped backwards onto the grass. “Yeah, now we are,” he said. “Hey.”
“What?” she was lying flat on the grass next to him.

“You know what?”

“No, what?” she murmured.

“I really, really, really hope we passed,” Izuku said.

The girl giggled, then laughed. He soon joined in.

Izuku stood in front of the door to 1A. He tried to analyze what his Danger Sense was telling him about what was on the other side. Very little, actually; no imminent threats were nearby. There was the low, rustling-in-the-grass sense of things that were possibly dangerous, in the abstract sense… but it wasn’t much more than the feeling he got from, say, an exposed electric wire or an untended pot on a stove. Of course it was a roomful of heroes-in-training, some with some seriously destructive powers-- so that was only fair.

He shrugged, sighed, and pushed the door open.

“Izuku-san!” “Izuku!”

“Uraraka-san! Ojiro-san!” Izuku’s face was instantly wreathed in smiles. “I’m so glad you made it!”

“You know each other?” Ochaco said.

“We went to the same dojo,” Ojiro said with a grin.
“If you’re here just to make friends, you’re wasting our time,” an incredibly weary voice said. They all gulped and turned around. An incredibly tired looking man in a scarf with a five o’clock shadow and bloodshot eyes was standing at the front of the class. Everyone hastily got to their seats. Izuku looked around; there was one empty seat?

“It took you eight seconds to sit down and be quiet,” the man said. “How irrational of you.” He looked around. “I am Aizawa Shota, your homeroom teacher. Be on time and in your seats from now on.” He pulled out a clipboard. He yawned and proceeded to take attendance. “You’re all here,” he said. “Imagine my joy.”

He looked over at the empty chair. “Our last student was delayed; he had to go to the Principal’s office to settle some paperwork. He will be joining us out on the field.” He pulled out a stack of bagged athletic uniforms. “Take these and get changed. Meet me out in the field in fifteen minutes.”

Aizawa looked over his new batch of students. They were all lined up in their track suits, looking suitably intimidated. “Let’s get this Quirk Apprehension Test underway. Midoriya, you go first.” He tossed the softball to the nervous-looking rabbit-morph. The boy stepped to the center of the circle and got ready to throw.

Aizawa was something of a self-deceiving bigot. He himself had to struggle up through the General Studies classes to earn a place on the Hero Course when he was a student. Even then, he had ended up as an Underground Hero—getting far fewer accolades, little if any recognition, and consequently making far less money than many of his contemporaries who worked far less at heroics and had far more cachet as celebrities. That, and his own inability to balance work as a nighttime hero, a daytime teacher, and a decent sleep schedule had made him… bitter. Especially towards students he saw as “Undeserving…” Which generally meant any student with flashy, P.R. friendly powers who got into the Hero Course on the first try.

He watched the boy flicking his ears around in a show of nerves. The underground hero felt his irritation rise. Typical, Aizawa thought. Timid, fearful, a bundle of nerves... You barely made it here even WITH a “combat useful” Quirk. There are a dozen General Studies students who deserve this spot more than you.

Let’s see how you handle having your Quirk pulled out from under you... He activated his power, nullifying the boy’s Quirk.
Eraserhead had pulled this ploy before. He was prepared for the boy to stumble, or perform a hilariously weak throw, or even to agitation and outrage as he realized his Quirk had seemingly disappeared.

He wasn’t prepared for a 100+ speedball direct to the face.

The instant Eraserhead used his power, the boy screamed, spun on his heel and fired the ball straight at him. The ball struck him square in the forehead, dropping him like a bag of potatoes. He hit the dirt and knew no more.

When Aizawa awoke, he was lying on his back in the grass, his students gathered in a circle around him looking concerned. Recovery Girl was kneeling next to him, applying something to his face. “There,” she said, standing up. “That should tide you over till it heals up.”

Aizawa’s hand brushed over his throbbing face. He felt bandages on his nose. “What?”

Recovery Girl looked at him. “One broken nose, and you’re going to have two beautiful shiners.” she tsked. “I’d use my healing on you but you’re so sleep deprived it’d probably put you in a coma. You’re just going to let it heal the old fashioned way.” She gave him a dry look and muttered the rest so only he could hear it. “And I’ve got good guess that you probably deserve it. ‘Logical ruses’ my wrinkled backside.” She handed him a baggy. “Have some gummies.”

As she toddled off, Aizawa sat up. He saw Midoriya standing there. His fists were clenched and trembling and his ears were laid back. “Midoriya, exactly what--”

“Don’t ever DO that to me!!” Izuku yelled.

Aizawa gave him an authoritative scowl, then thought the better of it as his nose throbbed. “Just what were you thinking assaulting a teacher--”

“It was a reflex response!” Midoriya said. The boy crossed his arms, jamming his fists under his arms. He kept right on glaring. “You shut off my Danger Sense.”

Aizawa frowned, but Tokoyami, the boy with the raven’s head, spoke up. “Ah, I understand,” he nodded.
Aizawa turned his dour attention on him. “Care to explain, then?”

The raven-headed boy nodded. “Sensei, imagine you are a small creature in the forest. It is the dead of night. All around you are sounds… things rustling in the grass, animals prowling in the undergrowth, predators on the wing overhead. What is the most frightening sound you can possibly imagine?”


Tokoyami shook his head. “No. The most terrifying sound in the forest is when every living thing suddenly falls silent.”

Several students made sounds of comprehension.

“It was worse than that,” Midoriya said suddenly. His voice was shaky. He brushed his ears with one hand-- a nervous rabbit grooming. “My Quirk sensed what you were doing at the last second. At the last moment it… it screamed like a woman in mortal terror, then fell silent.” He looked at Aizawa, and for the first time Aizawa felt just a tiny bit guilty. “When my Danger Sense goes off like that-- sudden and loud-- it’s a reflex, and I can’t help it. I punch, I kick, I fling something at what set it off, I bolt away as hard as I can. Sometimes all four at once. Like someone leaping away from a striking snake.”

Aizawa felt his head throb. “Yes. Important information, Midoriya. Thank you.” He got to his feet and pulled up his remaining dignity. That was the only thing to do: pretend everything was perfectly normal and go on. “Very well, let’s proceed with the assessments--”

“The #@% happened here?” a loud, grating voice demanded. The crowd of students parted and Bakugao made his appearance. “What, can’t anybody…. The blonde blaster stopped and stared at the rabbit boy. Midoriya looked nervous. Bakugao stepped closer. He squinted, then his red eyes went wide “…. Deku?”

The tableau froze for several long seconds. Then Bakugao burst into raucous laughter. “Deku? That’s YOU?” He cackled. “Holy #@%$, what the hell-- you really did have a Quirk! And you turned into a RABBIT?” Bakugao howled. “Man, Deku, only YOU could find a way to be MORE worthless WITH a Quirk than WITHOUT! AHAHAHAHA--” He choked and spluttered, doubled over laughing. He wiped his eye. “What the #@% are you doing out here, Deku?”
Midoriya had his ears laid low and was standing very still. “I’m in the Hero course, Kacchan,” he said, with a small cautious smile.

Bakugao gave him what he obviously thought was a tolerant smile. “Sure you are. Like I’ll believe that.”

“You’d better believe it, Bakugao,” Uraraka said. She looked unaccustomedly fierce. “Midoriya is a student in class 1A. He’s in the Hero course.”

Bakugao’s smile vanished like a french fry at a fat farm. “What?”

Ojiro coughed. “In fact, as I recall, he beat your score by ten points,” the tailed martial artist said. “...Kacchan.”

“He WHAT?” Bakugao’s head whipped around and he glared at Izuku with blazing eyes. He lunged toward the boy, his hands sparking. “You WHAT??”

“AAAAH!”

SPA\K

WHUMP.

Eraserhead looked down where Bakugao lay in the grass, then up at Midoriya. Midoriya hastily put his fist behind his back. “You’re going to have to get that under control,” Aizawa said sourly.

“Yessir.”
BNHA:Coyote

Izuku was five when he met Riley.

It had been a rough week for Izuku. It had been just last Saturday that his Mom had taken him to the Doctor, and the Doctor told him the terrible news about his Quirk-- that he’d never have a Quirk at all. That had been the worst day of Izuku’s life. His mother had cried. He had cried.

Then, he didn’t know how it was possible, but it got worse. His mother had told his teacher; she had to, she said, for ‘health and safety reasons,’ whatever those were. Then Teacher had blabbed to everyone. Now everyone pointed at him, and laughed at him, and were mean to him on the playground-- never where Teacher could see of course, not that it seemed to matter when Teacher DID see something…

And Kacchan was the worst. Ever since Kacchan had gotten his Quirk (and it was such a cool Quirk, exploding hands!) he had treated his former friend terribly. But now that he’d found out that Izuku was Quirkless and always would be, he was horrible. He’d push and kick and punch Izuku, or set off his Quirk in loud bangs to scare him, or call him bad things. He even started calling him a new name, and got all the other kids who followed him around to call him by it too. Deku.

“Useless.”

It had been going on all week. Izuku couldn’t even eat his lunch with the others anymore. Everyone normally ate at the picnic tables under the trees outside when the weather was good-- but (goaded by Kacchan) now the others would push and shove and slide over so there was no room; nobody wanted to sit next to a worthless Deku. He’d been forced to give up and go eat his lunch over by the sandbox, alone.

Today it was no better. He sat on one of the logs surrounding the sand, his bento box in his lap and tried not to cry. At least it was the last day of the week…

Someone came up and stood next to him. “Hullo,” they said. “Can I sit here?” Izuku looked up in surprise. He couldn’t see who they were, his eyes were all blurry with tears. He wiped his eyes on his arm and nodded. “Thanks,” the kid said. He sat down next to Izuku on the log.

Izuku blinked the tears out of his eyes and looked again. The kid was a mutation. He was covered all over with grey and tan fur. He had paws instead of feet; his hands were stubby and pawlike too, with
black claws instead of fingernails on his short thick fingers. He had a bushy tail, and a head like… a
dog? No, more like a wolf, with a long skinny muzzle and triangular ears. He was wearing a bright
yellow tee-shirt and blue shorts, and had a huge backpack on his back and a big metal American
style lunchbox in his lap. He seemed bouncy and full of energy. “Hi,” the kid said. “I’m Riley. I’m
new here.” He smiled; his pink tongue lolled out.

“Hi.” Izuku sniffled. “I’m… Midoriya Izuku.” Riley had a funny accent; he was probably foreign so
he should probably be polite.

Riley cocked his head to one side. “Should I call you Midor’ya or ‘Zuku?” he said. “You do names
all funny here in Japan. I never know what’s right.”

Izuku bit his lip. “Izuku is okay,” he said.

Riley smiled again. “That’s for friends, right?” he said. “‘Cause I wanna be friends. So you can call
me Riley, even tho my name’s Riley Coyote.” He leaned in. “My Dad says I’m named after a
famous Coyote who hunts Road Runners. But I think he’s joking.” He never stopped smiling
through all this.

Izuku mulled that odd statement over. “So… what’s your Quirk?” he said.

Riley shrugged cheerfully. “Bein’ a Coyote, I guess,” he said. He fiddled with the latches on his
lunchbox. At Izuku’s puzzled look he explained. “It’s our name, but it’s also an animal, kind of like a
skinny wolf.”

Izuku nodded, guessing that this was the type of dog Riley resembled. “Where do you come from?”
he said, pulling on the lid of his bento box.

“From ‘Merica, out in the desert,” Riley said. “We moved here ‘cause Dad got a new job. It took
forever to learn Japanese.” Riley rolled his eyes dramatically. “He made us talk nuthin’ but Japanese,
for months and months…” The lid of his lunchbox flipped open.

Izuku’s bento box popped open a moment later. Izuku smiled happily when he saw the food his
mother had packed inside. “Itadakimasu!” he said.

“Gesundheit,” Riley said. He looked in Izuku’s lunch. “Whatcha havin’?”
“Chicken katsu and rice, pickled vegetables and some cutie oranges,” Izuku said happily. “And you?”

Riley grinned. “PIE!” He reached into the lunch box and pulled out a miniature pie. He looked at it like it was the best thing in the world, his eyes wide and his tongue sticking out. His expression was so goofy that Izuku giggled.

“Really? Nothing but pie?” Izuku leaned over and looked in the pail. There was nothing in the lunchbox but several round, crusty pastries like the first. “You can’t eat nothing but PIE,” he laughed.

“Sure I can.” He held up the one in his hand. “This is a meat pie. And so’s that one, that one there is a veggie pie, and there’s a fruit pie on the bottom for dessert. Oh I hope it’s cherry. Ooo, forgot my thermos.” He reached for his backpack, paused, took a huge bite out of his pie, set the pie back in the lunchbox, then pulled off his backpack and set it on the log next to him. Izuku could see two canisters strapped to the backpack, one on each side. One was a large metal thermos and cup which Riley quickly unstrapped, the other was bright red with a nozzle and trigger on top.

“What is that?” Izuku said.

Riley looked. “That’s a fire extinguisher,” he said. He unstrapped it and held it up. “See?”

Izuku giggled. “You carry a fire extinguisher around in your back pack?”

Riley flicked his ears back and raised his eyebrows. “And you don’t?”

“That’s silly. Why would I carry a fire extinguisher around everywhere?”

Riley’s eyes went round. His voice rang with sincerity. “In case of volcanoes!”

Izuku nearly choked on a mouthful of rice. “Volcanoes??” he sputtered and laughed.
“You got volcanoes here, I saw it on the ‘puter,” Riley insisted. “And you live in PAPER houses!”

Izuku laughed so hard he started turning red. “No we don’t!”

“Do so! The ‘puter said so!” Riley scowled. “’s a really dumb idea with volcanoes around--” he said, almost as if he were scolding Izuku for poor building choices. “one little bit of burning ash and WHOOSH!” He threw his furry arms in the air, miming a raging inferno.

“There aren’t any--” Izuku coughed and giggled. “I mean, yeah, there’s Mount Fuji, but it doesn’t erupt or anything-- and we live in wood and stone houses, not paper!”

“Don’t care,” Riley said, tipping his nose up. “Just you wait, there’ll be a big eruption and then I’ll save us both from burning up with my good ol’ fire extinguisher.”

Izuku snickered at the coyote boy’s expression. “You can’t...” he was about to tell the odd boy that you couldn’t possibly stop a volcano with a fire extinguisher, when their lunch was rudely interrupted.

“Eyy, DEKU! What’s this then?”

The two boys jumped. Izuku gulped. It was Kacchan… along with the two boys who always tagged along behind him, the one with the long fingers and the fat one with the bat wings. Kacchan was smiling. That was never a good sign.

“Hi,” Riley chirped and stuck out a hand. “I’m Riley Coyote. Or is that Coyote Riley? I--”

Kacchan snorted disdainfully. “Shut up, EXTRA. I wasn’t talking to you.”

Riley’s head jerked back. He looked at Izuku. “Who’s THIS boogerhead?” he asked. Kacchan growled, but decided to ignore him.

“H-hi, Kacchan,” Izuku said. He felt all his brief good mood shrivelling away.
“So, DEKU, I hear you got a really good lunch today,” Deku said. “I forgot mine. You wouldn’t wanna not SHARE with your FRIENDS would you?”

Long Fingers and Batwings sniggered. “Yeah, I’m kinda hungry too, Deku,” the fat one said. “C’mon, share with us.”

Shakily, Izuku started to hold out his bento box.

A furry paw stopped him. Izuku looked up in surprise. Riley was standing, his hand on Izuku’s shoulder. He was smiling and he had a funny look in his eye. “Nah, you don’t wanna do that, Izuku,” Riley said. He was looking at Kacchan and his friends, and still smiling. “That one with the wings is TOO FAT anyway. He eats your lunch he’ll be too fat to fly.”

The smirk vanished off the batwinged boy’s face. “What’d you say?” he growled.

“What’samatter?” Riley said. His smile was even wider. He was almost giggling. “Didn’t you hear me, FAT BAT?”

Long Fingers snorted. “Let’s take dog boy’s lunch too...” he stretched out his hands for Riley’s lunchbox sitting on the ground forgotten. Riley slapped his fingers, making him yelp. “Keep your Boogerhooks offa my lunch!” he said sharply. “Eww. Hey Izuku, I bet your friend Kacchan keeps Booger Hooks here around to pick his nose for him! Ain’t that right, Booger Hooks?” The long fingered boy snarled and clenched his fingers into misshapen fists.

Izuku gawped at his new friend. Had the American boy lost his MIND?

Kacchan had a sneer on his face. “Well, DEKU, guess what? Your new friend just earned him and you a beating!” He smacked his fist into his palm, letting off a small explosion. “Step back, boys!” the other two backed up, chuckling.

Izuku jumped to his feet and doubled up his useless fists. He didn’t stand a chance, but he couldn’t just sit there and let his new friend get beat up without trying. It wasn’t what All Might would do!

Riley’s face lit up with glee when he saw the explosions popping in Kacchan’s hands. “Explosions! He explodes! That’s perfect! Now they’re a team!” He pointed at the three bullies one after the other. “Booger Hooks, Fat Bat and SPLODEY DOPE!”
“WHY YOU—!” Kacchan lunged, his hands out and filled with smoke and fire.

**BWOSSSSSHH!**

As Kacchan had lunged, so had Riley-- for the fire extinguisher. A cone of white fire suppressant foam blasted the exploding boy, coating his hands, arms, chest and face in a thick layer of white. “Gaawagh-- blu—pfft?” Kacchan sputtered. Snarling he shook the foam out of his eyes and reached out for Izuku and Riley, his hands clawed…

Nothing happened. “What??” Kacchan thrust his hands out again; this time a few wet, sad sparks popped out of the white muck coating his hands. The fire extinguisher had snuffed out Kacchan’s Quirk!

Izuku couldn’t help it, he snorted. Kacchan’s expression was just too funny. Riley wasn’t so restrained. He pointed and laughed like a hyena.

“GRArgh! ...GET EM!” Kacchan yelled. The other two surged forward on either side of him as he lunged again.

“Yeep!” Riley said. He opened up with the fire extinguisher again. **FOOOOOSH!** He painted it back and forth, up and down across the three boys. All three boys flailed and sputtered, slipped in the muddy foam on the ground and went down in a pile. They flailed around, shouting and bawling, getting in each other’s way while Riley stood there whooping and spritzing them with the last little bits of fire extinguisher stuff.

It was the funniest thing Izuku had ever seen. He was laughing so hard it hurt. He clutched his sides and doubled over, tears in his eyes as he laughed.

“WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS??” the teacher’s voice echoed across the playground.

Uh oh.
It was a long, awkward wait outside the Principal’s office. Kacchan and his friends had been taken someplace else to get cleaned up and dressed in clean clothes; meanwhile Teacher had dragged Izuku and Riley by their elbows to the Principal. Izuku had meekly gone along, afraid to look up at the angry woman. Riley though had been defiant the whole way, ears laid back and fur ruffled while he scowled at everyone. Teacher was having none of it though. She’d plunked them down in the hard wooden chairs in the Secretary’s office and told them not to move “while we call your PARENTS.” She’d gone into the Principal’s office, the door shutting behind her with a final clack.

They sat in the oversize chairs, their feet dangling. Riley was still fuming. “Stupid heads,” he said. “BAKA. Why are WE in trouble? Splodeydope tried to steal our lunches, then he tried to blow us up! Why isn’t HE in trouble?”

Izuku sighed and looked down at his lap, twiddling his fingers. “That’s just how it is,” he said. “Kacchan is… special. We’re not.”

Riley snorted. “I bet he’s special,” he said. “Short Bus special.”

Izuku wasn’t sure what that meant, but the way Riley said it made Izuku snicker. He smothered it behind his hands. He was already in trouble, he didn’t want to get in more.

Riley seemed to brighten a little bit. “Hey, that’s what we’ll call them,” he said. “The Short Bus Boys! Booger Fingers, Fat Bat and their mighty leader, SploodaysDOOOOPE...” the last he said under his breath in a singsong, while he stuck his arms out in front of him like a flying Hero. Izuku spluttered and giggled. They were going to get in more trouble for sure!

A little while later several women came in and went into the Principal’s office. The first was a tall lady with tan and gray hair. She had furry ears and a tail a lot like Riley’s. She took a moment to scold Riley-- but not very much-- for using his fire extinguisher like he had. “But he was EXPLODING, Mom!” Riley protested. “What was I supposed to do when somebody starts EXPLODING at me?”

