Summary

It all starts with a suggestion.

(In which Midoriya proposes an unorthodox way to keep in touch with Todoroki after graduation, and feelings get a little more complicated as the years pass.)
I should be writing my Yuri on Ice fanfiction right now, but instead I'm re-watching the sports festival arc of BNHA because season three has me SHOOK. The hype is so real.

Anyway, if you've seen or read "One Day", then you've got the general idea of this story; nobody will die at the end of this, however, so don't panic. (Which, when I think about it, is actually pretty weird because I'm known for my angst more than my fluff. I think this constitutes "personal growth" or something like that. My fans may be disappointed.) I'm expecting this to be about three or four parts, 20k words total. Nothing fancy. I just want my boys to be happy.

Rating is M because Endeavor's parenting is a mature topic and they might get a little handsy by the end of this story. Who knows? I sure don't. Buckle up, bitches.

EDIT: This story is now 60k and climbing. Wow. I hate myself.

Anyway, I'm coming back to this beginning note to warn you all that this story has heavy angst past chapter seven and eight. If that's not your cup of tea, then turn around right now. This a realistic depiction of adult relationships in a changing world, and I fuck with Tododeku a bit for important reasons that will be revealed later. There WILL be a happy ending that makes all their pain worth it, and it will be amazing. If you can trust me on that and stomach my emotional writing style, then enjoy. But if you're looking for fluff, stop at the end of chapter seven, jump straight to chapter 31, or wait until this monster is completed. I will continue to warn you about this throughout the rest of the story.

Thank you!

EDIT 2: 200k words. HAHAH YOU THOUGHT BITCHES.
A Tremendous Thing

Chapter Summary

2017 — the year everything begins

Shouto: 18 years old

Izuku: 18 years old

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It all starts with a suggestion.

“Hey, we should make this a thing,” Midoriya says one day, totally out of the blue. He’s sprawled out on a recliner in his mom’s living room, fingers idly picking at a frayed seam in the armrest as he half-watches the movie Shouto picked out for them. It’s an action flick and not a particularly good one, if he’s being honest, but none of the movies they watch are ever very good. That’s sort of the point.

Shouto, not one to be distracted so easily, keeps his eyes on the screen as the heroine in impractical spandex swoops down to save the school bus full of children before it goes off a cliff. “We watch movies all the time, Midoriya. It’s already a thing.”

“No, not—” But Midoriya catches himself and frowns thoughtfully. “Well, I guess it could include movies. Whatever. I was really talking about this, he says, gesturing between them vaguely. His eyes are bright in the dimness of the room. “Y’know, seeing each other. Hanging out. Doing stuff that friends do.”

Shouto blinks slowly, not fully understanding. “We already hang out a lot,” he says.

Midoriya huffs. “Well, yeah, obviously, but what about after graduation?”

The thought catches Shouto, and he considers it. After has always been a scary concept for him but being eighteen and this close to graduation somehow makes it ten times more frightening than it’s ever been before. He doesn’t like to talk about it with anyone, except maybe his mom and Midoriya because they don’t judge. They never have.

Still, it’s… touchy, as most things with Shouto are.

“You haven’t picked an agency yet,” Shouto reasons flatly. He remembers the names of a few of the agencies that had requested Midoriya—most of them are in America, but there are a few high-end agencies from Western European on his list as well. “We probably won’t be within a hundred miles of each other.”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Midoriya singsongs. He flips around in the plush recliner until he’s hanging upside down, legs thrown over the back of the chair; his hair skims the carpet in loose, tangled curls. He shrugs, and the motion looks strange upside down. “Doesn’t matter where I go, man. I’ll still find you. Pick a day, we’ll make it happen.”
“What, any day?”

“Yeah. We could make it, like, a yearly thing.” He splays his fingers out in front of himself, spreading his hands apart in a grand sweep. “A Deku-Shouto tradition. C’mon, it’ll be great.”

Shouto bites into his cheek. He’s never had a tradition before, not even with his family, so he’s not sure how to proceed from here. Tuesday lunches with Midoriya, Uraraka, and Iida don’t count because they have to cancel sometimes thanks to their internships. He supposes his Saturday lunches with his mom could qualify, but he’s still not altogether sure.

Shouto pops a few kernels of popcorn into his mouth and chews thoughtfully as he mulls it over.

“December twenty-seventh,” he says suddenly. The date rolls easily off his tongue, and he doesn’t think twice about it.

Unsurprisingly, Midoriya doesn’t question the date. He sticks out a thumbs-up that’s just as upside down as his smile and replies, “Hey, I’m down for a yearly gift exchange. Pencil me in, Todoroki-kun. We’re making this a thing.”

December 27, 2017

Shouto hates little else in this world more than he hates paperwork, and he is not afraid to admit that. U.A. had prepared him well enough for the inevitable avalanche of forms he would have to fill out once he joined an agency after graduation, but this? This is pure, unadulterated torture to the highest degree. He sees tiny checked boxes and red-stained stamps marked CLASSIFIED painted on the backs of his eyelids every time he blinks, each shivering afterimage inescapable and utterly fucking aggravating to the nth degree. At the desk directly across from his own, Yaoyorozu doesn’t seem to be faring much better.

“I am this close to pulling a spoon out of my elbow and gouging my eyes out,” she mutters, glaring at her paperwork as if the heat of her gaze could ignite the pages. She holds up her thumb and forefinger barely a centimeter apart. “This close, Todoroki.”