“We’ll be talking later, Riley,” his mother said with a longsuffering sigh. “After I speak with your Principal.”

The next was an angry looking woman with blonde spiky hair. She came storming in swearing under her breath. Izuku knew her of course. “Hello Mrs. Bakugao,” Izuku said meekly. She saw Izuku and huffed.
“Hello, Izuku,” she said. “So where’s the brat? Why isn’t he here? @%%! it, all this @%%## nonsense-- never mind, Izuku dear, I’ll just ask that idiot principle.” With that she stormed into the Principal’s office, slamming the door behind her. They couldn’t hear what was being said through the door, but it got really loud.

Riley turned to Izuku with his eyes round as saucers. “Kacchan and I… used to be friends,” Izuku explained. “Our moms know each other.”

Riley turned his bugged out eyes to the office door. “Yikes. God made TWO of them!”

Izuku choked.

Izuku’s mother was last. She seemed so sad and upset. Izuku felt terrible. “Oh, Izuku,” was all she said. She gave him a hug anyway and went inside.

“I is that your Mom? She seems nice.” Riley said. Izuku nodded.

The talk inside went on. Izuku and Riley couldn’t see the grownups inside through the office window; it was tinted too dark. Nobody sounded happy, that was for sure. They both sat back down and waited for whatever doom their moms and the Principal decided on. After a minute though Riley turned to Izuku with a smug, sly look on his face. Hey, ‘Zuku,” he said.

“What?”

“Told ya it’d stop an eruption.”

A picture of Kacchan standing there, covered in white and his hands sputtering like a damp squib, popped into Izuku’s head. He laughed out loud. “I guess it did,” he giggled. The two of them sat and giggled like loonies.

“This ‘Katsuki’ boy--”
“Bakugao.”

“-- He attacked THEM-- with his friends-- and you’re telling me RILEY is in trouble?” The Coyote woman was looking more hostile by the second. The Principal was seriously starting to regret dragging all three mothers in over a playground squabble.

“Mrs. Coyote, you have to understand,” the Principal said in an appeasing tone. “Young Katsuki’s Quirk came in very recently. He’s a very spirited and energetic boy…” He had to figure out how to appease the other two mothers without upsetting things with Katsuki’s. No school could afford bad relations with the family of a Quirk prodigy like young Bakugao, after all.

He was rolling snake eyes on that, though. “The kid’s a brat and you know it,” Mrs. Bakugao snapped. “Ever since his Quirk came in he throws his weight around with anyone he thinks is smaller than him. And you idiots giving him a fat head isn’t making it any better.” She huffed and looked at the other two mothers. “Coyote-san, Midoriya-chan, I’m sorry for all the trouble… believe me I’ll be jerking a knot in his tail when I get him home--”

“Thank you, Mitsuki-chan,” Mrs. Midoriya said. “We understand.”

“Things can’t have been easy,” Mitsuki said sympathetically. “Not since the diagnosis.”

“Diagnosis?” Mrs. Coyote said.

Mrs. Midoriya looked out the office window at the waiting area. The two boys could be easily seen, though the tinting meant they couldn’t see her. She sounded on the verge of tears. “Izuku,” she said. “He’s been diagnosed as-- Quirkless.”

There was a moment’s silence. Mrs. Coyote wheeled on the principal. “You’ve been letting this boy and his friends bully a Quirkless child?” There was a seriously dangerous glint in her eye.

The principal winced and made some feeble gestures. “We do not deal with such things the same way as you do back in America,” he finally said. There was a hint of contempt in his voice. “In Japan, children are expected to deal with such things on their own. It toughens them up.”
“Until they fling themselves off top of one of your school buildings,” Coyote-san said scathingly, her canine ears laid flat. The Principal’s face went carefully blank at that. She made a sound like “UGH” and turned her back on him.

“They used to be friends, you know,” Izuku’s mother said over her shoulder. “Izuku and Katsuki. That’s what makes it so sad. Now...”

Kitsumi grunted. “I’ll have words with the brat. He’ll stay away from Izuku from now on, or I’ll hear of it.” She gave the Principal the hairy eyeball. He cleared his throat awkwardly but said nothing. Inko nodded her thanks.

Mrs. Coyote’s shoulders slumped a bit. “Riley is... something of a trouble-magnet. He’s a terrible prankster. He tends to provoke people to. It doesn’t help that his father encourages him.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ll speak to him, Mrs. Midoriya, he’ll keep his distance from your son from now on--”

“Don’t you dare.” Midoriya’s voice sounded strange.

“I’m sorry?” Riley’s mother said.

“Don’t,” Inko said. “Please don’t.” She sniffled, and pointed out the tinted window. That’s when everyone heard it: high-pitched laughter. The other two mothers crept up to stand beside her. They saw the two boys-- the green-haired boy and the werecoyote-- sitting on the chairs in the waiting area. Riley was saying something and pulling an outrageous face; Izuku was laughing fit to bust, kicking his feet in the air as he let loose peals of laughter. The sight brought a smile to the other two stressed mothers’ faces.

Inko’s eyes were full of tears but she was smiling. “That’s the first time I’ve seen him so much as smile since we saw the Doctor,” she said to Mrs. Coyote.

Mrs. Coyote hesitated, then held out her hand. “Call me Lucia.”

Inko hesitated, then took her hand and shook it. “Call me Inko.”

As they watched, three more children came trooping in; Katsuki and his two hangers-on. They had been cleaned up and dressed in clothes out of the lost and found bin. They looked uncomfortable and surly. The three made sure to sit in the chairs farthest away from both Izuku and Riley.
“Come on, ladies, Let’s go round up our spawn,” Kitsumi said. They filed out the door.

The three mothers came out of the Principal’s office. Kacchan’s mother beelined straight for him, grabbing him by the ear and scolding him loudly. He yelled right back, but it certainly did him no good. His two sidekicks leaned as far back as they could get; they were going to be in enough trouble on their own, they didn’t want Kacchan’s mom splashing over onto them.

Riley’s and Izuku’s moms stood in front of their sons. The two boys looked sheepish. “Are we in a lot of trouble, Mom?” Izuku asked meekly.

Inko actually chuckled. “No, not for now. But we are going home now. I think you’ve had enough excitement for one school day.”

Riley’s mother spoke up. “But first I think we’ll all go someplace together and get to know each other better. If that’s all right, Inko-san?” Izuku’s mother nodded. “After all, I’d love to get to know all about your new friend, Riley.”

“And I would too,” Izuku’s Mom agreed. The boys’ faces lit up.

There was a low guttural growl. Riley started, then rubbed his tummy and grinned sheepishly. “Can we go someplace to eat?” He said. “The fat kid sat on our lunches...”

Izuku giggled like a loon.

And that was how Izuku met his new best friend….

Izuku and Riley became inseparable.

Izuku learned a lot about his new eccentric friend fairly quickly. He learned that Riley absolutely
loved pie. In fact his mother had quickly figured out that the easiest way to get Riley to eat anything--fruit, vegetable, or meat--was to bake it up in a crust. It made for some odd lunches, but at least it worked, Izuku supposed.

He learned that Riley was from a place over in America called New Mexico. Riley said it was “all desert, sun, sand and sweat.” He never seemed homesick for it (which Izuku was very glad about) but he did say that things were a lot more “hot and soggy” here in Japan in the summer. He would put on quite a performance whenever the weather got too hot, flopping bonelessly over the nearest piece of furniture, letting his tongue hang out of his mouth and proclaiming that he was melting, meellllllting, till his mother either stuck a popsicle in his mouth--or down his shirt, which got him moving again much to Izuku’s amusement. For all his complaining, he seemed to love the beach and was fascinated by the ocean waves coming in...

Izuku learned that Riley’s family was fairly well-to-do… “a little bit rich” as Riley would put it. It seemed that some ancestor of Riley’s father had bought out the stock of several failing companies back over a century ago--a couple of crumbling printing companies, some Western comic book companies, a record company, some company called “Blockbuster…” He’d been laughed to scorn at the time… but then the Golden Baby of China had been born and the Collapse had struck.

When the dust had settled, Riley’s great-great-etc. Grandfather had been the sole owner of those companies’ entire portfolio… including their intellectual properties and their material inventory. Entire warehouses full of books, comics, movies on film, VHS and DVD and more, sealed in plastic and collecting dust. Decades later an inventory had revealed copies of recordings that people had thought were lost to time forever. To this day the Coyote family were still sifting through the remains, finding the occasional lost gem that was worth a mint to the right buyer…

It was where Riley’s Dad got his job. He was employed in a business that engaged in “Restoration and Salvage of Historical and Cultural Treasures.” He had brought his family to Japan to work with some megacorporation to try and restore the cinematic and print treasures Japan had lost in the upheaval after the Collapse.

A side effect of this was that Riley probably had the biggest personal collection of DVDs, music CDs, and “American Manga” Izuku had ever seen. One entire wall of his bedroom was taken up with DVD cases. Another was taken up with shelves of comics (reprinted and compiled into graphic novel style volumes, for easier storage.) A visit to Riley’s house inevitably involved crashing in front of his TV set with a giant bowl of popcorn and some sodas to watch some movie or other. A sleepover usually involved a movie marathon.

Izuku and Riley shared a lot of interests. They both loved sci fi and fantasy, and of course they both were mad about Superheroes. They both dreamed of being Heroes someday. If anything, Riley dreamed it even harder than Izuku did. He was insistent of three things: One, that Quirk Doctors were full of bunk, Two, that miracles could still happen and either of them could somehow get a
Quirk even years late, and three, that even a Quirkless person could be a superhero.

“I mean look at it!” he said one day, pointing at the array of comics he had scattered across Izuku’s floor. “Back in the day, there were LOTS of Heroes without Quirks.” He held up a handful of comics, pointing at the covers. “Batman, Iron Man, the Lone Ranger, Zorro, Green Lantern—”

“Those were all make believe heroes, Riley,” Izuku said with a longsuffering air.

“Well? So? What one person imagines, another person can DO,” Riley said, reciting his favorite saying. “Look at them. Was anything they did impossible for someone without a Quirk?”

“I think Batman and Iron Man’s real power was ‘stupid big loads of money,’” Izuku said dryly. “And the Green Lantern had a magic alien space ring. So unless I find a billion yen or a magic ring in my cereal box in the morning, forget it.”

“And the Lone Ranger just had a gun.”

“Loaded with SILVER BULLETS.” Izuku snorted. “And a sidekick. And a HORSE. So he had ‘Stupid Money’ too.”

“Zorro just had a sword...” Riley protested.

“And a servant. And he lived in a MANSION. Just like Batman. So we’re back to ‘Stupid Money’ again.”

Riley looked at him and shook his head. “Why must you ruin my dreams?” he said. “In fact, why are you dumping on your OWN dreams?”

“I’m just trying to be realistic,” Izuku mumbled. Riley swatted him with a SHAZAM! Anthology.

“Well don’t be, it’s stupid. You may not have a Quirk, or Batman’s stupid money, but you’ve got a lot of things Batman has. Like a super Batman brain. Look at all those Quirk notebooks you write! You’re like, a super Quirk genius!
“And what’s better, you’ve got his guts and his heart. Remember when Splodeydope was gonna beat up that one kid and you jumped in to stop him? You knew you couldn’t win, but you protected that kid anyway. That’s a Heroe’s HEART, Izuku, and you got one the size of a bucket. I might be a hero someday, but you’ll be THE Hero. I’m sure of it.”

But Izuku soon learned that his friend had one love that ran deeper than anything: HUMOR. He loved to laugh, and he loved making other people laugh too. His movie collection was packed with hilarity, some pieces of cinema going all the way back to the age of silent movies over two hundred years ago (!) and were packed with names like Buster Keaton, Robin Williams, Charlie Chaplin, Bill Cosby, Jackie Gleason… the Three Stooges held a place of honor on his shelves. He had every episode of something called the Muppet show which had Izuku in stitches, and several movies featuring the mad puppets beside. Disney and Warner cartoon collections filled in the corners.

His music collection was much the same, peppered with albums by people like Spike Jones and Weird Al Yankovic.

He was also in love with jokes and pranks. His toybox was filled with things like squirting flowers and rubber spiders, fart cushions and joy buzzers. He had a well-thumbed copy of a book titled “1,001 pranks and practical jokes” he kept stashed under his bed. Izuku didn’t know who wrote it, but he was fairly sure Riley could have given them tips!

He wasn’t mean about it though (though it certainly drove his mother to distraction.) His jokes never hurt anyone, and he was always sincerely sorry if it hurt someone’s feelings. It was clear to Izuku: Riley didn’t want to be mean to people. He just wanted to make people laugh.

Izuku knew that for sure because of how hard Riley worked at making Izuku laugh. If he ever saw Izuku with a frown, Riley would be there with a bad joke or a goofy imitation, trying to get him to smile again. And if that didn’t work, he’d drag Izuku along into helping him set up one of his wild and ridiculous pranks on someone. It worked more often than not; Izuku rarely could be found anymore without a smile on his face or a laugh on his lips, thanks to his manic friend.

What was better (or worse, depending on who you asked), the coyote boy seemed to bring out Izuku’s own spark of mischief. They were thick as thieves and conspired together like utter villains, giving everyone, especially their poor mothers, more gray hairs. They were the class clowns of their school, doing jokes, pranks, silly performances and singing ridiculous songs at the drop of a hat. And they were even popular, a little. Oh, Kacchan was still around, being a mean and hateful pain, and he had his hangers on… but the rest of the class didn’t give a darn. Who cared if Izuku and Riley were the only Quirkless kids in school– they were funny! And fun to be around.
And so the two whiled away the days of their childhood, laughing and joking together and dreaming of the future.

But a few years later, their friendship nearly ended. Riley got his Quirk.

Izuku was out on the playground when Riley came running up to him. “Zuku! You’re not gonna believe it! You’re not gonna!” His tail was wagging and he was practically dancing from one foot to the other.

“What?” Izuku said. “What is it?” He suddenly grinned. “What is it boy? Did Timmy fall down the well again?”

Riley stopped hopping about and gave Izuku the most unamused look a canine face could manage. “Ah ha ha ha, hilarious.”

“Okay okay okay,” Izuku chuckled. “What is it?”

“My Quirk came in!”

Izuku started. “What??”

“Look!” Grinning, Riley pulled something out from behind his back.

Izuku stared. “It’s a pie.”

Riley nodded, beaming. “A banana cream pie!”

“A banana cream pie.”

“Yeah!”
Izuku mulled over his next words. “Riley, finding you and a pie in close proximity isn’t exactly earthshaking news.”

Riley gave him another exasperated look. “Yeah, but I didn’t HAVE a banana cream pie two minutes ago.”

Izuku raised one eyebrow and made a ‘go on’ motion with his hands. “Aaaand…?”

Riley grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him over. He didn’t stop till they were standing behind a hedge, out of line of sight with anyone. “You don’t get it. I just… made it appear! I was sitting there on the bench, feeling hungry and thinking about how much I’d love to have a banana cream pie and-.” he gestured to the pie in his other hand. “Poing! There it was, it appeared right in front of me!”

Izuku stared at him. A creation Quirk? A Quirk now, so many years late? “…. prove it. Do it again.” Izuku said.

“...Okay.” Riley held out his empty hand and closed his eyes. His face scrunched up in concentration. There was a faint ‘wibble’ sort of noise; a ball of something appeared in his hand and seemed unfold into…

Another banana cream pie. Riley opened his eyes and looked at his miracle dessert. “Yes!”

Izuku was gasping. “That-- that’s amazing! This is incredible!” He looked at the pie. “It’s… not exactly going to strike fear in the hearts of villains, is it?”

Riley handed him one of the pies. “Who cares? Infinite free pie, forever!” He gleefully dropped to the grass, cross legged, and prepared to dive into the confection in his hands. “Come on, dig in!”

Izuku laughed and sat down next to him. He fumbled a bit, trying to lift a slice out of the pan barehanded, but gave up and just scooped a fingerful up and stuck it in his mouth. Riley was way ahead of him, his snout practically buried in the banana cream pie as he scooped a chunk of crust and filling into his mouth, booby-fashion.

The two boys chewed for a moment. Then the chewing slowed and stopped. “Does yours taste
okay?” Izuku said.

Riley looked up, cream smeared all over his muzzle and nose and his ears canted oddly. “No, it doesn’t,” he said. “In fact it… it doesn’t taste at ALL. It…”

“It tastes like air,” Izuku said. “Like, well, nothing!” He smacked his lips. “And… it’s weird, but it’s like I didn’t swallow anything. It’s like it disappeared right as it went down my throat!”

Izuku had never seen anyone look sadder than Riley did at that moment. His ears drooped, and his eyes turned to wide, sad, puppy dog eyes. “Of course. I imagined it up. It’s imaginary pie.” He looked sadly down at the partially-eaten pie in disappointment. “What good is the power to make imaginary pie?”

“So there you two twerps are.” Both boys stiffened and looked behind them. There was Bakugao, looking ready to murder someone and enjoy every second of it. “So, I finally got you two pie-snorkeling idiots all to myself. Time to pay the piper for what you did last week.” He smacked his fist into his palm, setting off an explosion.

Riley wiped off his face and grinned up at the bully. “Gee, what WAS it?” he said in mock thoughtfulness, tapping his chin with a finger. “There’ve been so many--”

“The fart pillow, you furry twerp!” Kacchan said. “You stuck it on my seat in math class, and--”

“You shouldn’ta tried to steal that little kid’s lunch money, Kacchan,” Izuku said. “What goes around comes around.” Izuku hadn’t approved, exactly, but it was hard to stop Riley when he was ‘on a path of righteous vengeance’ as he put it.

“You filled it with BEAN CURD first!” Kacchan’s fists were smoldering.

“Well I figured if you were gonna ACT like crap, you should like you were FULL of--” Riley started to say.

“RRRARGH!” Kacchan, predictably, lunged.
Without a thought, Izuku’s hand had come up and driven his banana cream pie straight into Kacchan’s face. Kacchan staggered back, pie dripping from his face. The pan slid off and hit the ground with a clang before disappearing in a cloud of glittery sparkles.

“Wow, it does have use fighting evil after all!” Riley said gleefully.

Kacchan snarled and sputtered, wiping the remaining muck out of its face. It fizzled away even as he wiped it off. “That’s it, you DIE Deku!”

Izuku raised his fists. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Riley stagger to his feet, hauling back with the half-eaten pie in his hand-- but even as the coyote boy raised it, it was melting away, turning into a misshapen blob-- growing longer, changing shape… into a gigantic, day-glo colored squeaky hammer. Riley grabbed the enormous handle in both hands and swung for the bleachers.

SQUEE-KAWW!

He couldn’t hardly have missed, the head of the thing was the size of an oil barrel. Kacchan practically disappeared behind the head as it struck him, lifting him off his feet. He landed flat on his back with a whoof, his feet up in the air.

The two of them stood there a second, stunned. Riley threw the hammer into the air, where it blipped out of existence. “Whelp,” he said with a panicked grin, “Time to go! RUN FOR IT!” He bolted. After a second Izuku followed.

They both ran pell-mell around the outside of the building and to the front entrance before stopping, laughing and out of breath. “Did you see that? Did you see that?” Riley said, giddy. “I can make stuff!” He held out his hand, another colorless blob appeared and became a rubber duck. Then it became a nutcracker, then a croquet mallet, then a basketball, then a baseball… “I can make anything!” The baseball turned into an ingot of gold--- or at least it looked like it. He frowned and hefted it. “Sort of...”

Izuku tapped it. It clinked like metal, but the sound was thin and tinny. “More like… you can make stuff that imitates anything,” he said. “But not very well.” Riley grabbed the bar and twisted it, then stretched it like putty. Riley went back to turning the blob of whatever into different things while Izuku began to mutter. “Polymorphic, it responds to whatever you’re thinking. Dissolves into
nothing... The lack of flavor or scent in the pies suggest it’s not real matter: it doesn’t chemically react with anything—how much can you make, how hard can you make it, can you change its temperature or...” His hands were already groping for the notebook and pencil in his backpack.

“Oh wow-- Look what Riley’s doing!”

Riley’s antics had gotten some attention. Kids all over the front walk were crowding over to see what the goofy class clown was doing now. Riley could never resist an audience. He kept adding to the “stuff”, changing it into larger and more bizarre objects—-an inner tube, a beach ball, a giant banana, an enormous bunch of balloons. “What IS that?” someone asked.

“It’s my Quirk!” Riley said, releasing the balloons. They floated off into the sky till they were tiny dots of color, then popped like soap bubbles. Riley spun up more “stuff” and shaped it into a giant broadsword like something out of Final Fantasy. He waved it around in slow motion.

“Wow!”

“What a cool Quirk!”

“Wait’ll the testers see this!”

The sword drooped like it was made of chocolate. “Oh wow, that’s right-- I gotta call Mom and Dad and get them to take me in for Quirk Registration!” Riley wadded the sword up like a lump of play-doh and threw it over his shoulder to vanish into nothing. “I gotta get to the office, later Izuku!” he pushed his way through the crowd and ran inside. The crowd followed.

It wasn’t until he was gone that Izuku realized that Riley had let the crowd push him away.

Izuku would have stood there for longer-- but he heard swearing and explosions in the distance and decided to get scarce.

Riley was gone the rest of the day, most probably for Quirk registration. But he didn’t call Izuku the
next day, or the next. And when he returned, things had changed. The kids who used to tag along after Kacchan all the time (not that he gave them so much as the time of day) were now crowding around Riley, hanging with him, inviting him to sit with them at lunch… crowding out Izuku. The teachers that ignored Riley and Izuku, or at best had complained about “That coyote troublemaker and his little greenhaired sidekick”, now ignored Izuku entirely… and were now peaches-and-cream pleasant to Riley. Riley was getting invitations to parties or ‘get togethers’ at the mall. Izuku, as always, wasn’t.

Riley would try to invite him along, of course… but all it took was the looks on the faces of the other kids and Izuku would beg off with an excuse. He’d hoped that Riley would tell them ‘no thanks’ then, or try to wheedle him along, or something-- but he’d just shrug and say ‘maybe next time. No biggie.’ And he’d be on his way.

It went on for a week. Two weeks. Three. Izuku finally admitted to himself that his best friend had finally drifted away.

Kacchan had certainly noticed. To his surprise, he didn’t get angry over Riley suddenly being almost as popular as he was. That would have been preferable. Instead he seemed to take amusement at one of the school “losers” suddenly being popular, and the other not. “Hey, Deku,” he’d said one day, when he cornered Izuku alone. “Lose your girlfriend?”

“Shut up, Bakugao,” Izuku said tiredly.

Kacchan’s eyebrows went up. “Whoa, hit a nerve,” he said. “Ah don’t feel so bad, Deku. Anyone could see this was coming.” He inspected his nails and buffed them on his sleeve. “It was obvious he only hung out with you because you were the only loser as sad as he was.”

“Shut up, Bakugao,” Izuku said with a little more heat.

“Ooh, getting some SPUNK are we?” Kacchan said, leaning in and sneering. “Better pull that back in, DEKU. You haven’t even got that dog-faced loser to have your back anymore. He’s no big deal to me-- he got his Quirk, so what? But even he wasn’t going to let a useless Deku hanger-on drag him down.

“Face it, Midoriya, everything’s back to the way it was. He’s just another Extra that walked off-stage… and you’re a worthless DEKU, all alone. Later, loser.” He pushed away from the wall and walked off.
Izuku had never felt so down. Maybe it was better, he tried to tell himself. Kacchan was a complete tosser, but he was probably right. Riley had an awesome Quirk now. He was going to be a shoo-in for a Hero academy. Maybe even U.A. He didn’t need a… a Quirkless nobody tagging along, dragging him down.

Things came to a head one Thursday. Izuku was sitting at his desk between classes, going over one of his Hero notebooks. Riley was over in one corner, surrounded by his new admirers. He wondered if he’d forgotten Izuku’s Mom had invited him over for dinner. Again. Izuku pressed the pencil into his notebook till the tip crumbled and tried not to grind his teeth.

Finally Riley pulled away from the others. “Hey Izuku,” he said. “We’re heading out to the Arcade after school. Wanna come with?”

Izuku looked up, for once hoping-- nope, there it was. The kids standing behind Riley were pulling faces at the idea of ‘Quirkless Deku’ coming along. “No thanks,” he mumbled, turning back to his notebook. “…Wouldn’t want to get between you and your friends.” Even he flinched at how that came out.

Riley jerked his head back. “What was that about?”

Izuku’s unhappiness boiled to the surface. “What it’s about? You’re one of them now-- you’ve got your fancy, special Quirk. You’ve got all sorts of friends and popularity and…” he bit it back. “…And a future now. And you don’t need me hanging around messing that up, do you?”

Riley actually looked hurt-- though Izuku didn’t see it. He refused to look up. “It’s not like that,” he said.

“Isn’t it?” Izuku said coldly. “Go on. I don’t wanna be around to see you turn into another Kacchan, anyway.”

Riley’s jaw dropped. But before he could say anything he was interrupted. His hangers on had already drifted out the door. “Hey Riley, c’mon!” one of the kids shouted from the doorway. “We gonna catch up with the others or what?”

Riley looked back and forth between the kid in the door and Izuku. His expression curdled. “Fine. We’ll talk later,” he growled, then turned and trotted off after the others.
He got out into the hallway to find the others waiting. “C’mon, let’s go hit the arcade. Zuku’s not coming.”

“About time,” one said. “You let him drag on you a lot.”

“Excuse moi?” Riley gave the speaker an odd look.

“Yeah, I mean really,” one of the girls said. “I mean, you two stick so close some of us were starting to wonder of you were... you know...” she waggled her hand at the wrist and made a face.

Riley gave her a long, deadpan look. “Considering he and I once spent an hour debating what it would feel like to touch a boob, I think that’s a NO, sugarbutt,” he said dryly. Her mouth made an “o” and she flushed at his remark. “They’re called childhood friends, people. Humans have them.”

“Well not everybody has to be lifelong friends forever, dude,” one of the guys said.

“Yeah, you really need to just-- leave that guy behind.”

He wheeled on them. “Hey, you got a problem with Izuku? You’ve got a problem with me,” he snapped.

The kid stepped back and shrugged. “Hey, we thought you already gave him the shake off,” he said.

“Yeah, c’mon, you don’t need that Deku dragging you down--”

Riley stared at them. There was a long, long silence. Then suddenly every member of the group found themselves with eels crawling down their pants and blouses. “No,” Riley said over the high pitched shrieks, “What I don’t need is a GOLDFISH POOP GANG: a bunch of losers like youm, hanging off my ass and trailing around behind me wherever I go. Later, losers.” He marched off, leaving them flailing and shrieking. He knew from experience it would be several minutes before the animated eels vanished back into nothing.

Riley was upset. It had never dawned on him in all the excitement that it might look to anyone... to Izuku... like he was giving his best bud the cold shoulder. He stopped and thought, worried. Had he
been giving him the cold shoulder?

Well, he certainly hadn’t been making sure Izuku kept up, had he?

Riley got a sinking feeling in his gut. He had to fix this. “I gotta go talk to Auntie Inko.”

Auntie Inko was happy to see him, though she wasn’t happy about the reason. “Oh, dear,” she sighed as she set out some tea and biscuits for them both. “Izuku’s been fretting all this time about this. It was obvious to anyone he was afraid that once you got your Quirk you were leaving him behind as a friend.”

“But I’m not!” Riley protested.

“You know that, but does Izuku?” She poured the tea and scooted the cookies to him. He took a biscottie and nibbled. “I think ever since Kacchan… well…” she shrugged. “He’s been afraid that any friends he made would go the same way.” She took a sip of tea. “And when you said you couldn’t come over this weekend for his birthday--”

Riley spluttered tea. “His birthday is THIS week?” he facepalmed, getting cookie crumbs all over his forehead. “No wonder he’s bent out of shape. I’ll be here, Auntie Inko. I’m gonna have to do something special to make up for jerking his chain though. But first--”

“Izuku thinks I’m turning into another Kacchan, huh?” he muttered, knuckle to his lip as he thought. A slow smirk spread on his face. “Well…”

Next morning the junior high school was treated to an extraordinary sight.

Izuku had arrived early (to avoid… well, everyone) and had taken his seat. He was moping, staring out the window at the sky when a ruckus arose from outside. He went to look outside along with the other one or two early arrivals, and gawked in astonishment at what he saw.

Up the front walk came Riley. He was decked out in his regular school uniform-- but in addition to
that he was wearing a gold lame’ cape, a bright yellow fright wig, and a belt festooned with what looked like grenades and a giant platter-sized belt buckle that said “I’M #1” in bright red kanji. He stormed up to the front patio in a bowlegged strut that was a parody of Kacchan’s slouching swagger.

“OUT OF THE WAY, EXTRAS!” He bellowed and began flinging firecrackers and bang-snaps in every direction. Kids yelped and shrieked as they danced out of the way of the crackling poppers. The center of the patio cleared out quickly. Riley strode out to the center of the concrete and struck a pose.

“I’M THE NEW KACCHAN! ALL OF YOU PEASANTS LINE UP TO KISS MY ASS!” he roared– or, well, sort of. His voice wasn’t quite suited for that. “MY B.O. EXPLODES, THAT MAKES ME BETTER THAN YOU!

“I’M THE GREATEST! I’M NUMBER ONE! I’M BETTER THAN ALL MIGHT! I’M BETTER THAN ENDEAVOR! I’M SO GREAT I’M NUMBER ONE AND NUMBER TWO! EAT MY SWEATY EXPLODING SHORTS!!” He dropped a boom box on the concrete behind him, hit the button and struck a pose.

The music began playing. He began dancing and singing– to “Gangnam Style.” As he did the Gangnam Dance. But to his own lyrics:

(Beat beat beat beat)

“Oh I’m SPLODEY DOPE!

(Beat Beat Beat Beat)

“Oh I’m SPLODEY DOPE!

“Oh I’m BAKA-GAO, And I think my crap don’t stink so

“I say I’m super bad, who cares what you all think--

The school was in hysterics. The students were hanging out of every window and crowding the edge of the patio, laughing so hard they could hardly stand. The song went on for several verses, with “Baka-Gao” couldn’t attract a girl because his explosive sweat made him stink, how foul his mouth was, how his sweaty underpants had exploded and killed his housemaid, how noone could stand his personality, how he couldn’t be a villain because he got his butt kicked stealing milk money from kindergarteners, how he needed his tagalongs to help him pee because he was afraid he’d blow his
own dick off (at this point two cartoonish caricatures of Booger Fingers and Fat Bat came out from behind him and danced in a chorus line with him as he gyrated wildly)---

Izuku laughed so hard he cried.

“I got no styyyyy-le, I got no maaaaaa-nners, I got no CLASS!

That’s becauuuse I have got my heeeeeead stuck up my AaaAAAAAARRGH!”

“All props disappeared, and Riley exited Stage Right at a dead run, laughing like a loon, Kacchan right behind him trailing swears and explosions like Steve Austin coming in for his final landing.

It took a good half hour for the teachers to restore order. It was a half hour after that when Riley burst through the door, still wearing his “Baka-gao” get up. “Well, Zuku?” he demanded. “Is this what you think I am?”

“Now see here young man--” the teacher said. Riley whirled on him.

“Back off man ‘cause I just spent ten minutes running from your school’s pet teenage psycho flinging nitroglycerin from his sweaty palms at me and I’m in no mood for interruptions so if I want your input in this conversation I’ll BEAT IT OUT OF YOU!”

The teacher was an elderly man with a Quirk so inconsequential it barely showed (turning bald on cue), and a snarling coyote is unnerving out in the wild much less in the confines of a classroom. He shrank back in his seat and said nothing.

“Well, Zuku?”

Izuku bit his lip and tried to keep the water out of his eyes. He just shook his head. Riley dispelled the costume and flopped down in the seat next to him. “Zuku. Dude. We’ve been friends since forever. Didja really think I was going to stop being your friend because I got a stupid Quirk?
“You’re my best bud. You’re the brainiest, gutsiest, most decent guy I know.” He paused and grinned. “Sure you cry like a lawn sprinkler, but--”

“Hey--!”

“Kidding, kidding. But anyway, Quirks or no Quirks, you’re stuck with me. Cause we’re friends to the end and we’re gonna be the greatest Heroes ever.” Izuku sniffled and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. “Aww, c’mon, bro hug--” Riley grabbed Izuku and slapped him on the back.

It was a touching moment. A couple of kids may have even applauded.

“Happy birthday, sweetie!”

“Happy birthday, Zuku!”

“Yes, happy birthday!”

That weekend, they had Izuku’s birthday party at his house. When got up that morning and walked into the living room, he found the party already waiting for him-- Riley and his mother had come over at the crack of dawn and helped Izuku’s mother set everything up. It was about what Izuku had expected--- a cake, a few presents on the table, and his best friend and his honorary Aunt. But there was something odd about the setup…

It took him a moment for his sleep bleary mind to figure it out. The table had been moved to the side, making a clear spot on the floor. What looked like a braided Native American rug of some sort had been laid out on the floor. A towel was laid out next to it, along with some strips of cloth, some bandages, and a turquoise dagger. Riley was kneeling at one end of the rug. He had traded in his usual sloppy tee shirt and cargo pants for what looked like a deerskin vest and trousers. He gave Izuku a grin.

“What’s this?” Izuku asked, scratching his head.

“It’s a blood brother ceremony,” Riley said.

Izuku blinked. “What?”
“In the tradition of my forefathers,” Riley intoned, “I invite you, Midoriya Izuku, to become part of my family in blood. Will you join the Coyote tribe in blood brotherhood?” He paused and looked a little awkward. “Since I was a little kid in New Mexico, I… always wanted a brother. Then I up and find one all the way in Japan, go figure. I figured it’d be cool to make it, you know, sort of official.” he paused. “Well?”

Izuku’s face wreathed itself in a smile. “Cool.” he knelt down at the other end of the tiny ceremonial rug.

“My Dad told me how to set this up,” Riley said. “He said it’s a genuine native american blood brother ritual.”

Izuku hesitated. “But I read somewhere that the American Indians didn’t actually do blood brother ceremonies-- that Hollywood made it all up,” he said.

Riley’s eyebrows and ears laid flat. “Izuku. Am I an American Indian?”

“Um, yes?” He was, in fact, descended from native americans-- though which tribe was a little muddled.

“Is my father an American Indian?”

“Well yes--”

“Well then that makes this a genuine American Indian ceremony, doesn’t it?” Riley said.

“… Can’t argue with that, I guess,” Izuku muttered.

Riley nodded in satisfaction. He picked up the knife and carefully nicked the palm of his right hand. He handed the knife to Izuku. “put a little cut in the same place on your right hand,” he said. Izuku obeyed. A droplet of blood welled up. Riley took the knife and laid it on the rug between them, then seized his right hand in his own, pressing the wounds together. He picked up the strip of cloth and wound it around their hands, binding them together.
“Now we are one blood,
Brothers in Summer and Winter,
Brothers in good seasons and poor,
Brothers in times of prosperity and times of trouble,
Brothers in peace, brothers in battle,
Brothers until the trail ends
And beyond.”

The two boys gave each other fierce grins as their mothers (being mothers) clapped and took pictures. Izuku looked down at their bound hands. “Uh, now what?”

Riley looked at the bindings. “Um, we pull our hands apart, tearing the ceremonial cloth—” They tugged. The cloth didn’t tear. “We pull our hands apart, tearing the ceremonial cloth—” they yanked harder. The cloth still didn’t tear. Riley’s ears laid flat and he growled as they tugged back and forth. “FINE, we fetch the ceremonial sewing shears and CUT the ceremonial cloth— Ah there it goes!” with a rip their hands parted. The mothers moved in and helped them both bandage their hands (and liberally apply iodine. Safety first!)

The two boys laughed and clapped each other on the back. “Okay, now CAKE,” Riley said.

“Sounds good to me!”

Years later, the two blood brothers would get matching tattoos to commemorate the occasion. But anyone who knew them knew that they took the bond seriously from the very beginning. They were brothers in battle, brothers in blood, and they would become a force to be reckoned with.
On Riley and Izuku’s last year of Junior High, everything changed.

It safely could be said that Riley’s Quirk was the most thoroughly assessed Quirk in all of Japan. He hadn’t hesitated in the least to put Izuku’s “Super Batman Quirk Brain” to work helping him figure out his power. They had done experiment after experiment, test after test. It seemed like Izuku would never run out of new ideas or angles. Soon he’d filled an entire Hero notebook with observations on Riley’s Quirk alone.

After much discussion they’d named the Quirk “Living Cartoon.” Riley could generate up to a ton of an amorphic substance (he called it “Oobleck”) that changed shape and form according to his will. It could imitate any material substance, whether solid, liquid, or gas. It could even be virtually intangible. He could make it change volume, color, or temperature, he could even make it emit light.

It had certain fairly hard limits though. The harder and denser he made it, the more energy it took and the harder he had to strain to keep its form. The same was true for temperature or brightness. It was a strain to make it hotter than merely scalding or brighter than a 50 watt bulb, or cooler than just barely freezing.

To both their surprise they discovered that while the Oobleck couldn’t imitate the chemical properties of a substance--- wood made of oobleck couldn’t really burn; Oobleck “acid” was no more caustic than water--- physical properties were a different matter. Oobleck metal would conduct heat or electricity. Oobleck ice would melt, Oobleck water would freeze.

Most interesting, while Riley could make anything made from Oobleck do whatever he wanted, if he left it alone or it was set out of range of his power, it would persist as it was for up to an hour. He could make a tapdancing pineapple, but if you moved it more than fifty feet from him it would stop moving and sit there, doing a good imitation of a perfectly normal pineapple till it poofed out of existence 60 minutes or less later.

At one point Izuku figured out how Riley could generate sound. Izuku speculated that what the coyote boy was doing was emitting a cloud of Oobleck as air, then using his power to make it vibrate. Up to that point Riley had only generated sounds with his power by accident. Now (to Izuku’s chagrin, along with everyone else) Riley’s immediate vicinity was almost constantly filled with honks, tweets, boinks, farts, and odd voices that emanated from the most outrageous places.

The most unusual discovery though was that the less detailed the objects were-- the more “cartoonish” they looked-- the sturdier they were and the longer they lasted. Riley could make a perfect replica of say, a vase, but if he popped out a quick, cel-shaded looking version of a vase, it would last considerably longer and be much more durable. “Probably because the less energy you waste on fine detail, the more energy goes into durability,” Izuku guessed. Riley had shrugged at that one and figured he was right.

While they were working to push Riley’s Quirk abilities to new heights, Riley hadn’t forgotten that they BOTH intended to be heroes. He’d pushed Izuku to seriously work at ‘heroing himself up’-- He’d gotten Izuku to take up running to boost his stamina, and wheedled a set of dumbbells out of his own parents so they could work out and build up muscle. (To his chagrin, Izuku was bulking up far faster than he was, and was already leaving him gasping in the dust on their daily morning runs, curse his mellow metabolism.)

To sharpen their brains they took up watching murder mysteries and reading true crime stories, to see
if they could figure out whodunit before the detectives did. They went online and read police
procedurals, articles on Law—especially on Quirk and Villain law—and of course, every single thing
they could find on the Pro Heroes of the day.

The fact they spent quite some time on the computer analyzing the latest Pro Hero Swimsuit calendar
(Featuring Midnight and Mount Lady) was… entirely coincidental. Really.

Not all their efforts at “Pro Hero Self Training” went smoothly. After their parents had patched up
their injuries from the homemade obstacle course and worse, the impromptu sparring practice, the
Midoriyas and the Coyotes had pooled their funds and gotten the two boys memberships at a local
rec center. The place had everything imaginable from a weight room to a gymnasium to a room for
the local parkour club to a sparring ring for boxing and other martial arts. It wasn’t a Kung Fu
Master’s dojo, but it was pretty darn good. They even had an olympic swimming pool. (Izuku had
laughed his ass off at Riley’s doggy-paddle. He’d been laughing out the other side of his face when
Riley sicced a Faux Jaws on him.) Their training—and their fitness—jumped a level or two.

By this point, they were seeing serious gains. Neither of them was exactly material for Muscle
Beach… Riley was sadly always going to have a lean, almost scrawny ‘swimmer’s build’ at best,
and Izuku’s ripped form was surprisingly easy to hide under loose clothes… but any of their
schoolmates who saw them could tell they were different, that they moved with an athlete’s grace
and confidence. By and large their peers got the subliminal message to leave well enough alone
and steered clear.