Shouto glances up through the hair hanging in front of his eyes and sends her a doubtful look. “You say that every week.”

Her expression sours even further, if that’s possible. “Well, I really mean it this time,” she mutters, shifting in her uncomfortable office chair. “I think.”

Shouto whites out a box he accidentally checked in the Quirk Description section of the form, being careful not to go outside its crisp printed lines. “Well if you’re really serious about it, do me a favor and gouge my eyes out first,” he tells her, not looking up. “Saves me the trouble of doing it myself when I get home.”

Momo’s eyebrows fly up in surprise. She crosses her arms over her chest and leans back in her chair, looking for all intents and purposes like she’s about to conduct an interrogation with a villain. “Was that a joke?”

Not in the slightest. He’d do unspeakable things for a spot of blindness right about now, and maybe a stiff drink to chase it down—not that he’ll ever, ever tell her that. “Yes,” he lies easily, fanning
the white-out until it dries. “I’m surprised you noticed.”

She hums, regarding him with curious eyes as she studies his face. “You must be in a good mood this evening, then. What’s the occasion?”

“You’re the one always telling me to smile more. Why does there have to be an occasion?” Turning the page over, he begins the processing paperwork for their daily quota of villains—it was a slow day, so he only has four to do, but that’s still four too many.

“Well, this is you we’re talking about. There has to be some kind of reason.” Momo hums in thought as she pulls a half-formed pen out of the palm of her hand before pressing it back into her flesh, plastic gradually re-melding seamlessly with the lipids of her body. “Did you get nice things for Christmas?”

“No.” He didn’t get much of anything for Christmas, save a new pair of mittens from his mother and an angry phone call from his father about responsibility and disappointment, both of which had surprised absolutely no one. The mittens were nice though. Machine washable and everything.

Momo’s eyes light up with hope as another idea comes to her. “Did you finally go on a date with that guy from reception like I told you to?”

“No,” Shouto sighs. “Nor do I plan to.”

“Of course you don’t,” she mutters bitterly. She levels him with a look. “Care to explain why? Or are you going to make me guess this time around?”

He shrugs. “I don’t date coworkers.” Or anyone, for that matter, but again, he’ll be the last one to ever tell her that. He frowns down at the incident report section the form, tapping the tip of his pen against the margin as he struggles to piece his words together into something semi-coherent for the district attorney’s office to parse through tomorrow morning.

Momo scowls at his reticence, muttering something along the lines of party pooper under her breath. Shouto enjoys the following silence for all of three glorious, stale seconds before Momo’s lips part in sudden realization, and he braces himself for the worst.

She asks, “Is this because Midoriya’s in town?”

Shouto’s pen slips across the paper, slashing blue-black ink across the neatly printed lines of the incident report nearly to the edge of the page. He stares at her with wide eyes and frozen fingertips. “What?” he asks dumbly.

Momo glances down at Shouto’s report with an amused twist of her lips, eyes tracing the dark pen stroke marring the paper. “All right, that’s a genuine reaction,” she murmurs. She tilts her head slightly to one side and arches a plucked brow. “Did you seriously not know? It’s been all over the news since this afternoon. Figured you would’ve seen it by now.”

Her words make little sense to him. “I didn’t,” he says, shaking his head. “Why was Midoriya on the news?”

“When isn’t he on the news? Honestly.” With a vague wave of her hand, she shrugs. “I don’t know, I guess he’s in town for the holidays or something. Saved half of Tokyo on his way into the country. You know how he is.”

And he does, he does. Midoriya’s never been able to turn down a challenge when it crosses his
path—jumping into danger is a staple he wears willingly, tacked into his chest right above his heart. Shouto knows that better than most people.

Momo continues talking, oblivious to Shouto’s thunderous heartbeat. “I think he handled some villain named Meltdown in the financial district. No idea what his Quirk was, but Midoriya cleaned it up pretty quickly, from what I heard.”

Sounds like him. Before Shouto can decide it’s a poor idea, he shoves his paperwork aside and opens his laptop, heading straight for the national news website to see what’s going on. The first article he clicks shows a picture of Midoriya standing atop a partially crumbled skyscraper in the middle of downtown Tokyo; the photo’s grainy, but Shouto can see the glint of his metal facemask and those sharp, determined green eyes.

“’Deku’s Daring Divergence,’” Shouto reads, cringing internally at the title. “All right, not his best headline.”

“Mm. Is it written by that one guy at the Asahi Shimbun?” she asks. Shouto scans the byline and nods, and Momo lets out a weary sigh. “I swear, he’s been stuck on that alliteration thing for way too long. He needs a new trick.”

Shouto turns back to the article and scrolls through it, skimming for details. “Apparently Meltdown held the entire south side hostage,” he reads. “Dormant acid in the sewers and water mains, they think. He was going to activate the acid with his Quirk and collapse the pipes under the city.” Shouto lifts his eyebrows, faintly impressed. “Not a bad plan.”

“Messy, though. The city’s lucky Midoriya was passing through.”

“No kidding,” he marvels, reading further.

Momo cranes her neck to peer past the edge of his screen. “Does it say why he’s in town?”