Riley’s pranks and clowning, however, were almost endemic now that his Quirk was in. Being his
classmate or schoolmate was often an experience in the surreal, like going to school with a Warner
Brothers cartoon.

One uncomfortable thing they spent a lot of thought on was how Izuku could compensate for his
lack of a Quirk. They looked over heroes both real and fictional, analyzed their Quirks and debated
on how to improve their support gear. Hours were spent perusing weapons, armor, and other support
gear; debating soberly whether it was a better approach to have a plethora of weapons gadgets and
holdouts, or to have a single weapon one had completely mastered? Whether ranged or melee was
better? hi-tech with its power, or low-tech with its durability?

Observing the current batch of Pro-Heroes and the gear they used was less than entusiing. “This is
terrible,” Izuku said. “Most of the support gear these heroes carry, it’s… just so… minimalist.”

Riley nodded. “Like they went with the quickest first solution that was just good enough to do the
job, or to compensate for their Quirk’s weaknesses, and then just forgot about it,” he said.

“And most are more concerned with how good it looks than how well it works,” Izuku said, slapping
the cover of a magazine. “Look at Midnight. She fights in high heels? Seriously? No protective
armor, and most of her costume is made of tearaway cloth. What do you think of that?”

“Well I’m all for it, naturally,” Riley said solemnly, then gave the magazine Izuku was holding a
lecherous grin.

Izuku swatted him in the head with it. “Seriously. She should have something like flat boots—”

“Yeah, I’ve seen ones, you know, the thigh highs with all the buckles?” Riley said. He ducked
another swat. “Hey! I’m saying, you know, better armor— flat soles, steel toed— lots more protection
and they’d still fit her look.”

“Good point,” Izuku admitted reluctantly. “And her suit should be thicker, have a gap between the
leather and her skin. Put a battery powered air pump on her belt and nozzles on her wrists, and she could shoot her Sleep Mist in a directed stream instead of just releasing it in a cloud.”

“Hey yeah! O’course, she’d probably object to being all covered up like that…”

“Stupid reason to die, because you don’t want to be too modest,” Izuku snorted.

“That too,” Riley agreed. “And it’d prolong her popularity.” Izuku looked puzzled. “Hey, she’s not going to be prancing around all firm and perky forever,” Riley pointed out. “Running around without a bra can’t be doing her any favors.”

Izuku rolled his eyes and shook his head. “You are such a pervert,” he said, unsure whether he was annoyed or amused.

“Hey, it’s her that decided to make herself ‘the R-Rated Heroine,’ not me!” Riley protested. “I’m just pointing out the drawbacks of relying on sex appeal for your pro Hero career.”

They were walking their way home after school. This final year was looking to be fun, in the ironic sense of the word. The year had barely begun and the teachers were already blowing smoke up everyone’s skirts about preparing for their future. When their own homeroom teacher had asked, and it had come out that Izuku and Riley were planning on being Pro Heroes, the ridicule had been spectacular. Forget guidance counseling; whenever they talked to Riley, all they could talk about was how Riley “needs to take things more SERIOUSLY, Stop clowning around” and that he’d never be a Pro Hero with his attitude. And what they had to say about Izuku planning on being a Hero, the better.

Never mind the two of them kept their grades at the top of the class. Never mind that they were at the head of the class in the fitness tests.

Never mind that Izuku could whip half the class with one hand tied behind his back (and had proved it in the schoolyard more than once when some kid unfamiliar with the Disaster Duo tried to get belligerent with the unassuming green-haired boy.) Never mind that Riley could scale a wall like a cat, or that Izuku could hit a bullseye at twenty paces-- whether with a ball, sling, dart or dagger. Riley was the ‘disrespectful, Gaijin goof-off,” and Izuku was ‘the Quirkless kid,’ and that was that.

Meanwhile the teacher was telling the pasty, wheezing kid in the front row with pool noodles for arms who could stretch his eyeballs out that he had a good chance at getting into a Pro Hero school.

They turned at the corner and started down the underpass. “Say, do you figure All Might has any special Support gear?” Riley pondered.

“Why would he need it?” Izuku said. “He’s ALL MIGHT.”

“Yeah, but you can’t punch your way out of everything.”

“He obviously has,” Izuku said, chuckling. He kicked a can out of his way. It clattered down the tunnel, making strange echoes off the concrete walls.

“How you figure that?” Riley argued.

“If he hadn’t been able to punch his way out of something, he wouldn’t be here, would he?” Izuku said with a laugh.

“Hmm… good poi---” Riley stopped in mid stride and wrinkled his nose. “Fwagh. What is that smell? It smells like New Jersey took a dump!” He waved one furry hand in front of his snout,
sticking out his tongue.

“Now that’s just hurtful, kid.”

The voice was deep and raspy, and sounded like it was rising up through gargled mud. It came with a waft of breath that stank of sewage. Riley froze and looked at Izuku. Izuku was frozen in terror. He was looking behind Riley, his fists clenched to his chest except for one finger pointing UP—

Riley recognized the signal.

Riley spun on his heel and fired behind him and up, right where he figured the attacker’s nose was. A boxing glove on a spring shot up and hit its target dead center. Something passing roughly for a head splattered in every direction. Whoever they were staggered back. Riley got only a moment’s impression of a towering mound of sludge, vaguely shaped like a human, before he turned and leaped towards Izuku. “RUN!!” he shrieked.

The Slime Man reformed his head and reached out. “Come ‘ere!” he snarled.

Izuku staggered backward one terrified step; Riley managed to get one fourlegged leap in. Then the wave of sludge fell on them. Ropy tendrils of slime wrapped around them, smothering them.

The two fought back like maniacs; the Villain actually had to struggle to hold onto both of them. “You two are a handful, aren’t ya?” he gargled, chortling. “Truth is, I only need ONE of you. Tell you what, I’ll make a skin suit out of one of you, then kill the other, how’s that?” Both boys’ eyes widened in horror.

The Villain disgorged Riley, dumping him on the sidewalk. “Eh, you’re too distinctive. Boy Normal here is better for my escape...” He focused his attention on the green haired boy and began to slowly strangle him. The canine one got back to his feet. To the Villain’s surprise he didn’t try to run. Instead he reached behind himself and whipped out-- holy shit, where’d a kid get a FLAMETHROWER?

“Let him go or else!” the kid snarled. A plume of flame sprouted at the nozzle of his weapon.

Panicking, the Slime villain lashed out with a pseudopod and grabbed the nozzle of the flamethrower. He was flabbergasted when the “flame” actually came away in his grip like a big glowing tuft of cotton. He actually stopped and stared. It was like something out of a kid’s cartoon! “The hell?”

“Oh, the kid said. Growling in annoyance, the Slime villain lashed out, trying to grapple with the kid, fully intent on strangling him.

In the villain’s clutches Izuku was struggling both not to breathe in, and not to panic. His mind was racing at a million miles an hour, trying to analyze the situation, the villain’s Quirk, to find a way out of this. But the excitement and the exertion were already burning through the last of his oxygen, and things were going dark…

Just as he started to black out, he thought he saw the lid on the sewer grate behind the monster crash into the ceiling, propelled by a massive muscular arm.

“TEXAS… SMASH!!”

That was the only warning any of them got. At the last second Riley encased himself in a giant bubble of Oobleck. There was a tremendous WHUMP and a near-solid wall of air blasted up the tunnel. The Slime villain was splattered all over the inside of the underpass, and both Izuku and
Riley were sent tumbling headlong down the length of the tunnel.

The Oobleck ball splattered against the pavement like a rotten egg, spilling Riley out onto the street before disappearing in a cloud of glitter. Riley groaned and sat up. He felt like he’d been tossed down a hundred feet of bad road. *Oh right,* he realized. *That was what happened.* He looked up and saw an enormous blonde figure standing at the other end of the tunnel, striking a pose as if he had just thrown a victory blow. “Never fear-- for I am here!” he thundered, throwing Riley a salute and an enormous toothy smile.

Holy crap. It was All Might. The Symbol of Peace. The single greatest, most powerful hero in the world. Izuku was probably freaking out right now-- Riley looked around for his blood brother. To his horror saw him lying at the opposite end of the underpass in a crumpled heap. Riley’s battered brain finally recalled the words All Might had shouted and put two and two together.

“You MEATHEAD!” he shouted at a surprised All Might. “You used your Texas Smash in an *enclosed space*??” Riley tottered to his feet and ran to Izuku’s side. He was breathing, thank heaven. Riley dragged him out into the sunlight and sat him up, patting him on the cheek to try and stir him. “Come on, bro, upsy daisy,” he said as he checked Izuku over. Izuku groaned and rubbed his head.

Riley breathed a sigh of relief: Izuku seemed okay. The sludge monster must have taken the brunt of the blow. They were both going to an ER first thing though, just to get checked over for any internal injuries. Riley grimaced, then hawked and spat. And to get a prescription for a course of antibiotics, he added mentally. That Slime guy was *nasty.*

All Might came striding out of the tunnel. “You know, most people are a little more grateful for a rescue--”

Riley growled in annoyance. “Does the word ‘overpressure’ mean anything to you? You let loose with your Texas Smash ‘air burst’ punch in a narrow little tunnel! It was like firing a CANNON with us standing in the BARREL! You’re lucky you didn’t rupture our eardrums or our LUNGS with that stunt!”

All Might was taken aback. “I do have better control than that, young man,” he said, clearly a bit miffed.

“Well you--”

“AAAAH! ALL MIGHT??!!!!”

“Ah, he’s awake,” Riley said, looking at Izuku. He knelt down next to where Izuku sat hyperventilating. He held up a couple of clawed fingers in front of Izuku’s face. “Okay, Izuku, how many fingers do you see--”

Izuku slapped Riley’s paw out of his face. “Riley, stop clowning! It’s ALL MIGHT! Here! Right in front of us! For real!” Izuku looked up at the hero with absolute worship in his eyes.

Riley muttered to himself. This was predictable. To be fair, he’d probably be freaking out fanboy style himself later-- once he got over being irritated at nearly getting popped like a water balloon-- but an anthropologist could probably read the history of Izuku’s bedroom by analyzing the strata of All Might merchandise on the shelves and walls. “Yeah, allow me to introduce you. ‘Zuku, All Might. All Might, my blood brother, Midoriya Izuku--”

Izuku got to his feet babbling. Riley could only facepalm. “All Might, I’m you’re biggest fan ever, I mean I’m sure there are other big fans and maybe I shouldn’t say I’m the biggest I mean it sounds
like bragging and that’s really not what I want but OH MY GOSH WE WERE ACTUALLY RESCUED BY ALL MIGHT--” Izuku paused in the middle of his word torrent and looked around frantically. “Wait, where’s the villain?”

“Ha!” All Might held up a two-liter bottle in each hand. Each bottle was filled to the neck with brackish sludge. “I took care of that miscreant. Anyone care for a tall cold bottle of Diet EVIL?”

Riley peered closer. He could see a bulging eye floating inside each bottle, looking about in wild agitation. He grimaced and cringed. “I really don’t wanna know how you got the eyeballs through the neck of those bottles,” he said.

“Oh it was easy,” All Might said. “There’s this trick you can do with a boiled egg--”

Riley waved his hands ‘no’ frantically. “Nope nope nope,” he said. “Brain rejecting images now...”

All Might tucked the bottles into the pockets of his cargo pants. (He was a bit dressed down for heroing, Riley reflected-- then he noticed the grocery bag hanging from his wrist. Ahh.) “Well, I’ve got to get this miscreant delivered to the authorities,” he said, patting one pocket. “I’ll be seeing you brave fellows around--” he turned and crouched to leap away.

“All Might, wait!” Izuku stumbled forward, hand outstretched. “I-- I have so many questions--”

Riley could see it almost before it happened. All Might crouched to leap. Izuku threw his arms around All Might’s leg. Then both rocketed into the air.

Frantically Riley summoned up an enormous mass of Oobleck and threw. The plumber’s helper shot through the air and stuck to All Might’s back, right between the shoulder blades. Riley hastily knotted the end of the rapidly unspooling pile of rope around his own waist. “Ha! Gotcha-- Yaaagh OH CRAP!” he howled as he was yanked into the air.

A disturbingly long number of seconds in midair later, All Might came in for a landing on a distant rooftop. The Symbol of Peace was fortunately skilled enough at this sort of thing to cushion his unexpected passenger’s landing. He landed one footed and slid to a halt, cushioning the green haired boy’s impact with one arm.

Izuku finally released his death grip on All Might’s thigh and toppled over on his back like a beetle, shivering and staring into space. “Holy crap,” he squeaked.

All Might huffed and began to lecture. “Young man, that was INCREDIBLY…I don’t even have an adjective to describe how foolhardy that was! I...” he then noticed the rope trailing off his own back. “What the--?” With considerable difficulty (he WAS a bit musclebound), he pulled the toilet plunger off his back. “What on earth...” He followed the trailing rope with his eyes and up into the air just in time to see the coyote-boy come in for a slow, graceful landing, clinging to the handle of a paper parasol the size of a patio umbrella.

Riley floated in for a wobbly landing. His feet hit the rooftop just as the parasol and its rope vanished with a poof. He stumbled forward a few steps before stopping and glaring first at All Might then at Izuku, his eyes bugging out as his chest heaved. “You suicidal lunatic,” he rasped. He sat down on the rooftop heavily.

All Might rubbed his chin. What a fascinatingly useful Quirk, he thought. He wondered what else the boy could create-- he shook his head. Later. “That was incredibly foolhardy, young man,” he said to the green haired one. “What possible reason could you have for that?”

“I-I’m sorry, All Might,” Izuku gasped. He stood up. “I... it’s just… I have so many questions, so
many things I have to know..."

All Might heaved a massive sigh. He could feel his time running low. He turned to go. "I’m sorry, young-- Zuku, was it?-- But I don’t have time to--"

"Could a Quirkless like me be a hero like you??"

The question had come out more as a scream. All Might stopped and looked back, the astonishment was clear on his face. Izuku took a couple of deep breaths and went on in a more normal voice. “A- all my life, all I’ve ever wanted to be was a Hero,” Izuku went on. “A hero like you. Someone who could battle evil and save people with a smile on their face, someone who gave so many people hope.” He looked up, wide eyed and on the verge of tears. “I just-- is there any way that a Quirkless nobody like me could be a Hero?”

The Symbol of Peace stood there, his mouth open. “C’mon, say something!” Riley said, growing impatient.

All Might started to speak. “Young man, I--” Suddenly he disappeared in a cloud of steam.

“Riley!” Izuku yelped.

“It wasn’t me!” Riley yelped back. “What the heck--”

The steam cleared. Both boys screamed in horror. Where All Might once was, now stood an emaciated, skeletal looking man. His clothes drooped and sagged on his bony frame and his blonde hair was a bedraggled mess around his skinny shoulders and face.

“Holy… All Might MELTED!” Riley shrieked, his fur standing out like a bottle brush.

“All Might, what happened?” Izuku said, his hands to his mouth in horror.

The gaunt figure that had till a moment ago been the invincible All Might groaned. “Dammit.” He slouched over to the roof ledge and sat down. “Hello, boys. My name is Toshinori Yagi. Yes, I’m still All Might. This is what I look like normally.”

“Who.. what.. why...” Izuku stuttered. He sat down hard on an air conditioner casing.

“Yes, and where, when, and how, too,” Riley said, mesmerized. He sat down on the roof next to Midoriya.

“That other form? It’s like, well, flexing a muscle,” All Might said, flexing one skinny arm. “I--” He coughed; a small spray of blood came out of his mouth. Both boys let out a little scream at the sight. “Calm down, calm down,” he said, wiping his mouth with a handkerchief. “It just happens from time to time.”

“… Your health is declining, isn’t it,” Izuku said, that analytical light going on behind his eyes. “That’s why you make fewer and fewer public appearances over the past five or six years... an injury, wasn’t it? Some villain. And an injury to your left side; in every battle since then you’ve favored your left side… and with coughing up blood that means an injury to a lung, or...”

All Might-- Toshinori-- stared as Izuku trailed off into his trademark ‘Midoriya Mumble.’ “He does that,” Riley said, amused despite everything. “You get used to it. Superbrain at work.”

“Ah...” Toshinori nodded. “And he’s right on the money, too.” He pulled up his shirt. Most of the left side of his torso was a gnarled mess of scar tissue. “I was in a terrible battle with an extremely
powerful villain. I won, but at a cost. My stomach, half my left lung, a couple of feet of intestine...” he lowered his shirt, covering the gruesome sight. “I was in and out of the hospital for over a year, being operated on. Since then I’ve only been able to do my heroing for about three and a half hours a day. And that’s dwindling over time, too.”

“That’s.. terrible,” Izuku said.

Toshinori nodded. “You can’t let anyone know--” Izuku and Riley both shook their heads and gave their word. All Might relaxed a little bit. “I’m telling you all this much for a reason,” he said. “I want you to understand just how much it can cost you being a Hero. Even for those of us with a Quirk it’s hard, dangerous work. And… Zuku...”

“Izuku,” Izuku corrected him. “Midoriya Izuku.”

“Young Midoriya… without a Quirk… without the edge that gives… I’m sorry, but there’s really no way for you to be a Hero. It’s just too dangerous.”

Izuku’s face fell. “Hold on,” Riley protested. “There were all sorts of Heroes without Quirks back in the old days--”

“Yes, a few. A hundred years ago. But they didn’t have to deal with villains who DID have Quirks! And even then--” Toshinori shook his head. “I’m sorry, Midoriya Izuku. Be a cop, or a doctor, or a firefighter, those people are brave and honorable too. But you’ve got to be realistic. Being a Pro Hero isn’t for you.” With a grunt of discomfort he got to his feet and headed for the access stairs. He opened the door and looked over his shoulder. “Boys… good luck with your lives.”

The door closed. Izuku’s expression crumbled. His head sank and tears began rolling down his face. Riley got up and stood next to him. “Hey, hey! Screw him, okay? He may be All Might but he’s just one guy, what does he know--”

Izuku shook his head. “Not.. not now, Riley,” he said hollowly. “I just… I just don’t wanna think about it now.” Riley heaved a sigh and quietly sat on the AC next to him. They just sat and stared over the city for a while.

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It was almost half an hour before they finally got up and took the access stairs down to the street. (They waited that long because neither of them wanted to run into “Toshinori” again.) They took a detour to a nearby clinic and got a quick look over by the doctors there. No injuries beyond bumps and bruises, for a miracle. Then another detour to a pharmacy to get their prescriptions filled for some potent antibiotics (the attending nurse had almost squealed when she heard the villain had come out of a sewer.)

Just as they got out on the sidewalk there was a distant explosion. Smoke rose up over the city skyline. “Yikes, villain activity again?” Riley exclaimed. “Freakin’ busy day...”

“I hope not,” Izuku agreed. “I’ve had enough Hero- Villain excitement for once.”

“Then again it’s an explosion; there aren’t exactly many GOOD options for those,” Riley pointed out. “Like, ‘oh yay, it’s not a villain, it’s just a gas line?’ … Oh man, that’s near your neighborhood, Zuku! Maybe we better go check it out--”
Izuku agreed. The two broke into a run.

It wasn’t a gas line. It was the Slime villain from before. He was rampaging in the middle of the street, explosions going off all around him. There were two or three Pro Heroes there; they had cordoned off the street and were pulling innocent civilians out of harm’s way.

“Him again?” Riley yelped. “How the heck did he get away from All Might?”

Izuku froze in horror. “Oh no,” he said. “It must have been when we were in midair-- I must have dislodge the bottles--”

“Ohh, crap,” Riley said, eyes wide and ears laid back. “And when the hell did he get exploding powers--” just then they both saw the hostage struggling in the Slime villain’s grip. He had a familiar head of spiky blonde hair and was letting off detonations in every direction.

“Ohhhhh, crap, it’s SPLODEY DOPE,” Riley squawked. “Sludge Face is using him like a meat puppet flamethrower to keep everyone back--- **IZUKU! What are you doing??**”

Riley’s blood brother was already in motion. He’d vaulted over the Hero’s police line and was racing straight towards the villain, fires and explosions all around be damned. “Zuku, you lunatic!” Riley yelled.

But Riley could hardly talk; he was already running too, barely a step behind.

Izuku ran towards the rampaging Villain. The words *it’s my fault, it’s my fault, it’s my fault* were the only ones running through his mind. It was his fault the villain had escaped All Might. Now it had another person-- one of Izuku’s classmates-- in his clutches. The lives of all the people around were in danger too. All because of him.

But even if that hadn’t been the case, somewhere deep down in his bones he knew he’d still be running towards the danger all the same…

Izuku and Riley had spent a lot of time speculating on what sort of gear a Quirkless hero would carry. Would he have a plethora of gadgets, or would he have just one weapon he had mastered? Would he focus on long range or melee? Would he go with the potency of high tech, or the durability of low tech?

They didn’t just speculate either. Riley had a few toys of his own, but he always made darn sure Izuku didn’t go anywhere without at least two or three holdouts hidden somewhere on his person. Some of the items would probably get them both in trouble if they were ever found out-- but neither one, especially Riley, cared. It was a dangerous world with supervillains in the street and neither one of them was going to be caught defenseless if he could help it.

He’d been unable to reach his weapons when Sludge Face had grabbed them before. That wasn’t a problem now. He reached behind his back and pulled something from one of his belt loops.

He could peg a moving target at fifty feet. An orange-sized eyeball at ten? Not even a challenge.

“Hah, you’re a way better pick than the last one,” Sludge Face said to his struggling prisoner. *“With you as a skin suit, I’ll be able to blast my way through anything they throw at--”* he heard running and looked up just as a kunai, a ninja-style throwing knife, skewered one of his bulging eyes. It splattered like a burst egg yolk. He screamed in agony and his grip on his hostage slipped.

Katsuki coughed and spat, sucking in a deep breath gratefully. At last, one of those Pro Hero asshats was coming to rescue him! Then he looked up and saw what Sludge Face saw and nearly choked
“YOU??” the villain and hostage both said.

“US!” Riley whooped, bringing an enormous cartoon mallet swinging around into the villain’s side. It hit with a wet SPLUT, spraying muck everywhere. “Eww, you’re just as NASTY as before!”

“KILL YOUUUU,” Sludge Face gargle-screamed in an apoplexy. He lashed out with a pseudopod, missing by a mile.

Izuku noted something he’d suspected the last time: Sludge Face didn’t have perfect control of his body. He could only seem to focus on one pseudopod at a time, and deal with one attacker at a time. If he’d actually been able to control all his flailing body mass, he’d have been able to snap both their necks in the underpass in an instant. Instead he’d had to wrestle and struggle to keep both of them in his grip… “Spread out!” he shouted to Riley. “Don’t bunch up, he can’t fight two people at once!”

“Got it!” Riley crabwalked to the right, forcing Sludge Face to divide his attention further. They both grabbed up burning pieces of trash from the fires and waved them about, distracting him further. The villain thrashed back and forth, raging at them. But he was like a baited bear; any time one of them stepped close enough to grab the other rushed in, waving their firebrand and distracting him.

“I’ll twist both your heads off!” He snarled. But it was working; his grip on Bakugao was slipping. The exploding boy thrashed and cursed, pulling himself further free.

Out of nowhere a cowboy lasso came and wrapped around Kacchan’s torso. It was Riley, who was now decked out in cowboy boots and a ten-gallon hat. “Yeehaw, gotcha, pardner!” Riley cheered, and began hauling back, digging his spurs into the ground. With a wet SPLORT, Kacchan pulled free.

Sludge Face bellowed in fury. As Kacchan slipped free of his grip, Izuku stepped a little too close. Sludge Face lunged and engulfed him up to his chest. His firebrand flew off out of reach and sputtered out. “Any last words, brat?” Sludge face snarled, leering at him and glaring with his one remaining eye.

Izuku pulled his knuckleduster out. This wasn’t your standard brass boxing cheat, though. It was a 950 thousand volt stun gun. It was probably illegal as hell in Japan. It could knock a longhorn steer on its butt at full power. And Sludge Face’s body was almost entirely liquid.

“How about a TASER SANDWICH, BOOGER LIPS?” Izuku yelled. He rammed his fist into the slime villain’s body up to the elbow and pressed the trigger.

“Yablabblaalabbblaahhabbaggle!” Sludge Face screamed, his entire body spasming and rippling like a jello mold on a washing machine. He lit up from inside with a sparkling, blue white light. It was positively festive.

Izuku wasn’t exactly having a fun time of it either, though. Most of the voltage was grounding out right through Sludge Face’s liquid body, but Izuku was getting more than his share of the current. He jittered and shuttered, his teeth clenching in pain. Finally the stun gun shorted out, and both of them slumped to the ground-- Izuku in a pile of twitching limbs, Sludge face in a slowly spreading puddle.

Riley looked up from where he was helping Kacchan. The other boy was bent over, gagging and puking up Sludge Face’s muck. “Izuku! Are you okay?”

After a second or two, Izuku rolled over on his back. He raised one arm and gave his blood brother a thumbs up. Riley laughed. Several of the people in the crowd watching cheered and applauded.
Then Sludge Face got back up.

A couple of the onlookers screamed. “Oh come ON,” Riley griped.

The slime villain raised a pseudopod, forming a massive hammer (*A sludgehammer!* Riley’s stupid brain insisted on providing) and raised it high over their heads. “Youuuu… diiiieee...” he gargled. The hammer descended.

There was a sound like thunder and a cloud of dust. All three boys opened their eyes and looked up. Standing over them, bracing the hammer on one massive arm, was All Might. “Never fear boys,” he said. “For I am here!”

“The hammer fell, showering them with dust and debris.”

“Detroit—SMASH!” His fist whipped around and struck Sludge Face, center of mass, in a powerful uppercut.

What happened next wasn’t so much a punch as an explosion. Sludge Face *disintegrated*, spraying against the walls. The blast of air from the blow shot straight up into the sky, forming a vortex that tore through the clouds above. Seconds later, a gentle rainfall pattered down.

For once Riley was speechless. Izuku contributed for him.

“Ho Lee Crap.”

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After that it was all over but the shouting. Lots and lots and LOTS of shouting.

While All Might dealt with the press and the teeming onlookers and a few unlucky patrolmen set to work with a trash bag and a scooper, the police and the other Pro-heroes spent their time reaming Izuku and Riley out. It did turn out that the knuckleduster taser was illegal… eighty years ago. After the advent of Quirks, things like tasers were regarded as something of a joke. Fortunately it didn’t occur to anyone to check the provenance of said taser (a fairly recent and still legally doubtful model from the USA) or to search Riley or Izuku for other holdouts (or perhaps they realized how very very bad it would look to the crowd of eyewitnesses for the cops to strip-search a couple of junior highschoolers and decided it wasn’t worth it.)

That didn’t stop the cops, or the Pro-Heroes, from yelling at Izuku and Riley at length. Don’t you know how stupid that was, don’t you know how dangerous, oh gods and imps what do you mean you don’t have a Quirk? And on and on and on.

“It was bad enough your unlicensed friend here went in,” Death Arms said, glaring at Izuku, “but you running in there without even a Quirk--!”

Riley was getting into a snappish mood. Literally; he was close to biting someone if they didn’t lay off. “Oh really? You had a Quirk AND a stupid license. What was YOUR excuse, Dumpster Chin?”

Death Arms stuck his finger under Riley’s nose. “You’re in big trouble as it is, kid!” He threatened.
Riley laid his ears back and looked at the Pro Hero through lowered eyelids. “Oooh. Hope I don’t need RESCUED. A trained monkey with a butter knife could hold YOU lot at bay.”

Death Arms snarled and seemed to swell up. “You little ungrateful…”

“Ungrateful for what? You did nothing! You had four or five heroes with you, and you all just stood there with your thumb up your butt while a zero-rater with a sludge power tore up the street!”

“Riley…” Izuku hissed, mortified. They were in SUCH hot water already…!

“We’re Pro Heroes, young man,” Kamui Woods cut in. “We know better about what we do than you. We knew that we didn’t have a Quirk suitable for dealing with that villain…”

“A SUITABLE QUIRK?” Riley exploded, his eyes bugging out. “My bloodbrother had NO Quirk, and he STILL dropped Sludgeball on his butt! So I repeat for the peanut gallery, what was your excuse?”

“Wood burns, kid,” Kamui Woods said dryly, holding up his arm and sprouting a few branches to emphasize his point.

“Wet wood doesn’t,” Riley sneered. “You have Backdraft right here. If you’d just had Backdraft take a second to douse you first, you could have reached in and grabbed the hostage before the Villain could stop you. Then the rest you could have taken the villain down easily.” Kamui Woods blinked; the idea obviously hadn’t even occurred to him.

Riley wasn’t through though. “Or Backdraft could have just diluted him with a blast of water to the face. Which would have kept Kacchan from firing off any more explosions as well. Or Mount Lady coulda grabbed road salt from one of the stores and dumped it on him. Or-- hell, half a dozen other ideas!

“Instead you were all--” he slapped his paws to his cheeks-- “Oh noes, my power isn’t exactly perfect for slime monsters! What ever shall I dooo?”

“RILEY!” Izuku shouted, mortified.

An enormous hand clamped over Riley’s muzzle. “Iiii think that’s enough,” All Might said pleasantly. Riley fumed and tried to spit out more invective at the gathered Pro Heroes, but All Might kept a grip on his muzzle. “Gentlemen, officers,” he said to the heroes and cops gathered as he tucked the fuming coyote boy under one arm. “These two fine young gentlemen” he put a friendly hand on Izuku’s shoulder. “performed a very brave, if somewhat reckless deed. Everyone’s spirits are a bit high now of course, but all things considered, I’m sure we can let this go with a warning, right?”

The other heroes and the police relaxed a bit. Heroes deferred to All Might readily.. and the police were obviously thinking of having to do a lot less paperwork. “Are you sure, All Might?” one officer said.

“Of course!” All Might beamed. “I’ll just get these boys on home--” he picked Izuku up and tucked him under the other arm. He seemed oddly urgent, Izuku thought. Then he noticed the wisps of steam starting to rise from All Might’s arms. “Now if you’ll all excuse me, I must be on my WAAAY!” With that the hero leapt into the sky.

This time the leap was nearly disastrous… All Might actually “flamed out” at the peak of his leap. Fortunately Riley managed to spin a massive parachute for them all out of Oobleck. “Quick thinking, young Coyote,” All Might sighed in relief as they floated down into an empty lot.
“Yeah, great,” Izuku said. His face was as green as his hair. “Next time, All Might, could we just walk wherever you’re going?”

“My vote is on walk,” Riley said feebly, flopping on his back on the ground.

“Sorry. I figured I’d best get us all away before my second wind gave out-- and Riley here dug you two any deeper,” Toshinori said wryly.

Riley had the grace to look sheepish. “Sorry, Zuku,” he said. “Those Pro Heroes just kept talking, and it really got under my skin--”

Toshinori sighed. “I hate to admit it, but the younger crop of heroes these days do seem to… lack in thinking outside the box,” he said. “You’re a remarkably sharp lad, young Coyote. Where did you come up with all those strategies off the cuff…?”

Riley sat up. He gave All Might a wry half smile and jerked a thumb at Izuku. “He thought up most of that in the waiting room at the clinic,” he said.

Toshinori looked at Izuku (who was blushing) and raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“You should see his collection of notebooks,” Riley chuckled. “He’s got more deductions than Sherlock Holmes and more contingency plans than Batman.”

“Ah, a brilliant deductive mind to go with a brave heart,” Toshinori said in admiration. Izuku was so red his head looked like a tomato. Toshinori sat down on a nearby trash can, his gangly arms draped over his knees. “Boys, I owe you an apology. Especially you, young Midoriya.” both boys looked up, surprised. “I’ve gotten… a touch cynical over the years it seems. I forgot the real meaning of being a hero. It’s not the license, or any Quirk, that makes a Hero. It’s the heroic spirit; the spirit of someone who for the sake of others, runs toward danger rather than away from it. The spirit I saw in you, today.

“I was wrong. You have the heart and soul and will of a true hero. You not only CAN be a hero, you WILL be. I choose you, young Midoriya Izuku, to be my successor, and to inherit my power.”

Izuku fell to his knees. His back bowed as tears gushed from his eyes. His hero, his idol, the one man he wished to emulate most in the world, had said he truly could be a Hero. All the doubt and negativity and scorn of his teachers and elders and peers instantly turned to dust and blew away, less than nothing.

All Might said he could be a Hero.

A furry arm went around his shoulders. “Told ya,” Riley’s cheerful, know-it-all voice chuckled in his ear.

“Wait. What. INHERIT your power??”

***

The first day of high school at U.A. finally arrived. The two blood brothers stood side by side,
“Wow. Big door,” Riley muttered.

“For big students?” Izuku pondered.

“Musta been interesting when Mount Lady was attending...” Riley said thoughtfully. “Oh well. In we go.” Izuku nodded and the two of them pushed the door open.

Izuku looked around as they stepped through. There were a few familiar faces there from the practical test. In particular he recognized a certain pink-cheeked girl with short brown hair. “Ohayo, Izuku-chan!” she said, waving. Turning pink at the cheeks himself, Izuku waved back.

“Who’s that?” Riley asked.

“R-remember me telling you about the practical?” Izuku stammered under his breath. “T-the girl I rescued?”

“Oh, hey, that’s right! You rescued the damsel!” Riley chuckled, pulling Izuku to his side and punching him in the arm. “You heroic little cliche’ you. And she’s cute, too!”

“Riley...” Izuku rolled his eyes.

“Hey, I’m just saying-- you already did the damsel in distress thing, you’re in like Flynn with her...”

“Riley...!”

“Just remember to invite me to the wedding--”

“Riley, she can hear you!” Izuku whisper-screamed at him. Both he and the girl were tomato red now. Uraraka giggled in embarrassment, covering her mouth.

“And she’s giggling. Good sign!”

“Arrrrgh...!”

Thankfully for Izuku, Riley’s attempts to get his blood brother to die of embarrassment were interrupted. “You! Get your feet down off that desk at once!” Someone shouted. “You are disrespecting the school, the craftsmen who made it and the alumnus who came before you! It is shameful!” The stiff, dark-haired figure ranting at another student was immediately recognizable.

Izuku groaned.

“Oh look, it’s Captain Uptight from the practicals!” Riley said in mock cheerfulness. He watched the boy’s arm bob up and down as he spoke. “Hey, he comes with real Kung-Fu action!” he said in an aside. “You think if we push the button on his back wings will pop out?” Several of the nearby students overheard and snickered.

The stiff-backed boy… Tenya something?… turned around. His eyes fell on them. “You!” he exclaimed.

Riley threw his arms out. “US!” he exclaimed right back.

Izuku groaned to himself again. In the auditorium right before the practicals, Riley and the uptight boy had gotten into it when the officious young man had tried to call Izuku out for his muttering habit “distracting the other students.” Riley’s snarky rejoinders had wound the boy up like a dollar-store clock; it had nearly turned into a shouting match before All Mic had gotten everyone to settle
down. This was going to be an issue, Izuku feared, if the two continued striking sparks off each other.

To his surprise, the boy bowed to them. “I am Tenya Iida,” he said. “I owe the two of you an apology! I have heard of both of your actions in the practical exam. Obviously you are the superior students for you perceived the real purpose of the test when I did not. I mistook your jovial attitude for lack of seriousness. Again, I apologize.” he bowed again.

“That’s okay,” Izuku said, embarrassed. “I didn’t really… I mean, I just did what I thought was right.”

“All the more, then.” Tenya bowed again. “And you, Coyote Riley. You merely spoke in defense of your friend—”

Riley reached out and grabbed him by the hand. “Ah, don’t think about it,” he said. “If you’re willing to let bygones be bygones, so am I.” He shook Iida’s hand.

“Ah, yes. Well then.” Tenya bobbed his head in a sort of abbreviated half bow. “I need to find my desk, if you will excuse me..”

As he turned away, Riley leaned over to Izuku. “Buh-buh-buh-buzz LIGHTYEAR,” he muttered under his breath. Izuku had to slap a hand over his own mouth to smother a snort.

“And you! For the last time get your feet off of your desk!” they heard Tenya shout.

“Get wrecked, Trust Fund boy,” was the surly reply. Izuku and Riley looked at each other, then leaned over to look around Iida’s back. It couldn’t be…

It was. Seated in a desk by the window, his feet propped up on the back of another, was Bakugao Katsuki. He was glowering out the window, not even bothering to look back while Tenya chided him. Riley pushed Iida to one side and clapped his hands to his cheeks in faux delight. “It can’t be! It IS! Look, Izuku– It’s SPLODEYDOPE!”

Kacchan’s back went ramrod straight. His head slowly turned. “No,” he said, his face stiff with horror. “You two??”

“Splodeydoope!!” Riley flung himself into Kacchan’s lap and threw his arms around his neck. “Splodeydope, we MISSED you!” he yodeled, pressing his hairy cheek into Kacchan’s.

“Augh!! Get OFF!”

“Just think, we get to spend three whole years together! Taking classes, and field trips, and--”

“How are you two HERE?”

“And maybe even we’ll all drive together with our dates to the PROM!!--”

“They swore there was no way you’d ever get into U.A.!!”

“I know, WE’RE surprised too! Isn’t it wonderful? FWIENDS FOWEVAH!”

“AAAAARGH!!!”

It normally took Aizawa less than ten seconds to settle his incoming class down. Today, it took nearly five minutes.
One the first day of U.A., Izuku and Riley flipped the table.

“Seriously,” Ashido said, clearly not believing it. “You two are brothers.”

“Absolutely,” Izuku said with a wide innocent smile. He threw an arm around his blood-brother’s neck. “Can’t you see the family resemblance?” As he spoke Riley whipped out a baseball cap with a patch of green fun-fur attached to the crown and donned it. They both mugged at her. Ashido laughed.

“In fact we’re twins!” Riley said.

“Please cease your silliness,” Iida said, chopping the air with one hand testily. “We can all see that you look nothing alike.”

“Oh, it’s ‘cause you’re not wearing your hat, Zuku,” Riley said.

“Oh, right--” Izuku reached behind himself and pulled out a sun visor and donned it. Then they mugged at everyone again. Snorts and guffaws were their reward.

“Oh. NOW I see it,” the pink-skinned girl giggled.

“You know, seriously, you and Riley might be related,” Izuku said suddenly to Hagakure.

“What makes you say that?” the invisible girl giggled, playing along.

Izuku gave her a knowing look. “Well, anyone who looks at Riley can tell he’s not quite all there...”

The other kids laughed and groaned. Riley blew a raspberry.

“If you’re out here to do nothing but tell bad jokes, you’re wasting your time,” Aizawa-sensei’s voice droned. The students stiffened and stood straight in their line.

All but Riley of course. “Really? Cause I’ve got some really awful ones that would probably meet your standards--”

“BE QUIET.” Aizawa activated his Quirk, making his eyes glow red and his hair rise like Medusa’s locks around his head. Everyone fell still. This time even Riley yeeped and fell still. Once he felt he had their attention Aizawa released his power and resumed talking. “You are out here in the field today to do a Quirk Apprehension Test.”

“A what?”

The ball disappeared into the stratosphere. The field of students went oddly still. “Izuku!” Riley yelped, running over to his bloodbrother’s side. “What the hell, man?”

Izuku held up his hand. The index finger was black and purple and clearly broken. “It’s okay,
“Riley,” he said. He pulled a roll of bandages out of his fanny pack and began wrapping his finger, preparatory to going to Recovery Girl’s office. “It’s nothing more than what we expected.”

Riley’s ears were sagging. He looked almost ready to whimper. “Dude...”

Izuku kept his head down and his teeth clenched, but Riley could see the tears in the corners of his eyes; they were from more than pain. “It’s okay,” he repeated. “It’s just for once I’d like to have had a teacher that wanted to HELP...” He finished wrapping his hand and walked off, not looking at any of the other students.

Riley watched Izuku go, then turned back to look at Aizawa. His glare could have frozen gasoline. “Well, sensei,” he said coldly. “It looks like you’ve got your expulsion.”

“How so?” Aizawa said, cocking an eyebrow.

“I may not be the brightest, but I can do math. Even with that rocket-bomb throw, Izuku’s going to come in dead last with his scores.” He started walking off.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Aizawa-sensei demanded. Riley didn’t stop walking.

“Congratulations, you made it a two-fer!” he called back. “You think I’m going to stay here with a petty dick like you, waiting to see when you get bored and decide to expel me too?”

“No one was going to be expelled,” Aizawa said. “It was a logical ruse to get you all to give your best performance.”