Shouto shakes his head, scanning the article again. “No, it doesn’t,” he murmurs, rolling his lower lip between his teeth. A moment later, he spots a related article at the bottom of the webpage, and he stops short. “Wait, there’s a video interview.”

He clicks on it and waits for the video to load. Meanwhile, Momo pushes out of her chair and circles around to Shouto’s side of their desk cluster, bracing a hand on his armrest and leaning in so she can see better.

The video comes into focus on the glass of a shattered storefront—a ramen bar, it looks like, but not much of it remains in the aftermath of whatever fight Midoriya took part in. There’s glass littering the streets and torn newspapers floating across the cordoned-off parkway as sirens flash in the background, and it looks like most of the city sector has been evacuated. Wildly, the camera turns on a newscaster who looks slightly frazzled and a little worse for wear, but his eyes are bright and he’s practically shaking with excitement.

“Good morning. We’re here today with Deku, the hero who single-handedly saved countless lives this morning in downtown Tokyo,” the young newscaster announces, fingers pressed to his earpiece with microphone in hand. The camera pans around and focuses on Midoriya as he stands at the top of some half-crumpled steps a little way away. He’s gesturing wildly while he talks to the police, not paying a bit of attention to anything else.

Midoriya glances over as the newscaster approaches. He looks stunned for a moment, but quickly collects himself and manages a bright smile that would rival All Might’s on a good day. There’s a
deep scratch on his cheek and a bruise flowering beneath his jaw—otherwise, he looks unharmed. Shouto sinks into the stiff cushions of his office chair with a small, unnoticeable exhale.

“Deku!” the newscaster calls out, sticking the microphone in Midoriya’s face. “You saved half the city today even though you’re only a sidekick and operating on foreign soil for your American agency. Will there be repercussions for your actions?”

Midoriya blinks, frowning. “Um, I don’t know, actually. Maybe?” He smiles sheepishly and rubs the back of his neck. “Honestly, I’ll accept whatever punishment my agency has for me when I get back to the States. Saving these people was worth it.”

“A noble answer, truly!” the newscaster cries. “Tell us, Deku—what was your strategy going into the fight? You must’ve had something up your sleeve.”

“Oh, I want to hear this,” Momo mumbles, crowding in closer. Her brows are knitted, fingers pressed against the seam of her mouth. “Midoriya always had the best plans in school. I bet it’s something—”

“I didn’t actually have a plan, believe it or not,” Midoriya answers bluntly. He shrugs. “I was just on my way to the train station when I saw a drainage grate on a street corner that looked like it’d been melted by something, and I got a bad feeling. I always follow my gut, y’know? Couldn’t just leave after seeing something like that.”

“So intuitive! So perceptive! Amazing!” the man shrieks, his eyes bugging out like he’s about to have some kind of conniption. “Why were you going to the train station, if I may be so bold? Are you visiting family for the holidays? Perhaps you have a secret lover somewhere in your home country?”

Midoriya laughs brightly, eyes crinkling at the edges, and he shakes his head. “Oh, no, nothing like that. I’m just doing my best to meet up with a friend of mine for the holidays. Which reminds me—” He frowns, tugging back the sleeve of his suit to look at his watch, and his eyes widen in horror. “Oh, god, I’m going to be so late. Sorry, but I really need to run. Stay strong, everyone!”

Shouto reaches out and pauses the video, halting whatever the newscaster is about to say next. The video is frozen on an image of Midoriya as he sprints past a crowd of fans and first responders gathered at the edge of the police perimeter; he has one hand raised in an attempt to hail a cab, eyes bright and eager and—Shouto stiffens in his chair, bones going rigid as his joints flood with molten steel. Oh, god.

“Momo,” he says, sounding a whole hell of a lot calmer than he feels. His tongue is sandpaper in his mouth, dryness seeping between his teeth. “What is today?”

Momo plops back down into the chair on her side of the desk cluster, brows furrowing as she gives him a strange look. “It’s Friday. Why?”

“No, no. I mean the date,” Shouto says, shaking his head. “What’s today’s date?”

Momo blinks slowly at him like she thinks he’s a little soft in the head, which he very well might be at this point.

“It’s December twenty-seventh,” she answers carefully. She scowls, unaware that Shouto’s world just tipped entirely on its axis. She huffs, blowing a strand of loose hair out of her eyes. “Dammit, I knew I should’ve gotten you that desk calendar for—"
He’s out of his chair before she can finish her thought.

He pays for a taxi because it’s faster than waiting for the train, but the drive home still feels like it takes four million fucking years, minimum. Were it not against the rules, Shouto would use his ice to skate across the rooftops and save himself even more time, but he’d prefer not to get written up for personal use of his Quirk during his off time, even if it is for Midoriya’s sake. As it is, Shouto rapidly taps his fingers against his thigh while buildings and flickering storefront signs pass by in smears of sun-bleached stone and neon tubing, respectively. He tries very hard not to melt the pleather seats as the seconds stretch a little longer.

There’s no way. There’s just no way. Right?

They’d never talked about it after that day at Midoriya’s house before graduation. It had been one of those one-and-done conversations that Shouto had practically forgotten about as soon as it ended. It was a teenager’s dream that he knew could never work, not with their prospective hero schedules and impossible hours, not to mention the possibility of death, which was a very clear and present possibility (read: likelihood) in their line of work.

When the driver finally arrives outside his apartment building, Shouto scrambles to pay him but doesn’t wait for change, stumbling up the stairs to his flat with all the coordination of a person who’s had far too much to drink. Wisps of frost are starting to curl past his lips by the time he reaches his floor, chest heaving and veins singing with latent energy he refuses to let loose. Not possible, not possible, not—

Shouto turns the corner toward his apartment, and his blood freezes. At the end of the row, Midoriya looks up sharply from his spot on the floor in front of Shouto’s door, metal facemask hanging loosely around his neck and hood hanging down his back in a limp drape of fabric. His costume is smudged with blood and dirt in a million different places, and his hair is a tangled, curly disaster, but he has a packed duffel bag on the ground next to him and oh, god, he’s here—

Midoriya doesn’t wait for Shouto to say anything. He simply scrambles to his feet and dusts himself off with a crooked smile. “Hey, there you are,” he says. “I was starting to wonder if you’d forgotten.”

“I did,” Shouto stammers. He takes a tentative step forward, barely believing his eyes. “I did, and I’m sorry, but you’re— you’re supposed to be in New York right now.”

“I saved up some vacation days,” he explains nonchalantly. Shouto stares at him, dumbfounded, and Midoriya’s cheeks turn faintly pink under the scrutiny as he huffs an awkward laugh. He punches Shouto’s shoulder good-naturedly. “Come on, man. I keep my promises. I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

It’s a figure of speech, Shouto knows, because if it really came between their friendship and the world, Midoriya would choose the world every time and not think twice about it. That’s just the kind of person he is.

And yet he’s here.

Shouto surges forward and crushes Midoriya in a hug before he can say another word. Midoriya stiffens automatically, and Shouto almost pulls away, worried he’s crossed an unspoken line, but
Midoriya hugs him back in a vice grip before he can untangle their limbs.

“Missed you, too, dude,” Midoriya murmurs, patting his back reassuringly. His voice is close and warm against Shouto’s shoulder, and his breath ghosts over his ear as he chuckles. “I was going to call first, but something came up in Beirut and I didn’t have service until a few hours ago. Then the Tokyo thing happened—wait, did you hear about that? I mean, you probably did.”

Shouto releases him but grips his shoulders, holding Midoriya at arm’s length to look him up and down. “Yeah, we heard. It was… impressive.”

He lets out a strained laugh. “No, it was pretty awful, actually,” he says, pointing to the gash on his cheek with a wince. “I was actually wondering if you could, ah… help me out a bit? Figured if I went to a hospital, they’d never let me leave.”

Only then, in the waning moonlight of the evening, does Shouto see the deep purple bruising that’s peeking out from beneath the neckline of Midoriya’s costume like mottled, inky shadows, and the way he’s ever so slightly favoring his right side like his ribs are bruised or cracked. Shame curls low and hot in Shouto’s stomach, and he nods. “Right, yeah, of course. Come in.”

Shouto fumbles with his keys, reaching for the lock on his door. Twisting the knob, he kicks the door open and swoops down to grab Midoriya’s duffel bag before Midoriya can sling it over his own shoulder.

There’s a disgruntled scoff behind him. “I can carry my own stuff, Todoroki.”

“You’re a guest,” he says simply, hanging his keys on the hook by the door. He tosses Midoriya’s stuff onto the couch in the living room and turns around to see Midoriya shut the door behind himself with a strangely nervous look on his face.

“I didn’t even ask if I could crash here,” he says, shifting his weight. “Properly, I mean. I figured I could stay at my mom’s until—”

Shouto’s brow furrows. “Yes, you did.”

Midoriya blinks up at him, caught in the middle of toeing off his sneakers. “I did?”

“Last January, right? That was when we decided this?”

It takes a moment for Midoriya to understand, but when he does, his face lights up with a small, personal smile that makes Shouto’s left side heat ever so slightly. “Right, January,” he says. “Well, good to know it’s a standing invitation for me to barge into your apartment whenever I feel like it. I’ll keep that in mind the next time I need free internet access or a place to lay low.”


And the weird part is that he does. He knows that no matter the circumstances, Midoriya will always be a welcome guest, come hell or high water—and, knowing the types of trouble Midoriya tends to find on a daily basis, hell is probably the more likely option of the two. Giving him an ice pack and a couch to sleep on is the least he can do, and if hell just so happens to be nipping at Midoriya’s heels on the way in in the door, well. That’s fine. Shouto can deal.

Across the room, Midoriya unclasps his mask and sets it on the coffee table in the living room with a heavy thunk. He stretches his arms over his head and winces, hands curling protectively over his right side. He still manages a wry smile. “One year at an agency and you’re already going soft on me, Shouto.” His eyes soften imperceptibly. “But thanks. Really.”
Shouto’s lip twitch in a smile, and he turns toward the window to hide it. “Don’t mention it.”

Two hours later finds Shouto on the floor of his living room with latex gloves on his hands and a curved needle pinched between his fingers as he sews up Midoriya’s ruined cheek. It’s messy and unpleasant, and the scent of blood is sharp in the air, but there’s a movie running on the TV in the background that Midoriya’s eyes are glued to with open wonder, so Shouto supposes all of this could be a lot worse. Midoriya’s smile is enough of a distraction that Shouto can ignore the scent of copper clinging to his hands and how much he hates seeing that specific shade of red splashed against Midoriya’s freckles.