Riley stopped dead in his tracks. He turned around and walked back till he was standing right in front of the homeroom teacher. “Are you telling me,” he said calmly, “that my blood brother shattered the bones in his hand in a desperate attempt to impress you enough that you wouldn’t expel him on the first day -- and it was all a RUSE?”

Aizawa’s lips curved up in the tiniest bit of a smile.

WHUMP.

Aizawa curled up in a ball, clutching his groin. He really should have been prepared for a knee to the crotch, he reflected in agony. “Consider that my notice,” Riley said, then stalked off.

Once his balls stopped shooting shutdown notices to his brain, he stood up straight. Mostly. “Very well,” he grunted. “Two students have-- urgh-- made their choice... what?” Because Tenya Iida was now standing in front of him, bowing.

“I am sorry, Aizawa-sensei,” Tenya said with almost ritualistic formality. “But for my own well-being, I cannot countenance remaining in such an educational environment.” He turned and walked away.

Then to his shock, Momo Yaoyoruzu did the same. “I’m incredibly disappointed, sensei,” she sighed. That was one of his recommended students!

Then Uraraka tearfully joined them. “My parents told me if it came to this, to not hesitate,” she said. “I had such hopes but... Izuku-chan saved my life. If this is how A.U. treats HIM...” she bit her lip.
and left at a run. Aizawa stood there and watched in disbelief as, one by one, his entire class walked out on him. Some made a brief statement; some just looked at him scornfully. All of them left. Soon there were only two students left—Mineta Minoru and Bakugou Katsuki. The grape-haired boy looked back and forth between the teacher and the other last student. “Three years of being stuck with you and Splodeydope here?” he said finally. “Forget it!” and galloped off.

“And you?” Aizawa said to the explosive teen.

Katsuki snorted. “Forget you,” he said, running his hand through his hair and sneering. “I hate dog-boy and Deku’s guts. And the rest of those losers are just Extras. But even I know what to do when all the rats abandon a ship. Someone else is gonna get to train the world’s next number one Hero. Seeya, teach.” He flipped Aizawa the bird, setting off a small firecracker burst, and left.

“Well THIS could have been predicted— and prevented,” said a voice behind him. Aizawa yipped and spun about. (He would deny it later for all the good it did.) Behind him stood All Might and Principal Nedzu. All Might looked thunderous, and Nedzu… was not quite smiling.

“Oh, Aizawa,” Principal Nedzu sighed, shaking his head. “You were warned about this sort of thing…”

The next day there was a U.A. staff meeting. There were a great number of highly agitated staff.

“AGAIN!” Vlad King, the homeroom teacher of 1-B, shouted, slamming his fist on the table. “Aizawa has gone and done it AGAIN! Expelled an entire class of highly promising students— on a WHIM! The parents, the student sponsors, the alumni are going to eat us alive for this!”

“To say nothing of the competition,” Cementoss rumbled. “Isamu Academy, Shiketsu Academy, Ketsubutsu High and Seiai Academy are going to have a field day.”

“The Ministry of Education isn’t going to be particularly gleeful about this either,” Midnight said sourly. “Honestly, Aizawa, expelling them on the first day? We’re going to have educational reviewers climbing up our…”

Ectoplasm cleared his throat noisily. “I think the phrase ‘we’ve got a mess on our hands’ covers it,” he said.

Toshinori Yagi was there as well. He was in his “deflated” form, but only a fool would not be intimidated by the man regardless, especially considering his mood. “What I am curious about,” he said with a glower at Aizawa, “is why you decided to expel my successor on the very first day of his schooling?”

Aizawa was sitting at the table like anyone else, but he was clearly in the hot seat. He regarded his staffmates with bleary eyes and an unrepentant attitude. “I would expel anyone who showed his aptitudes, whether he was the great All Might’s successor or not. Your ‘successor’ is barely capable of controlling his Quirk,” he said contempuously. “He—”
“He’d only HAD the Quirk for a handful of months before the admissions test!” All Might said, agitated. He coughed violently for a moment, then wiped his mouth with a bloody handkerchief. “He is still learning to contain it. He can only use it at five percent power normally… the only time he’s used it at one hundred percent is when he was backed into a corner! Like when saving a girl’s life in the practical-- or in that ridiculous ‘Quirk Apprehension Test’ where you threatened to EXPEL him!” He coughed more violently and reached for a bottle of water. "You were supposed to help him learn to control it-- not expel him for not knowing what you hadn’t even taught him yet!"

“In all fairness to Aizawa-san,” Principal Nedzu said, raising his voice. The room quieted. “He did not, in fact, expel anyone. The class actually, I believe the term is ‘dropped out.’”

Everyone in the table stared. “All of them?” Number Thirteen said, sputtering in disbelief. “What could have motivated them to do that?”

“From what I saw, because of how they saw Aizawa-san treat young Midoriya and Coyote,” All Might said sourly.

“Hmm,” Cementoss said. “I can hardly believe that those two raised such loyalty from their classmates in less than a day.”

“Actually, the seeds of this were apparently planted months ago,” Nedzu said, sipping from his ever-present cup of tea. His beady eyes glittered in a fashion that the other educators at the table recognized as a sign that he was both intrigued and amused by something. It was a look they all learned to find deeply unsettling. “You see, young Midoriya and young Coyote apparently compiled a dossier on Aizawa-san and emailed it anonymously to all their classmates several months before the beginning of term.”

“What?” Aizawa said in a displeased monotone. He was starting to take interest in proceedings-- he actually sounded awake.

“In fact, they composed dossiers on every teacher in U.A. and emailed it to any student who was interested,” Nedzu said after a careful sip. “For a small fee, of course.”

“What?” this was unanimous. Toshinori saw where this was going and started to laugh.

“Oh yes, attendance lists, grades, student reviews… expulsion records…” Nedzu hmmed and dunked a sugar cookie. “That sort of thing. It’s an interesting practice, used by many American universities to help keep their staff accountable.” All Might was chortling and choking into his handkerchief so hard he was in danger of passing out. "It apparently needs institutionalizing here, as well."

“Where did they get all that information?” Aizawa said. He was wide awake and sounding ready to get quite hostile.

“My dear boy, they simply asked for it. Those records are open to any student, staff member or alumnus that requests them,” Nedzu said. “They asked for nothing that wasn’t legally and readily available to anyone who asked. They merely compiled it into a more useful form and offered it about.” He gave Aizawa a cryptic look over the rim of his cup. “Of course, when they sifted through this information and learned of your… proclivities… they made a point of sending the information out to every first year student in 1A. A little advance warning as it were.”

“Why would they go to such lengths?” Midnight asked. She tugged at her studded collar nervously. Memories of certain… behaviors… that she had though were behind closed doors were flitting through her mind, and she was wondering if mention of them had made their way into these little “dossiers.”
“Why don’t we listen to the instigators and find out?” Nedzu said. He pressed a button on his armrest and spun his chair around to face the back wall. An enormous flatscreen lowered and lit up. The camera angle was from behind an office desk, presumably the principal’s. Midoriya Izuku appeared, sitting in front of the desk. Nedzu could be heard asking him to explain his and Riley’s actions.

“Well,” Midoriya said, scratching the back of his head, “Riley and I we’ve… had a lot of problems in the past with teachers.” He hunched his shoulders a bit in seeming memory. “Some who were bigots against foreigners, or against mutation quirks, or.. um.. Quirkless.” He coughed selfconsciously. “And a lot who didn’t think we could make it as Heroes.” he frowned. “Some just laughed at us. But others… obstructed us. I caught one teacher in junior high tearing up my academic application to U.A. even. Another actually fiddled with our grades, to try and make it harder to pass…” His frown turned into a heartbroken scowl. “We learned to do ‘evaluations’ like this before we changed a grade, or went to a new class. Just so we’d know what teachers would be trouble. I’d hoped it’d be different at U.A. but…I’m sorry…” He got up and walked off camera.

There was a brief flicker of static, and the seat was now filled by Riley. He was seated casually, one arm over the back of the chair, one leg over the arm, and juggling a pair of hackey-sacks in one hand. He looked at the person on the other side of the camera in surprise. “WHY?? Why’d we do it?”

“Okay, let me paint you a picture. Five and a half years old, just immigrated to Japan, the glorious land of the rising sun. More alone than I’ve ever been in my life. A Quirkless, mutated Gaijin weirdo. I run into this Quirkless japanese kid on the playground-- he becomes the best friend I’ve ever had in my life. We do everything together. We even plan how someday we’re both gonna be Heroes together.

“And every step of the way, everyone who’s supposed to be helping us is trying to stop us. They beat us up. The teachers lecture us about how stupid we are for wanting it. They ignore it when the “important” kids, the kids who they think are SUPPOSED to become heroes, bully us. Some of them were out and out bigots-- against Gaijin, against Mutations, against Quirkless. Grades fudged. School papers “lost”. Applications eighty-sixed. One year they tried to stick me in a class for Special Ed students because I still had an accent and the senile old bat teaching our class couldn’t understand it. The year after that, they tried to stick Žuku there because he was ‘handicapped.’” It was clear he was getting angrier as he spoke.

“Every last teacher-- the people that were supposed to help us-- told us we couldn’t do it, that we weren’t able to, that we ‘had no potential.’” Those last words were delivered with venom. “And we did it anyway. We studied, we trained. And at the last possible moment, we got our Quirks. But even without any Quirks, we still woulda done it. But all those people? They weren’t teachers… they were just OBSTACLES.

“By the time we hit junior high we were pretty sick of it, and our parents were pretty sick of it too. It was Izuku’s idea to start putting together dossiers on the teachers we’d have to deal with the following year.” He smirked briefly and made a money-counting motion with one hand. “Of course it was my idea to monetize it…”

“Well, when we finally made it to U.A., we just kept on doing it. We’d hoped, we’d really hoped, that this time we wouldn’t NEED it.” He snorted. “And what happens?

“On the very first day, my blood brother-- the smartest, bravest, kindest, most heroic guy I know, who trained, and studied, and worked, and who overcame everything thrown at him while everyone laughed in his face, who literally crawled on broken bones to get to this school’s front door-- gets told by some scruffy, unwashed, Night of the Living Dead Russell Brand looking mother@$%er--”
At this point several of the teachers doubled over spitting and snorting. There were at least two spit takes.

“--that he ‘doesn’t have any potential.’ And then then threatens to expel him based on how he touches his tippy-toes and throws a baseball.” The boy sat back, glaring off to the side. “So yeah, I punched him in the nuts.” More snorts and spit-takes greet this. “Not like I care. He’s not my teacher anymore and never will be, because I’m NEVER walking into another classroom where he’s behind the teacher’s desk ever again.”

The screen went dark. Nedzu turned his chair around and faced the staff. “You will be interested to note the last sentiment was echoed by every other student who walked out: they would never sit any class headed by Aizawa Shota ever again. Some spoke to me directly. Others wrote it out formally. It wasn’t out of any solidarity, mind; they simply weren’t willing, to quote one student, to ‘stay and wait to be the next one he expels when he gets a bug up his ass.’ This was not a reaction taken in the spur of the moment. All of them had been forewarned months in advance that some of our teachers were ‘troublesome,’ and were waiting for the other shoe to drop.” He gave Aizawa a look. “Teenagers these days apparently have a low tolerance for unfair teachers.”

“I did them a favor,” Aizawa said, impassive. “If they couldn’t handle a little difficulty--”

“Oh really?” Nedzu said. “Let’s review what happened to the last group on whom you showered this particular benevolence.” He put a folder up on the table and opened it. “Let’s start with the 20 students you expelled a couple of years back…

“Six of them applied for transfers to our competitors, graduated and went on to become Pro Heroes. Four of them overseas. They are all on record as disparaging U.A. to the press as having an undeserved reputation, by the way… Six of them were unable to complete their education and are now struggling as minimum wage workers. four more of them dropped out completely and now have criminal records as Villains.

“And five of them committed suicide.” A chill passed over the room at this last bit of information.

“I judged them as not having enough potential to be proper Heroes, and I stand by that decision--” Aizawa began.

Nedzu stood up in his chair and slapped his paws down on the table. “That was not your decision to make!” he yelled. Several of the staff set back, jaws agape. For the perpetually mild and seemingly cheerful little principal to shout was unheard of. “They proved their potential,” he continued in a calmer voice, “when they passed the gauntlet of the admissions exam. Your job was to bring that potential out, to nurture it, to teach them how to use their Quirks become Pro Heroes. Instead you decided to become an obstacle, a hindrance, a threat that the students had to somehow overcome just to secure their futures.

“On paper, you’re an excellent teacher. On paper, the students who graduate from your class are of the highest quality and go on to be great heroes. The reality, however, is anything but.

“You maintain your high evaluations by expelling countless promising young students, and keeping the remaining handful of gifted prodigies whom you barely have to exert yourself training, artificially puffing up your own accomplishments as a teacher. You’re constantly pulling your little ‘logical ruses’ on them, turning them untrusting and paranoid toward you and by extension toward the rest of staff. Your personal appearance is slovenly, your attitude is deplorable and you’re constantly sleeping in your own class!
“Your ‘eccentricities’ have been tolerated for far too long, and it has now been conclusively demonstrated that they harm this institution more than they help. You may be a fairly excellent Pro Hero, but you are a ruinously substandard teacher, and it has once again fallen to someone else to clean up the damage you have done. You may consider yourself on unpaid suspension until further notice.”

As Nedzu had spoken, Aizawa’s already pallid face had gone sallow as candle wax, sagging in dismay. At the Principal’s final pronunciation he had slumped back in his seat, stunned.

“Aw, don’t feel too bad, Eraserhead,” Snipe said sarcastically from the end of the table. “Think of all the sleep you’ll catch up on.” He tipped his Stetson back. “Now the question is, can we get any of those students back and if so, how?”

“I’ll take them in,” Vlad King growled.

“You already have twenty students, Kan,” Midnight pointed out.

“Then give me a larger classroom,” Vlad said. “We overbuilt this school, we might as well make use of all the extra room. College professors handle classes of over a hundred students, a high school teacher ought to be able to handle forty.” He sniffed. “I’ll make a couple of seniors into teacher’s aides if the workload is too much.”

“Very well,” Nedzu agreed. “Well move you into one of the smaller auditoriums. The rest of you will have to shuffle your paperwork a bit, and we’ll play the rest more or less by ear.” There was a general murmuring of agreement. “I will have,” he sighed a moment, “letters of apology sent out, explaining the change of circumstance to the parents and asking the students to return.”

“You should have seen this coming, Aizawa-kun,” Toshinori chuckled. The former teacher looked at him, scowling sullenly. “Oh don’t give me that look, you should have! Midoriya is my disciple after all, and Coyote is closer to him than a brother. Didn’t you see their performance at the practical exam?”

“And what precisely did I miss?” Aizawa said sourly.

“Yes, what did he miss?” Number 13 said. “I’m afraid I missed the practical exam...”

“Other than the fact that they both destroyed their respective Zero Pointers?” Toshinori chuckled. That certainly surprised the rescue hero, to judge by the way they jerked in their seat. “Young Midoriya earned his rescue points saving a young woman from being crushed by the Zero Pointer’s treads. He punched the machine in the face, destroying it utterly. And young Coyote?” His skeletal grin broadened. “He ran straight to where the Zero Pointer waited, hotwired it, and then rode it around the testing zone, smashing dozens of the other robots with it.

“Those boys don’t just overcome obstacles in their way. They turn them against you, then dynamite them to oblivion and perform a festive dance atop the smoldering pieces.”

He got up from his chair and patted Aizawa on the shoulder. “It was a bad, bad day for you when you decided to become an obstacle.”
My Little Hero Academia

Midoriya was a teenage boy in Musutafu, Japan. He lived in a world of superheroes… and supervillains. In his world over eighty percent of the people on Earth possessed some sort of superpower, a Quirk. A handful of those had the talent, training, skill and power to become Pro Heroes, superheroes licensed to perform brave deeds rescuing citizens from danger and battling the forces of evil. His entire life he had dreamed of being a great Hero.

But Midoriya was one of the diminishing few born without any power at all… He was Quirkless.

His entire future changed one day, though. In a chance encounter with All Might, the greatest hero in Japan, he was found worthy and chosen to be All Might’s successor, and inherit his power-- One for All.

He ran to the beach. He knew today was the day. Today he would finish clearing Dagobah beach, the rigorous physical training would be completed, and All Might would transfer the power of One for All to him. He would take the application test for U.A., the most prestigious hero academy in Japan and All Might’s Alma Mater, and begin the long course to becoming the world’s greatest Hero.

He knew all these things right down to his bones. But the one thing he didn’t know is that, through all his struggles, he had an audience.

“Good Morn, sister! Hath the green-haired one finished his trials?”

“Yeah! Has he gotten the mojo thingy yet? I’m on pinions and needles here!” Someone rasped.

The voice that replied was serene as the dawn. “Good morning, girls. No, not yet; he’s on his way to the beach now… oh, look. he’s arrived and completing the last of the work.” The onlookers paused to watch as the object of their attention began hauling the last of the debris on the beach away.

“My word,” a genteel, cultivated voice said. “The boy certainly is--”

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘ripped.’ Exercise, it does a body good.” This voice bubbled over with good cheer.
“Oh dear, how long do they have till the test?” The last was in a timid, anxious whisper.

“Couple of hours. Popcorn?”

“Sakes, they’re cuttin’ it close, ain’t they?”

Fretful hooves tapped a staccato. “I know! My nerves are so on edge. What if he misses the exam? What if he doesn’t pass? What if--”

“Calm yourself, my favorite student.” The serene voice chuckled. “The young hero we’ve watched has risen to every challenge thus far; I’m sure he will do spectacularly.”

The last pile of trash was shifted, ready to haul away. As the sun rose, Izuku climbed to the top of the heap and screamed his triumph to the sky.

“My word, that was certainly primal.”

All Might was waiting for him when he came back down. “Congratulations, young Midoriya,” he said. “You’ve done it-- and with just hours to spare. You are ready to be a vessel for One for All.” He plucked a single golden hair off his own head and held it out to the boy. “Eat this.”

“Gross. A hair??”

“These little rituals of power have unusual requirements sometimes...”

Midoriya managed, with some difficulty, to swallow the strand of hair. “Now quickly,” Toshinori urged him. “The exam is in a few hours. You do not want to be late!”

“Wait, what? No explanation? No instructions? No tips? Just “Clench your butt and yell” and off he goes to-- When you all lent me your power, I had at least a LITTLE training!”

“Fifteen years as my apprentice, and it’s ‘a little training,’” the serene one murmured in an amused aside.
Midoriya took the written exam with confidence... then he faced the dreaded practical. He and a hundred other powered students were set loose in a faux city, to do battle with an army of killer robots. The testing zone exploded in violence and mayhem all around him.

“Oh, I can’t look! This is so brutal!”

“Come on, kid, you haven’t even beaten one yet--!”

Then there was a mighty rumble, and everything went mad around him.

“Great horned toads, what in the name of Discord, Tirek and Krastos the Gluemaker is THAT??”

“Oh no. That must be the ‘Zero Pointer’ that All Mic described!”

Students fled in panic as the skyscraper-sized mechanical monster bore down on them. Izuku was looking around frantically for an avenue of escape when he heard the cry for help. A girl was pinned under some of the wreckage. It was the girl from before the test... the Zero Pointer was bearing down on her, grinding everything under its treads.

It was then that Izuku felt the power surge through him. Power, incredible, explosive power pouring through his insides. He did not pause, he did not hesitate. He poured that power into his legs and LEAPED.

“YEEHAW! Go get ‘em, boy!” Other cheers rose in agreement.

He soared up, hurtling towards the machine’s gargantuan head. He hauled back with one fist, poured power into it till his skin crackled with light...

“SMAAAAAASH!” One punch landed. The leviathan One-Pointer flew backwards, exploding at the seams, fire and smoke erupting from every shattered joint. It fell to the ground in a thunder of destruction.
“Ho.. lee… horseapples...” the raspy voice said reverently.

“Oh no.” The serene voice was no longer serene. “Something is wrong...”

“His limbs, oh no, look at his limbs!” the timid voice cried out in distress.

Izuku cried out in agony. His legs… his arms… the bones had shattered like glass! He plummeted from the sky, his limbs flapping like socks full of broken pottery. He was going to die!

“Oh crap, he’s gonna go splat when he hits!”