“Wait, so he was the guy’s twin the whole time?” Midoriya mumbles, eyebrows raised. The action pulls the muscles of his face taut and Shouto nearly misses his next stitch. “That’s wild.”

Shouto grunts distractedly, leaning in a bit closer for a better angle on the cut. He’s trying his best to focus, but he knows he’s fighting an uphill battle, being this close to Midoriya’s face. He’s tired tonight, and his hands shake a little bit with every stitch; it’s taking an incredible effort not to slip up and stab Midoriya in the fucking eyeball.

“Oh, I get it!” Midoriya says suddenly, and Shouto almost spears his nostril on accident. He jabs a bruised, crooked finger at the TV. “So, the lawyer is sleeping with the piano teacher from the bowling alley, but she’s too involved with what’s-his-face’s twin brother to realize that she’s not actually interested in the real brother—”

“Midoriya,” Shouto interrupts flatly, leaning away a few inches to make eye contact. “If you don’t shut up, I’m going to miss your cheek and sew your mouth shut on accident. Is that what you want?”

He blinks. “I would very much like that to not happen,” he says earnestly.

“Right, then shut up. You’re moving way too much.”

Shouto leans in and pretends he can’t feel the heated flush on Midoriya’s cheeks beneath his sticky, bloodstained fingertips as he gets back to work. Thankfully, Midoriya says nothing else and refrains from moving, but his fingers twitch restlessly between them—he’s never been one for sitting still. The moments drip past them in comfortable silence while the show continues to play in the background, needle keeping the time as Shouto spears his skin again and again and pulls the sutures tight with delicate focus.

A commercial comes on as Shouto nears the end of the cut, and Midoriya takes the opportunity to mumble, “Sorry.”

Shouto sighs through his nose and slips the needle through Midoriya’s skin swiftly, being careful to keep his touch as light as possible. “It’s okay,” he says. “I just don’t want this to scar. It’s not pretty.”

Izuku’s mouth curls at one corner wryly. “Aw, you’re no fun. Come on, it’ll make me look tough.”

Shouto’s gaze is withering. “Midoriya.”

“It’s not that bad,” he reasons, but there’s no conviction behind it.
“You’re lucky it didn’t catch your eye,” he mutters, feeling suspiciously like his mother. He remembers getting lectures like these when he was a kid and spent too long training with Endeavor and hiding his injuries after that fact. Swallowing thickly, his gaze darts across Midoriya’s face before dropping back to the task at hand. “How’d this one happen, anyway?”

“Piece of glass,” he answers, shrugging faintly. “Meltdown shoved me out a window on the forty-first floor of an office building. I caught myself on the thirty-fifth, but the debris hit me on the way down.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, it sucked. Nearly tore my shoulder out of place with that landing.” His expression brightens, but there’s a certain amount of artificiality to it. “But hey, it could’ve been worse.”

Shouto’s fingers still. He doesn’t want to think about worse. Worse implies death, and that’s something he doesn’t like associating with Midoriya. He rolls the needle between his fingers, turning words over in his mouth carefully.

“I’m glad it wasn’t,” he says quietly in the end, then gets back to work.

The television is still going in the background, all soft-focus camera angles and cheap stinger music as the soap opera runs back-to-back reruns. After a moment, another commercial break begins, loud and obnoxious as all the ones before it, and Midoriya carefully reaches forward to mute it with the remote.

In the quiet that descends across the apartment, Shouto sees his opening. “You shouldn’t be so reckless, you know,” he murmurs. The black surgical thread is warm and sticky between his fingers as he pulls it tight, and Izuku’s eye twitches in pain.

Silence plunges, cold and deep between them. Shouto can’t see Midoriya’s expression at this angle, but the set of his jaw implies he’s thinking about something unpleasant. Shouto counts his heartbeats in sets of two.

“A lot of people tend to die when I play it safe,” Midoriya says after a moment. “I don’t really have a choice most of the time. Trust me.”

“There’s always a choice,” Shouto replies, trying not to breathe through his nose because he can’t stand the metallic scent of Midoriya’s blood this close. He bites the inside of his cheek. “You’re not invincible, Midoriya, no matter what All Might may have told you. You’re human just like the rest of us.”

The words hang in the air above their heads before swinging down with the firm punch of a pendulum. Midoriya had spilled the secret of One For All after their second year of high school during a summer training exercise gone wrong—a building had collapsed suddenly and they had been trapped beneath a precarious support beam for about six hours. Things had looked rather grim for both of them from the outset.

Now, even though Midoriya’s secret is perfectly safe with Shouto, they still try to avoid talking about it. Shouto doesn’t know why exactly; all he knows is that talking about All Might makes Midoriya sad, so he actively tries to avoid talking about it because it’s Midoriya and he should never, ever be sad about anything.

Midoriya lets out a long sigh, his eyes still glued to the TV but no longer seeing much of anything. His shoulders are stiff beneath his t-shirt; Shouto’s smart enough to know it’s not from residual
soreness.

“Agree to disagree, I suppose,” Midoriya mutters, almost to himself. His brows knit, and he looks sidelong with a frown. “Hey, what’s up with you tonight? You usually don’t worry about me this much.”

A safe subject change. Shouto exhales and rolls with it. “My idea of a fun Friday night doesn’t usually involve stitching up someone’s face,” he says off-handedly. “Forgive me for being a little cranky about it.”

Midoriya snorts. “Oh, now you want to joke. Come on, man, give me a real reason.”

Shouto smirks, eyes narrowed in attentiveness as he tightens the final suture. The knot isn’t pretty, but it’ll do for the next few days, at least until the worst of the cut has healed over. “Someone has to make up for your lack of self-preservation,” he says. “Might as well be me.”

“You and my mom.” Midoriya scoffs, but there’s a smile on his face anyway. “I swear, you guys should start a club or something. Make membership cards and everything.”

“Badges.”

“Hats.”

“Buttons.”

Midoriya’s face screws up. “That’s the same thing as a badge.”

“No, it isn’t,” Shouto says. He knows there’s a smile on his face, but he doesn’t care enough to wipe it away. He sets the curved black needle in a shallow dish of alcohol and grabs a small piece of gauze from the corner of the coffee table. Soaking up some of the astringent liquid, he dabs gently at the dried blood on Midoriya’s cheek. “Buttons are like pins. Badges are sewn on. There’s a difference.”

Midoriya squint, unconvinced. “But what about—” a sharp hiss cuts him off, and he recoils from Shouto’s touch as the antiseptic sinks into his skin. “Fuck, ow. God. Little warning next time?”

“Sorry,” Shouto murmurs, watching as sterile white gradually stains pink as he blots away flecks of dried blood around the wound. “I’m almost done, promise.”

“No, it’s— it’s cool. Just stings a bit,” he says. The muscle in his jaw flutters beneath his skin like an uncontrollable heartbeat, fists clenched at his sides, but he forces a smile anyway. “Better than the hospital, at least. Right?”

Shouto eyes Midoriya’s socked feet and the acid burns marring his shins, the scraped palms he keeps hidden against the carpet. There are bruises on his body in places Shouto can’t see and rings of exhaustion around his eyes, shadows of ghosts he doesn’t talk about. That neither of them ever talk about.

“Yeah,” Shouto says quietly, dabbing gently at freckled skin with feather-light touch. There’s a soft, secretive smile on his face. “Way better.”
They spend the rest of the night on Shouto’s living room floor with bowls of popcorn and really terrible soap operas looping on the TV, the fake tears and overdramatic accusations providing steady background noise for their conversation. They talk about anything and everything, from the weather in Japan to weird villains they’ve fought. Shouto tells Midoriya about his job at his agency (it’s boring, there’s lots of paperwork, but it’s been a pretty safe year on the whole) and Midoriya talks about his agency in America and how different it is (the villains in America are insane, and he barely has time to sleep in between emergencies, but the street food is good in Queens, so that’s something). Midoriya asks him about his mother at one point; Shouto tells him things are good. They don’t talk about his father at all.

They fall asleep somewhere in between three and four in the morning and wake up at noon with stiff necks and sore joints. Shouto heads to the farmer’s market to get stuff for breakfast while Midoriya’s in the shower. He’s careful to avoid red bell peppers and mushrooms because he knows how much Midoriya hates them.

When Midoriya leaves the next day, there are handshakes and hurried promises to keep in touch, even though they know they’re both much too busy for that sort of thing—especially Midoriya, who has to do the whole Symbol-of-Peace thing to worry about every waking hour of the day. Shouto is content with a promise of next year and maybe you could swing by the States?

After with that, Midoriya is gone just as quickly as he arrived. Shouto forces himself to come back to the real world inch by inch as soon as his apartment door closes, dragging his feet the entire way. He flops back on the couch with a sigh.

He finishes his paperwork first.

Chapter End Notes
What Branches Grow Meaning

Chapter Summary

2018 — one year later

Shouto: 19-20

Izuku: 20-21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

December 27, 2018

Christmas sucked this year, and Shouto’s got the black eye to prove it.

Things had started out well enough, as they usually do at home. He remembers walking through the front door of his father’s house with no small amount of trepidation and a small bag of shoddily wrapped presents in his hands that he hardly even remembers buying in the first place. Fuyumi had greeted him with a tight smile and hung his coat up with the whispered warning he’d been waiting for:

“Don’t upset the balance.”

In retrospect, Shouto should’ve left the presents in the foyer and walked right back out the door after that. But he stayed.

He remembers how tense dinner had been—his mom sat at one end of the massive table, head bowed in submissive silence and fingers trembling, and his father sat at the other end, practically taking up one half of the room all by himself. Fuyumi, Shouto, and Natsuo had been placed smack dab in between them on either side of the table to act as disposable buffers. They talked about the weather (“It’s going to be a long winter this year, isn’t it?”) and Shouto’s gig at the hero agency. (“It’s going fine, thanks. No one’s died in a while, so that’s cool, I guess.”)

His mom flinched every time Endeavor passed the potatoes or made grand, sweeping gestures with his thick arms. Shouto had to consciously avoid setting the house on fire while he pushed his dinner around his plate, too jittery to swallow anything other than his own saliva.

They unwrapped presents in tense, static-flooded silence, their lips each set into thin lines of displeasure and fingers curled into preemptive fists. Shouto sat to the left of his mother and Fuyumi sat on the floor in front of Endeavor across the room—just in case, her stern gaze had told him. Natsuo stayed standing in the threshold, arms crossed over his broad chest and eyes narrowed at their father, waiting for something, anything to happen. And for the most part, other than the heavy feeling of awful hanging in the air around them, everything was fine.