“I can’t look--”

Mere feet from the ground, something struck his face a stinging blow…. And his fall halted. The timing had been incredible; she had hit him with her zero gravity quirk with inches to spare. “R-release,” she groaned, undoing her power and letting him fall to the pavement before turning to retch.

“Oh-- HUZZAH for the round-faced maiden!” There was a sound of fervently applauding hooves. “BULLY for her! I have found mine favorite amongst this crowd for sure, Sister!”

“He ain’t outta the woods yet--”

“He’s a shoo-in for that school for sure!”

“But the rules state that the Zero Pointer is-- zero points! He hasn’t got a single point yet!”

Izuku pushed himself up on one arm, desperately tried to crawl forward. He could see a few two and one pointers a block away. Tears gushed down his face. “Please,” he begged. “Just one point--!”

The ones watching wept in pity as they watched the boy struggling to crawl on broken limbs. “This is horrible,” the meek one wept. “Won’t one of them do something--?”
The horn sounded. “The practical exam is finished,” shouted All Mic over the intercom. Overwhelmed by pain and despair, Izuku collapsed and darkness overtook him.

“That SUCKS!”

“He failed?? That’s terrible!”

“It’s worse than that,” the eldest voice said, her serenity gone. “He’s dying!” She was right. The damage to the young man’s body was too great; the pain and shock were starting to shut down his heart. And the school’s miracle healer was preoccupied with several injured students elsewhere. She would arrive too late.

“No!”

“What do we do?”

“What we intended before we learned he was to receive One for All,” the eldest said, voice firm. “He cannot survive his injuries-- but an ALICORN could!”

“Are you sure??” the studious voice said.

“It’s his only chance. Now, everyone, NOW!”

Some of the applicants had begun to approach the shattered boy lying on the street when a pillar of light, blazing white as sunlight and moonlight and limned with a thousand colors, fell from the sky and engulfed him. There was a sound like someone striking a power chord across the strings of the cosmos and an explosion of rainbow-white light, flinging everyone backwards.

Ururaka sat up from where she’d been tossed, groaning at her new bruises. She blinked the spots out of her eyes. “What happened?” she murmured. Cautiously she got to her feet and approached where the green-haired boy had fallen.

There was no boy there anymore. Instead what lay there was a tiny mint-green pony with freckles and a tousled mane.
“Sister?”

“...Yes?”

“That was the transformation and ascension spell, was it not?”

“…Yyyyyessss...”

“Twas more than sufficient to immediately transform yon hero into an alicorn, yes, and save his life?”

“With all of us contributing? Oh yes.”

“Then while it did mend him and save his life--- why there lies a green EARTH PONY?”

A hoof tapped, uncertainly. “I… haven’t the foggiest...”
Inko stared at her son. Her son stared back at her with large, soulful eyes. He was scared, embarrassed, bewildered, confused and maybe feeling a little guilty… which sounds like a lot to take in at a glance, but Midoriya Inko was his mother, and her son’s heart had always been an open book to everyone, not just her. Besides, the way his ears laid back and his little pony tail twitched were just dead giveaways.

Izuku was a pony. A little green pony. A little pastel green pony with a dark messy green mane and tail. He was ridiculously adorable, too, with a large head, smallish body, cute little hooves the same color as his coat, and huge green soulful eyes. He still had his freckles as well. He was wearing the scruffy remains of his track suit and looking decidedly confused.

“I don’t understand this,” she said in confusion, gesturing to the little green pony who was sitting on one of Recovery Girl’s hospital gurneys, twiddling his hooves. “How could-- how could this ‘One for All,’” she said, looking around carefully and lowering her voice, “how could it turn my son into THIS?”

“We have no idea,” Toshinori Yagi (All Might’s scrawny, lanky “mortal” form) said. He leaned forward in his chair, his arms resting on his bony knees. After the initial panic, All Might and Izuku had come to the conclusion that keeping any secrets from Izuku’s mother was pretty much a futile concept, and had decided to reveal everything to her-- All Might’s secret, One for All, the whole mess. All said, after the shock and disbelief (and a bit of horrified shrieking about his tackling the Zero Pointer on his own), she had handled the situation and all its strangeness fairly well.

After all this was the age of Quirks. The average person probably saw stranger things than this in the cafeteria lunch line.

“We think possibly… maybe… One for All interacted with a latent Quirk in some fashion?” He held his hands up and shrugged. “Triggered it in some way? All Quirks are mysteries, but One for All has mysteries about it all its own.”

“Of course!”

“What? What is it, my student?”

“We forgot about the nature of One for All! It’s not just an inheritable power matrix, it’s an
amalgamation that grows more powerful as it's passed down. But you can't have two independent matrixes in one individual— it'd be unstable. Toshinori may not have had a Quirk, but eighty percent of the population does, so statistically at least six of the previous inheritors had a Quirk of their own. One for All would have had to combine with any other Quirks present-- merge with them, making a more powerful whole!"

“Yes, of course! But what does that mean for Izuku?”

“That’s the thing... Alicornification is an amalgamation too. It’s a combination of all the tribes of Equestria. I’ll have to do the math, figure out the algorithm, but... I think One for All disassembled the spell, and put it back together... differently, as parts of itself.”

“In what way?”

“I don’t know for sure until I do the numbers-- but I have an idea. I can’t wait to see if it’s true.” There was a sound of clapping hooves and giggling.

“How is he, though?” Inko said anxiously. “Is he healthy?”

“Oh, quite,” Recovery Girl said, smiling. “Healthy as a horse, in fact.”

Izuku’s eyebrows tabled. “Really?” he said, deadpan. “You really had to go there?”

“There is one question I would ask you though, Midoriya-san.” Recovery Girl said. “Has your son ever gotten any tattoos?”

“Tattoos?” The exclamation came from everyone in the room. “Certainly not!” Inko said, while Izuku chipped in with “No way!”

“Well I did notice one thing while I was examining him,” Recovery Girl said. “Young man… er… young pony?… pull down your sweatpants just a bit please. Just over your hip.”

“What? B-but...” Recovery Girl just gave him a look. Blushing fiercely he used a forehoof to push the waistband of his pants down, exposing his hip. There on his hip in dark green was the kanji for
Izuku craned his head backward to look. “That wasn’t there before, I swear!” He checked his other hip, it was there as well.

“How… strangely apropos,” Toshinori said.

“Words appearing on someone? That’s a normal Quirk?” Inko asked.

“We have a student with a word bubble for a head, you tell me, Ma’am,” Toshinori said in amusement.

Izuku hiked his sweatpants back up. “I hope we can find some clothes that fit a pony,” he mumbled. “This is awkward.”

“Actually, the Support classes could re-tailor some clothes for you at cost,” Toshinori said. “They have to design costumes and gear for all sorts of mutation Quirks after all.”


“An ordinary one should be fine,” Recovery Girl said. “Maybe a few more leafy greens-- but everyone could use that, if you ask me.”

“Ah.” There was a moment’s pause. Inko looked at her son and started to giggle.

“What?” Izuku said. He looked at his mother askance.

“Did I ever tell you I wanted a pony as a little girl?” Inko giggled. Impulsively she leaned forward and cuddled her son.

“Mom!”

“I can’t help it. You really are adorable looking...”
“Ugh...” Izuku rolled his eyes, blushing.

Toshinori smothered a chuckle. “I am compelled to wonder if he still has One for All...”

Izuku frowned thoughtfully. “I do,” he said. “I’m sure of it. Ever since that punch I can feel it, sort of crackling away down inside me.” He held up a forehoof and looked at it. “But-- I’m sort of scared to call it up now. Who knows what it’ll do to me next?”

Toshinori frowned and plucked at his chin. “It is a problem. There is much my own predecessor never got to tell me about it. Much of One for All’s history is a mystery. But she did tell me that it... \textit{wants} to work with its bearer. Strives to. It just takes time to adjust to each new person who wields it. It’s learning to work with you, as much as you are learning to work with it.”

“So... trust it, try to understand what it wants?” Izuku said.

Toshinori nodded. “I had little problem, but it was always fairly straightforward with me.” He shook his head. “That does bring up another issue. Your admission.”

Izuku’s head snapped up. “My admission? B-but I didn’t...”

Toshinori held up a hand, smiling. “I think considering the circumstances, I can tell you in advance,” he said. “You did get in.” The Midoriya’s faces lit up and Inko hugged her son in delight. “While you didn’t make any villain points, there was a second, secret scoring system-- rescue points. You earned sixty of them when you rescued miss Uraraka from the Zero Pointer, which actually put you in second place. Congratulations.”

\textit{Somewhere in another corner of the cosmos, a gathering of ponies whooped and applauded.}

Inko nearly squeezed the stuffings out of her son as they celebrated. “Ah, however,” Toshinori said, “there is one thing. Due to circumstances, the administration is asking that you be subjected to a second practical test--”

“What!” Inko said, letting go of her son and standing up. “After all he went through, you’re going to put him through that AGAIN--”
“Please, let me explain!” Toshinori said, motioning for her to calm down. Inko sat down, her face thunderous. Izuku hardly looked any happier. “Most of us are of the opinion that young Midoriya has more than proved himself. But there are concerns. He has after all undergone a massive physical transformation. There are several on staff who insisted that he be re-evaluated to determine how much his abilities have changed.”

Inko fumed but relented, her shoulders heaving. “That’s… only fair,” she said in frustration. “I’m sorry, Izuku, but he’s right.” She looked at Toshinori. “But how can you in good conscience make him face that Zero Pointer again--!”

“It will be a simplified, scaled-down test,” All Might reassured her. “We’re not about to pit one little pony-- er, student-- against a training zone full of battle-bots!” Both the Midoriyas calmed a little bit at this. “If you’ll bring Izuku back next Saturday, we’ll conduct the practical and get it out of the way. Is that good?” Both nodded. “Good. We’ll see you then.”

“Please proceed to the red cross in the center of the room,” Aizawa’s voice droned over the loudspeakers. Cautiously, his head on a swivel, Izuku walked into the enormous aircraft hangar. The vast, brightly lit space was scattered with makeshift obstacles; concrete barricades, block walls, pillars… His hooves clicked loudly on the concrete floor. What did they use this building for normally, he wondered? Storing the Zero Pointers between tests, maybe?

When he arrived at the red cross, Eraserhead spoke again. “This evaluation is a scaled-down version of the Application Practical,” he said. “You will be pitted against three one pointers, two two-pointers, and one three-pointer. You will have fifteen minutes. If you defeat them all in that time you will pass. If you do not… then you fail.”

Izuku looked up at the ceiling. “What?? I have to beat ALL of them?? And I was told I already passed-- that this was a re-evaluation! That’s not fair!”

“Life isn’t fair,” Eraserhead droned. Izuku seethed. He swore he could hear a note of smugness in the Underground Hero’s tired voice. “By the way, the test has started.” Izuku heard the ominous whine of servo motors and bleeping sensors closing in. “Duck.”

Izuku yelped and hit the dirt. He just barely dodged the sweeping leg of a two-pointer, jumped over another and hit the floor galloping as fast as he could go, robots coming from every direction.
Up in the observation room, All Might was glaring at an impassive Eraserhead. “You made a liar out of me, Aizawa,” he growled. “Why did you push Nedzu-sama into changing this to pass-or-fail?”

“This is an academy for training superheroes, not a school for the handicapped,” Aizawa said without taking his eyes off the viewing window. “He’s basically lost his hands, his bipedal locomotion, his-- well, everything. If he can’t keep up with fully abled students he doesn’t belong here.”

“Well you’re certainly not doing your teacher-student relationship any favors, faithful listener,” Present Mic (who was busy running the hangar’s computers) said. “Little rocker’s gonna have a chip on his shoulder about you the size of a double-platinum record!”

“You will note how I’m shaking in my boots,” Aizawa said in a bored monotone.

“And I’m sure this has nothing to do with your phobia of horses,” All Might snorted, disgruntled.

“Shut up.”

Down on the floor Izuku evaded the robots for a moment and took cover behind a waist-high wall (for him, higher than his head). He called up One for All, began pouring it into his hooves--

_no, that’s not right_. He stopped. It was like his body was _shouting_ that this was the wrong approach. His mind clicked over like a swiss watch on fast forward. Why? He flexed his muscles in his legs and shoulders… muscles. Joints, muscles, tendons… THAT was his mistake! When he’d thrown that Zero-pointer killing punch, he’d put One for All into his arm-- but you didn’t just punch with your arm, you punched with your shoulder, your back, your waist, your leg-- the whole body, in fact.

No wonder his legs had broken and his arm had shattered. It was a miracle he hadn’t ripped them completely off! The power needed to be spread out _through his whole body_, so it could all work together.

He began calling up One for All throughout his form, letting it fill him evenly… feet-- ah, hooves-- legs, shoulders, hips, back, chest abdomen, neck, even his head… _no not all of it_! Again he listened to his body, keeping it to a fraction, holding it back like turning down a spigot to a trickle-- just enough, just to the verge but no more--
Bolts of green lightning writing over and under his skin, he leaped over the wall and attacked.

“Your prodigy better do something soon,” Aizawa said idly. Time’s half up...” He stopped in mid sentence, his mouth hanging open, as a high-pitched whinny and a horrendous smash resounded from below. A one-pointer folded double around two tiny hoofprints flew past the observation window.

“Oh, our contestant is up and at ‘em now, listeners!” Present Mic crowed. “Yeeah! There went a one-pointer!” There was another smash. “And another!” Lasers crackled and mini missiles howled. “The bots are returning fire, he’s taking cover-- nooo, he’s kicking the concrete barricade through the air at-- ouch, that’ll leave a mark-- crushed a two pointer like”

“Holy, he’s on the three-pointer’s back, he’s twisting off--” there was a squeal and a crunch and a dismembered robot’s head came up and bounced off the observation window. “And now he-- OHHH this is brutal! It’s robot gotterdammerung, people! And now he’s using what’s left of one two pointer to beat the other--” there was an explosion.

“The last one pointer is, yes, it appears to be fleeing for it’s life...” All three onlookers heard a squealing tire and a robotic voice going “nope nope nope nope--” followed by furious galloping hooves and a painful smash. Present Mic threw his hands in the air and made a victory sign. “And the final score is: Tiny little green pony TEN, U.A. robots NOTHING, YEEAAAAAAAH!” He spun in his office chair.

All Might snorted. Aizawa glared at the DJ Hero sourly. He hit the klaxon, then the button on the intercom. “The test is over,” he said. “Are you uninjured, Midoriya?”

Down on the floor, Izuku was standing atop the badly-stomped remains of a One Pointer, breathing heavily. He glared up at the window. “SO,” he said a little sarcastically, his teeth bared. “How’d I do, teach?”

Toshinori leaned over to Aizawa. “Good luck on that ‘hearts and minds’ thing,” he said, his cheerful smile full of schadenfreude “By the way, did I ever tell you that when I was out in the American Midwest, I saw a horse kick a man that made him mad so hard it ruptured him?” He made a motion with his hands like two globes bursting. “Like two plums under a meat mallet...”

“I hate you,” Aizawa muttered.
The first day of U.A. arrived. Izuku was ready. He straightened his tie as best he could with his hoof, set his shoulders and pushed open the door to class 1-A.

“Sir, get your feet down off that desk! It is disrespectful to this institution—”

“Bite me, trust fund boy!”

Inwardly Izuku groaned. He recognized both voices. Kacchan AND that Tenya kid? In the same class? Izuku’s luck was truly terrible. Of course so was everyone else’s; those two would get along like gasoline and a burning book of matches… “hello, excuse me, is this heroing course 1-A?” he said.

Everyone turned to look. Instantly several female voices squealed in glee.

“Oh my gosh he’s so CUTE!”

“Eeee!”

“How aDORable!”

Alarmed, Izuku backed up a step. In a heartbeat he was surrounded by classmates, most staring over each other’s shoulders in curiosity or, in the case of the females, cooing and squealing about how “cute” he was. “Oh I’m glad you made it, Izuku-chan!” Uraraka was saying, hopping up and down on her toes and smiling. Izuku blushed like a rose and grinned sheepishly. Or perhaps ponishly.

“Awww, I see a budding romance--”

“Hush, Cadence, we’ll miss something.”

To his surprise, Tenya was bowing to him. “Tenya Iida,” he introduced himself. “And allow me to issue an apology for my temerity at the examinations. You saw that the test was more than we all thought; you are clearly the superior student.”
“I--” Izuku stammered. Noone had ever apologized to him or congratulated him on being a superior student before!

“This is a new student??” Someone said in disbelief.

“Indeed,” Tenya said again. “He in fact had the highest score in the practical exams.”

“They had me do a re-evaluation.” Izuku said, chuckling nervously. “They added my score from that to the practical--”

“Still, Izuku-chan, you should be proud of that,” Uraraka insisted.

“What??” a voice from the back burst out. People suddenly started getting pushed aside as Kacchan forced his way forward. “That NOBODY Deku scored higher than ME? I don’t believe it for a--” he got through the crowd and glared down at Izuku… and froze, his jaw hanging open.

“Uhhh, hi Kacchan,” Izuku said apprehensively.

Kacchan stared.

“Kacchan?”

Kacchan stared some more.

The tableau seemed frozen. “Kacchan, you’re making me nervous--” Izuku said, backing up a step--

“What IS THIS??” The scream made everyone in the class jump backward. “What--” Izuku began.

“What THE HORSEY HELL IS THIS??” Kacchan pushed his way through the crowd and stood staring at a wall.
A bedraggled looking man with a sleeping bag under his arm came in through the door. He seemed to make a point of giving the green pony in the middle of the room a wide berth. “What is all this irrational noise—”

“I CAN’T DEAL WITH THIS!” Kacchan screamed, staggering out into the hall.

Aizawa looked around the room with bleary eyes and a cocked eyebrow. “….Anyone care to explain?” he asked. “…Or, at least try?”

Izuku stuck his head out the door and looked for Kacchan. The blonde boy was standing down the hall, banging his forehead gently against the wall.

“WHAT IS MY LIFE???” Kacchan screamed.

Izuku slowly, carefully pulled the door shut. “Umm, Kacchan will be joining us later I think,” he said weakly. There was a final “aaaaagh!” from outside before the door clicked shut, sealing the room in silence.

There was a long silence as the class stared at the teacher, and the teacher stared at the class. “Well, take your seats,” Aizawa said.

There was a general scramble as everyone rushed to their desks.
It was the second day of classes when Izuku blew all of his classmates’ minds.

It took a couple of days before the staff managed to contact all the students and their parents and convince them all to come back. Still, it was with a serious case of Deja Vu that Izuku and Riley stood before the doors of their new classroom. “Well, here we go again,” Riley muttered as Izuku pushed open the doors.

The new classroom was a small auditorium, made to sit just under 200 students. The rest of the class, all 40 of them, were gathered down at the center and front, near the podium. “How many of these rooms do you suppose they have?” Riley said, looking around.

“They were planning on someday becoming a full blown university, I read somewhere,” Izuku said. “Look, there he is-- Vlad King, the Blood Hero!” he stage whispered, pointing. “He’s our new teacher. Awesome!” He was right of course. A tall, heavily built white-haired man dressed in a red bodysuit was standing at the front of the class.

Riley’s brow furrowed and he gave Izuku a look. “You knew he was going to be here,” he said. “They told us when they called us back!”

“Yeah, but still…”

Vlad King saw them enter and made a beckoning motion. “You’re just in time,” he said. “Come down and find a seat!” Izuku grabbed Riley by the sleeve and all but dragged him down the steps. They found desks next to each other, front and center on the front row just as the bell rang. Izuku already had one of his extra-large notebooks out and was scribbling away. For the thousandth time Riley noticed, shook his head and reminded himself to get his bloodbrother a digital tablet for his birthday.

Vlad King cleared his throat. “Welcome back, all of you,” he said. He cast an eye over his double-sized herd of students. “To what is, due to circumstances involving staff membership, the single largest Pro Hero class in U.A. history,” he went on drolly. Some of the students chuckled nervously; word of Aizawa-sensei’s little fall from grace had gotten around fairly quickly. “My name is Sekijiro Kan, or Vlad King when I’m Pro-Heroing. MY goal is to teach you how to use your talents, your knowledge and your Quirks to the best of your ability, and to impart the skills to you to become not the best Heroes in U.A. or even the best Heroes in Japan, but the best in the world.”

He had been pacing back and forth as he talked and leaned on the podium. “Ambitious of me, I know, but there’s a reason our school motto is ‘Plus Ultra.’ That is my ambition, and I hope it is yours too. Now,” he said, straightening up, “Does anyone have any questions?”