Until Shouto unwrapped his present from Endeavor, that is. Then everything was decidedly not fine.
He doesn’t remember what the contract said exactly—the type was tiny, nearly illegible, and the
damn thing had been fifty pages at least, so he only had time to skim the first few paragraphs on
the first page before he realized what it was. It mentioned something about transferring Shouto to a
newer hero agency in Tokyo so he could skip the remainder of his sidekick tenure and jump
straight to professional hero status. All it would take was one signature, one swipe of an ink pen,
and he’d be free to do as he pleased in the world.

For anyone else, it would have been a wonderful gift. Anyone else would’ve signed it right away
and never thought about it a second time.

Shouto isn’t just anyone.

He hasn’t seen his mother since the hospital staff escorted her back to the psych ward with careful
hands and tight expressions. Fuyumi hasn’t called him to check in because she knows he needs his
space right now, and Natsuo willingly stayed behind at the estate to lay into their father about the
whole thing just because he could. Thankfully, Endeavor hasn’t called Shouto to reprimand him for
shaming the family again—a blessing if ever there was one. Shouto figures he probably owes
Natsuo a favor for that, all things considered. Or perhaps Endeavor had simply assumed the black
eye and finger-shaped burns on Shouto’s forearms were a clear enough message for the time being.

Shouto doesn’t care either way. He’s just trying to get home without collapsing at this point. It’s an
uphill battle in every sense of the word.

Shouto idly pulls his sleeves a little lower around his fingers, and he keeps his hood tugged down
over his eyes to hide the watercolor bruise that stains the dark, damaged flesh around his left eye.
The metro isn’t too crowded today, probably due to the holiday weekend—there are only a handful
of people onboard, talking on cell phones and skimming social media while the train jostles around
a particularly sharp curve. No one’s recognized him yet, but he still has a few stops left before he
gets to his neighborhood. He needs to stay on his toes.

The train slows at a station near the garment district, and a few people climb onboard at the
platform. A little girl in a blue jumper looks up at Shouto as she passes him, her tiny fingers
tangled with her mother’s, and she meets his gaze beneath the shadows of his hood. She gasps
sharply through her crooked baby teeth and backs into her mother’s legs, eyes wide and horrified.

Shouto grits his teeth and turns his face to the window, pulling his hood a little lower. Dammit.

The train begins to move once again, lurching forward with a half-garbled announcement from the
automated voice overhead. Shouto reaches out to grasp one of the vertical steel bars near the doors
to keep his knees from giving out, but the simple motion is more than enough to send waves of
white-hot pain shooting up the lengths of his arms. He clenches his jaw, teeth shifting
uncomfortably in his mouth, and he only barely holds back a curse.

His arms hurt where the burns rub against the thick, stifling fabric of his hoodie. His duffel bag is
falling apart and slightly charred, thanks to the fireball Endeavor sent after him on his way out the
door of the estate, and his face is sore and swollen. A tiny part of him wants to just collapse in the
middle of this train car and sleep for fifty years because honestly, what else is he supposed to do?
He can’t say the thought isn’t tempting.

It’s almost eleven by the time Shouto’s train arrives at his station, and he has to suppress a hiss of
pain when he clips someone’s shoulder on his way across the platform. He grits his teeth and takes
a breath—there’s a sudden, sharp tearing sensation, and a trickle of something hot and wet begins
to make its way down the length of his forearm. He doesn’t have to roll up his sleeve to know that
it’s blood.
Second-degree burns, then. That’s fine, he can work with that. He’s had worse.

The toe of his sneaker catches on cracks in the sidewalk on his way home, his watery vision too blurred to see where he’s going, and when he reaches his building, Shouto gives a halfhearted wave to his landlady that she probably doesn’t altogether buy. He drags himself into the elevator, collapsing against the wall as he fumbles to press the correct button on the panel. The earth bends beneath his feet and he rises up, up, up, and he’s so tired. God, how can anyone ever be this tired? Time flows backwards, but Shouto eventually manages to unlock the door to his apartment with shaking hands. He all but collapses onto the scratchy carpet of his tiny entryway. He’s ready to pass out, ready to die—

“Todoroki?”

He freezes in place, hand clenched around his doorknob with wide eyes staring at a familiar stain on the carpet in the corner. No, no, no. He doesn’t move, doesn’t breathe, and hopes to high heaven that he’s hallucinating.

A shuffle from his living room, the squeak of springs as someone rises from the couch around the corner. Footsteps.

Fuck.

It’s December twenty-seventh. He almost laughs at the sheer irony of it all—really, what are the odds of this happening on the only day out of the year Midoriya happens to be in the country? Something invisible and stupidly cosmic must have it out for Shouto; that’s just all there is to it.

Shouto shifts as he sucks in a rattling breath, and pain explodes against his damaged skin where his sleeves brush ever so slightly. He has to get Midoriya out of here. Shouto doesn’t want him to see him like this right now—or ever, really. Preferably ever.

With a grunt, Shouto kicks his door closed behind him and presses his back against the wall, limbs sagging with exhaustion. Maybe if he can hide his arms long enough, he can blame everything else on some random villain so that Midoriya will buy it and leave. It’s a lot of maybes, but he’ll just have to make it work. He doesn’t have any other choice.