Izuku’s hand shot up. “Sir, your Quirk involves telekinetically controlling your own blood,” he said. “Are you able to control other people’s blood as well? All the info on your site is kind of vague on that.” Izuku hadn’t even looked up from whatever he was writing in his notebook as he spoke.

Vlad King blinked and stared. Riley smirked and cuffed Izuku on the back of the head; the greenette took no notice. “He meant about the class, Izuku,” he said. “Sorry, Sensei, he gets like this.”

“Ah.” The teacher paused. “For the record, yes. Though I prefer not to. It can get… messy.” It took the students a moment to get the gist but then several grimaced. One or two cringed.

Izuku continued, artless as ever. “You mean you can forcibly pull the blood--”
“From someone else’s body, yes.” Vlad nodded. “If I get close enough.”

“How close?”

“Too close.”

“Does blood type matter?” Izuku said, still scribbling.

Vlad’s eyebrows rose. “I never checked.”

“I’m gonna guess that you can control your own blood type easier. There’s probably a correlation with donor compatibility...” he stopped and chewed his pencil. “What’s your blood type, Sensei?”

“B. What’s your record for consecutive questions?”

“Forty two.”

“That’s impressive.”

“I’m a kid, it’s my job.” The pencil never stopped moving. Riley looked over his shoulder: the word ‘Coagulants?’ was prominent and underlined twice. He shuddered. His best friend could have a ruthless turn of mind when analyzing Quirks.

The other students had been following the discussion, their heads turning back and forth like they were watching a tennis match. Vlad King cleared his throat again, getting all their attention. “Which brings us to this next part,” he said loudly and clearly. “We have an exceptionally large class. Being familiar with your classmates, your TEAM-mates, is going to be important throughout the upcoming year and beyond. We’re going to have a little personal introduction time. None of that!” he said as a couple of students groaned. “I want each of you in turn to stand up, introduce yourselves, give a brief description of your Quirk and be ready to answer a few questions. A FEW.” He gave Izuku a look. Izuku gave him a weak grin. “Let’s begin with the former class 1-A.” He pulled out an attendance sheet.

“Oui monsieur.” A blonde prettyboy stood up. “I am Yuga Aoyoma,” he said, giving everyone a courtly bow. “I am very pleased to meet you. My Quirk is called ‘Navel Laser...’”

Izuku was writing again. “Not a laser,” he muttered... more than loud enough to be heard.

“Pardonnez mois?” Yuga blinked.

Izuku looked up and blinked back. “Oh, sorry,” he said. “Um, it’s just your energy beam doesn’t act like a laser. A laser is just light. But yours has kinetic force. You even used it for rocket propulsion in the apprehension test! It might be a kinetic energy beam or even a particle beam, but a kinetic energy beam is most likely...” he tapped his chin. “Are there side effects to it?”

“Y-yes,” Aoyoma said, his smile slipping a bit. “It is hard to control. Which is why I have to wear the belt at all times.” he showed them the focusing belt around his middle; it had a large crystal lens over his navel. “And if I use it too much, it causes me great stomach pain.”

Izuku nodded thoughtfully. “Kinetic energy. When you expel it, it’s already expanding on the way out, pushing on the walls of your stomach before it reaches the lens. The way rocket fuel is pushing outward in every direction as it burns, before it exits the nozzle. The lens makes it more directional,
but...not as directional as it COULD be. If you could find some way to make the energy more directional while it’s still inside your body, it would probably relieve the pressure problem.” He wrinkled his nose. “Maybe some sort of fiber optic implants?”

Aoyoma looked surprised, then thoughtful. “Oui. Perhaps ma pere’ can speak to the doctor who made the belt… merci, Midoriya-san.”

Vlad King stared for a moment before remembering himself. “Ashido Mina!” he said.

A pink skinned, pink haired girl in the back row stood up and waved. “Hiii. I’m Ashido, call me Mina, my quirk is Acid. I can secrete gallons of acid from my hands and feet. I can even control its acidity and viscosity! Though if I do it too long my skin starts losing its acid resistance.”

Once again, Izuku’s hand went up. “Do you carry alkalis with you?”

Mina looked puzzled. “What?” She tugged at one of the curly horns on her head.

“You know, to neutralize the acid,” Izuku said. “Baking soda. Alka seltzer. That sort of thing. Mix it with water and you could spray it on your skin to relieve the acidity.” He grinned suddenly. “Or you could mix them with your acid, straight, for some REALLY interesting reactions...”

Riley hooted. “Ohohohoho!” He poked Izuku in the shoulder. “Remember fifth grade? A couple of baggies, some vinegar and dish soap and--”

“Baking soda toilet bomb,” they both said together.

Riley hooted again and slapped his own forehead. “It looked like Cthulhu was about to come up out of the toilets!” he cackled. He sighed happily. “What a year...” Izuku just grinned and shook his head.

Several of the students snickered or laughed. Ashido giggled but she looked intrigued. What was worrisome was that Sekijiro couldn’t tell if she was intrigued about their suggestion, or the toilet bomb recipe… He turned to Riley. “Is he going to do this with everyone?” he asked warily.

Riley smiled and rolled his eyes. He got to his feet and fished around in Izuku’s backpack. “Hey, you brought MY notebook,” he said. He pulled out a double-thick college bound notebook.

“I figured we might actually learn something new about your Quirk today,” Izuku shrugged.

Riley walked up to Vlad King and handed him the book. Vlad King took it and began flipping through it casually. His eyebrows slowly rose and he began reading in earnest. “This is...”

“Izuku’s assessments of my Quirk, yes.” Riley was grinning like a cat who’d eaten a flock of canaries. “Ever since it came in, he’s been evaluating it… its strengths, limitations, weaknesses… everything. Like I keep telling everyone, he’s an absolute superbrain, especially about Quirks.”

Vlad closed the notebook and handed it back. “Impressive.” Riley loped back to his seat. Vlad tapped his chin for a moment. “All right, let’s change things up a little,” he said. He tapped a button on his podium. “What we’re going to do is we’re each going to introduce ourselves and our Quirks, and the rest of the class is going to try to come up with ideas and suggestions for the Quirk user. Those who contribute will receive class credit...”

Some students groaned and drooped dramatically… but quite a few looked interested or even excited. That was what education was all about, Sekijiro thought to himself. Kindling that spark of inspiration.
“Asui Tsuyu!”

“You can secrete a stinging toxin?”

“Kero.” Tsu nodded.

“What kind? I know it’s really weak, but-- Is it a soporific? A paralytic? A neurotoxin? Depending on what it is, you could probably save it up, concentrate it, and store it in something you could use to spray or just throw it as a weapon...”

“Uraraka-chan, there are two things that can make people nauseous; something putting pressure on their stomach, and something affecting their inner ear. Recovery Girl could probably do some tests, but since zero gravity causes astronauts problems sometime due to the fluid in their inner ear sloshing around, it might be your power is sort of “leaking” into your inner ear. I bet the support crew could find some way to keep your Zero Field out of your ears so you don’t get sick.”

“Oh I hope you’re right, that would be wonderful!” Ochako clapped her hands together and looked hopeful. “Do you have any other ideas?”

“Oh. Um, for your costume I’d add CO2 jets. You could use them for propulsion when you’re weightless, and also for extinguishing fires.”

“Ooh! Would that really work?”

Riley grinned. “We strapped a fire extinguisher to the back of a teacher’s office chair once and drove it up and down the school halls...”

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“So, you can’t direct your electricity, Kaminari-san?”

The blonde with the lightning stripe in his hair shrugged, feigning indifference.

“I bet the Support kids could come up with something for that. Taser lines--”

“Small railguns on the wrists--”

“Ion projectors--”

“Electromagnets!”

“At the very least,” Yaoyorozu said. “They could give you all sorts of battery powered Support
equipment and you’d never need a power supply.”

“Maybe even a whole suit of powered armor!” Izuku snapped his fingers. “One of the big complaints is that power armor needs such bulky power supplies. That’s why Power Loader’s armor is so large and cumbersome. But Kaminari IS the power supply. And if his support gear is using up his electricity, it isn’t going to short out his brain as often—”

“Whoa, whoa whoa!” Kaminari said gleefully. “Let me write this down. I got me a whole new Christmas wish list!”

“I got an idea. Koji, do you have any favorite animals?”

The huge boy with the craggy face smiled and shrugged.

“Where are you going with this, Izuku?”

“I’m just thinking he ought to keep a couple of small animals with him wherever he goes,” Izuku told their teacher. “Something with nimble little paws... Register them as support animals... even a pet squirrel or a couple of lizards or a snake could get him out of a tight pinch...”

“You mean you can’t turn off your invisibility. And you can’t make anything else invisible... hmm.” Izuku tapped his chin as Hagakure waited. “Well, your quirk turns your hair invisible-- but human hair is too thick and coarse to weave into good cloth. But maybe if they doped regular cloth with your DNA... they could at least make you a leotard.” he cringed. “And something for your poor feet. Holey Moley, you were running around that Practical Exam battlefield in your bare feet weren’t you? All that broken glass and metal--”

“They should make it with lots of pockets,” Mina said suddenly.

“Pockets?”

“Let me show you.” The pinkette got up. “Hold out your hand, Hagakure... here.” She dropped the eraser in the invisible girl’s hand. Everyone saw it hovering there in midair. “Okay, now cover it with your other hand.” The eraser disappeared. Mina made a ‘ta da’ gesture.

“See? If her Quirk field is just under or over something it doesn’t affect it. That’s why her chair doesn’t disappear under her butt.” There were snickers. “But if her body-- or her Quirk field, actually-- is enveloping it, it turns it invisible. That’s why we don’t see her lunch while she chews it.”

“So if she has an invisible suit with a lot of pockets--” Izuku said, writing frantically.

“Then I can carry a ton of support gear and still remain completely invisible!” Hagakure said. “Brilliant!”
Mina brushed her nails on her vest and blew on them. “I have my moments,” she said smugly.

“Okay, Sato, you get a short term burst of strength from eating sugar. Does it matter what kind? I mean we know table sugar works, but fructose digests slower, so it might last longer…”

Tokoyami stood there, his Dark Shadow hovering over his shoulder. “Yes. Dark Shadow grows weaker in the light, and stronger in the dark… but he also becomes more uncontrollable, more dangerous and feral.”

“Then carry a flashlight, dude,” Kirishima said. “What’s the big deal?”

The raven-headed boy stared… then actually facepalmed, muttering to himself. Dark Shadow actually started laughing at him.

“Flashlights, flares, flash-bang grenades,” Todoroki started counting off on his fingers. “There are flashlights with thousands of candlelight power you can see from miles away. Also I would carry smokebombs as well as have something to shoot out lightbulbs…”

“Wait, you said you convert body fat into whatever you make?” Izuku said, his head coming up and his pencil stopping.

Yaoyoruzu Momo, a beautiful young woman with a rather sophisticated air, nodded. “Yes. I have to pull the object off the surface of my skin, and I have to know it’s structure intimately, but that’s how it works.”

Izuku shook his head. “No it doesn’t!”

“Excuse me?” Momo said, a touch frostily. “It’s my Quirk—”

“I know, but, I mean, it couldn’t work that way,” Izuku protested. “Remember that moped you created at the Apprehension test? And the cannon? Those two items alone had to be at least a hundred kilos or more! If you’d lost a hundred kilos of body mass, even just fat, you’d be DEAD.”

Momo started to protest, but stopped. “Of course, conservation of mass. But—”
“You’re not making things from your body fat,” Izuku said. “You’re METABOLIZING body fat to do... whatever it is you’re doing. But the actual stuff the things are made of is coming from somewhere else.”

Momo was a highly intelligent girl. She sank down into her seat, hand to her mouth and her eyes wide as the implications of what Izuku had said whirled through her head.

Riley leaned in her direction. “Heck of a wild ride, innit?” he said. “Going along on Izuku’s little mind-trips.”

“...Anything else?” She said. She sounded apprehensive. It wasn’t often one was reminded just how hard one was violating the laws of physics.

“Uh, well...” Izuku scratched the back of his head and blushed. “Um... it’s about your, uh, costume needs. I know you need to have a lot of skin exposed to fabricate things, but--”

Mineta Minoru suddenly sat up straight. “No, don’t do it, Midoriya-san!” He said, waving his hands.

“Well, just five words--”

“Don’t! I’ve seen her costume sketches, for the love of all that is awesome and sexy in the world, don’t say anything!!” Mineta begged, his hands folded in supplication.

“--Velco flaps and overlapping layers.” Mineta groaned and slumped, his head thumping on his desktop. “You don’t have to strip down to barely better than a bikini,” Izuku went on. “just put in some flaps or overlapping parts that you can reach under to, er, pull stuff out.”

“Plus it makes you look like you had the stuff hidden inside your costume,” Riley chipped in. He chuckled. “They’ll go nuts wondering how you hid a ten foot pole and a motorbike as concealed carry.”

“Oh, and the, uh, butt bookshelf...” Izuku grimaced. “Not really gonna work. You really won’t have enough time to stop and flip through a giant volume of industrial chemistry to find a formula or blueprint you need. The Support Class could make you a visor with a Heads Up Display, put a smartphone in it so you can upload blueprints and chemistry stuff-- even 3d stuff!-- right to your visor.”

Momo nodded and wrote a note to herself. Then she looked up. “Wait, how do you know what my costume looked like--??”

Riley coughed. “I can neither confirm nor deny,” he said in a government agent monotone, “that either of us obtained temporary access to the costume requests filed by another student or students while we were in the Support Studies classroom submitting our own-- ow!”

“Wait.” Riley squinted at Mineta’s head. “How do you keep from sticking to the pillow at night?” He wasn’t the only one who looked a little puzzled.

Mineta shrugged. “They don’t get sticky until I remove them.”
“Ahh.”

“So they don’t stick to YOU, either...”

“Well, more than that. I actually repel them a little.”

“Kinda like everyone else,” someone said. The runty hero-in-training looked a little hurt at the laughter.

“So that’s how you get so much “bounce” out of them when you jump on them,” Izuku nodded, making a note. “Can you repel them harder?”

“Dunno. Never tried. I was too busy trying to pull them loose of things when they stuck...” Mineta said. “Hmm.” He plucked an orb off his head and regarded it for a minute, cradling it in his hand. He suddenly closed his eyes and grimaced. “HnnnnnNNNNGGGGGG--”

PTOW!

With a pop like a gigantic cork gun, the purple ball shot out of his hand and straight up to the ceiling. It hit with a resounding THWACK, making the hanging lights swing back and forth. Everyone in the room sat there for a moment, staring up at the ball stuck to the ceiling over thirty feet overhead. Slowly Mineta began to grin. “Something NEW has been added,” he said, drumming his fingertips together.

“Yeah. A personality transplant,” Izuku said drolly.

“I hear there’s a baboon at the zoo willing to donate,” Riley quipped.

It didn’t come to blows, but it was close.

Everyone pondered Sen Kaibara. His Quirk was fairly straightforward; he could rotate any part of
his body like a drill. Hands, arms, torso, head...

“Rotary tools?” Riley said.

“Rotary tools,” Izuku nodded.


“But just give him a bo staff,” Ojiro said, his tail waving slowly as he thought out loud. “He would be a whirlwind of destruction with that...”

“The bo staff would be simpler,” Izuku agreed grudgingly.

“You can merge with anything black?” Izuku said eagerly.

Shihai grinned-- a disturbing thing to see, white teeth in an all-black face.

“Smoke bombs again,” someone said.

“Cans of black spray paint!” Someone else contributed. “Or black printer toner. Or carbon black...”

“Carry stuff like that and you can leave a trail of black wherever you go, that you can escape into at a moment’s notice.”

“There’s this stuff called Vanta black,” Riley said. “It’s supposed to be the blackest stuff in existence, literally...”

Noone seemed to have anything to suggest for Kendo Itsuka’s Giant Hand power. “Manicures,” Izuku said suddenly. “And hand lotion. Really pamper your hands whenever you can.”

Kendo put a hand on her hip. “Why?”

“Well it’s more of a P.R. thing,” Izuku explained. “When your hands enlarge, every little cut and callus and pimple and hair stands out ginormous. That’s why movie stars use so much makeup and get photoshopped to boot--- because the tiniest little defect stands out huge when your face is on a movie screen ten feet tall. I know it’s shallow, but... keeping your hands pretty will help with public perception of you.”

“Besides,” Ashido said, lying back in her seat. “It’s a great excuse to have someone cosset and pamper you and make you feel fabulous, daaahlink.” The other girls giggled.
Kendo wrinkled her nose. “I’ll think about it,” she said reluctantly.

Riley took one look at Manga Fukidashi and started grinning evilly.

“NO.” Izuku said immediately.

“But brah--”

“No. You two are to keep your distance!” Izuku said.

“Is there some sort of problem with these two students getting better acquainted?” Vlad King said, arms crossed.

“Sensei, does the term ‘binary explosive’ mean anything to you?” Izuku said, eyeing his increasingly manic bloodbrother nervously.

Vlad King pondered that for a moment. He pondered a student with a personality like a Warner Brothers cartoon who could create a cartoon replica of anything from his mind, collaborating with a student who could make cartoon sound effects into reality. “Right. Manga-san, you sit over there--yes, over there, FAR AWAY from Coyote. You two are not to go anywhere without a third person, preferably a teacher or other staff member, present--”

Monoma Neito regarded the class coolly. “How interesting,” he said. “The drama queens of class 1-A have to come crawling back-- and to us! The lowly class of 1-B! How embarrassing for them!

“And now they’re going to give all of US advice on what we need…Well, what do the noble class members think that I desperately need to--?”

“THERAPY,” said both halves of the classroom in unison.

Vlad King was sitting in his office, humming to himself as he finished filing paperwork from the day. There was a knock at the door and Principal Nedzu walked in. “Good afternoon, Sekijiro-san,” the dog-bear-mouse Principal said. “I take it the first day of class 1-AB went well?”
“Better than expected,” the Blood Hero said. “The two groups of students are already integrating quite well. And we made some surprising progress with all of them on insight into their Quirks. Though I fear there may be some revisions to the students’ costume and support gear requests...” he chuckled.

“Interesting.” Nedzu’s nose wiggled. “What do you credit this smooth transition to?”

Sekijiro set down the files he was shuffling. “Well I would like to attribute it all to my magnificent skills as an educator,” he joked. “But truthfully, much of it is attributable to two students in particular: Midoriya Izuku and Coyote Riley.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t kid me, boss,” Vlad King chuckled. “I know you know who they are. I’ve caught you laughing your hairless tail off at the video of Coyote-san’s admission practical.”

“I think it’s the fact that he sang the Mario Brothers theme song over the loudspeakers the entire time.” Nedzu said.

“I think you just relate to his predilection for hijacking large, dangerous mobile machinery,” Vlad King quipped.

Nedzu sighed nostalgically. “Yes, I never have forgotten the looks on the Guard’s faces at that illegal genetics laboratory when they first saw me hotwire a bulldozer,” he said. “Heh. EeeeeeheeheeHEEEHEEEEEE... ahem. You were saying about the boys?”

“Like I said, they were the grease in the wheels for the whole process. Young Riley’s good cheer and sense of humor smoothed over many rough spots. And Izuku’s open candor and insights into Quirks helped start an open discussion that enlightened many.” He chuckled. “Despite the upheaval, the students’ morale has actually improved due to those two. Their social skills are far from perfect, but what they have will get them far... at least on the public relations side of things.”

Nedzu nodded. “And I believe there was something else you wished to discuss?”

“Yes, an idea that several of the students asked about.” He set the papers down. “They wanted to see about taking Support Class courses.”

“Support Classes?” Nedzu cocked his head.

“Not the entire course, that would be too heavy a load,” Vlad said. “But at least some of the core classes. They complained of being too reliant, sight unseen, on the Support students for everything and the inevitable shortcomings and failures of communication over their costume and gear... they also think it would lighten the load on Support if they had a better grasp of how to take care of their own equipment.”

“A tenable thought, reasonably put,” Nedzu agreed. “I will speak to Power Loader about it, and look into it.” He toddled from the room. “This new class is certainly bringing about some interesting changes,” he said over his shoulder as the door closed.

“They certainly are,” Vlad King murmured. He was becoming more and more interested in seeing what these new first years would show him once they got out on an actual testing zone...
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