“Todoroki, is that y—”

Footsteps stop short, and he hears a sharp intake of breath.

Too late.

Midoriya stands in the hallway of the apartment with fuzzy socks on his feet and thick-framed glasses perched precariously on the end of his freckled nose. His eyes are wide, lips slightly parted in surprise and mild horror as he takes in Shouto’s too-pale skin and hunched shoulders. He looks good. A little more muscled than last year, perhaps, and maybe an inch or two taller. Shouto can’t be sure though.

Shouto fumbles wordlessly, and in that moment—with Midoriya’s eyes looking through Shouto like he’s made of goddamn glass, how does he do that? —Shouto knows he can’t lie about his injuries. All he can do at this point is minimize the damage and hope for the best, even if “best” is a pretty generous term for the dumpster fire that has been the entirety of Shouto’s evening. He needs to cut his losses while he still can.

“You should leave,” Shouto finally manages, kicking his shoes off with minimal wincing. The wall is cold against his back even through his hoodie, and he leans into the sensation as he slides
down to the floor. His eyelids flutter, and he shakes his head back and forth clumsily. “Sorry, I didn’t think—”

“What happened?” Midoriya breathes, voice small. He approaches and squats down directly in front of Shouto, his eyes wide and searching his expression for something, anything. When his gaze falls on Shouto’s bruised and battered face beneath the shadows of his hood, Midoriya’s jaw clenches, eyes sharpening. In that moment, he actually looks like those intimidating fan posters they sell of him at the mall. “Tell me how to help.”

Shouto shifts uncomfortably, looking to the side. “Midoriya, I really don’t—”

“Where else are you hurt? Are you bleeding?” he asks, but his voice is soft around the edges this time. A dulled blade not meant for him.

“Not bleeding,” Shouto presses through his teeth, but lying is more than a little exhausting at the moment. He amends, “Not a lot, anyway.”

Midoriya’s eyebrow twitches. “Can you stand?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re clearly not.” His eyes rest pointedly on the dark wet stains on the sleeves of Shouto’s hoodie before flicking in the direction of the bathroom. “First aid kit still under the sink?”

Shouto should shake his head and say no. He should tell Midoriya to save himself the trouble, to go stay with his mother this time around, that they can reschedule for next year. He should do a lot of things, honestly.

But Shouto’s never been good at doing what he’s told, and he’s certainly not planning on turning over a new leaf today. He knows when he’s beaten. And desperate. And bleeding, god, this fucking hurts.

Shouto deflates, shoulders sagging. “Yeah, it’s still there,” he mumbles. He pauses, hesitating briefly before adding, “Grab the burn cream while you’re at it.”

Midoriya doesn’t question it. “Can you make it to the living room? Or do you need me to carry you?”

Shouto has enough sense to look vaguely offended. “I’m banged up, not comatose.”

“If you say so.” Midoriya pushes his glasses up his nose (Really, when did he get those?) and stands up, holding out a hand for Shouto to take. “Come on,” he says, beckoning with a tight smile etched into his features. “Let’s at least get you to the couch before you pass out.”

Shouto begrudgingly takes his hand and allows Midoriya to pull him to his feet with unsurprising ease, but he staggers as the blood rushes to his head all at once. He instinctively reaches out to grab the wall for support, but he ends up pressing the flat of his palm against the center of Midoriya’s chest instead. Even in comparison to the steady heat his left hand, Midoriya is warm. He’s more of an electric blanket—soft and comforting in all the right ways—whereas Shouto’s more of a searing, red-hot stovetop without an off switch or a lifetime warranty.

Shouto needs to lie down. Probably.

Midoriya’s fingers come up and encircle Shouto’s wrist to steady him when he sways dangerously to one side, spots filling his vision in fuzzy constellations. Another hand comes up to press against
his lower back and steer him into the living room.

“Whoa, there,” Midoriya murmurs. His touch is light through the thick material of Shouto’s hoodie, pleasant and respectful. “Careful. Take it slow.”

Shouto grunts and shuffles over, sitting heavily in the center of the couch when his knees can no longer be bothered to keep him upright. Midoriya hovers over him, adjusting pillows and moving blankets out of the way to make room for him. His fussing is more than a little endearing.

Even though he’s half-resigned to his fate at this point, Shouto feels the need to mumble, “You don’t have to stay, you know. I can take care of this myself.”

“Maybe so,” Midoriya concedes. He cracks a small, warm smile that’s only slightly strained at the edges. “Do you want me to stay?”

It’s a genuine question. Shouto knows Midoriya would leave if he asked—no questions, no qualms, no hard feelings or missed birthday phone calls. The choice is completely and utterly Shouto’s, and for the first time that evening, he wonders what it’d be like to be selfish. Just this once.

Shouto drops his gaze to the coffee table, studying the neat stack of coasters on the corner where they sit next to this morning’s folded-up newspaper and a mug of hot tea. The crossword has been half-completed already; Midoriya’s cramped handwriting fills the boxes in half-scribbles and shorthand that makes no sense to anyone except him, but the sight is more than a little familiar.

“Stay,” Shouto tells him softly. He clears his throat and glances out the window, studying the skyline like it’s the most important thing in the world right now. “If you want, I mean.”

The apartment is quiet, save for the slow exhale Midoriya lets out through his nose. He nods once, mouth curving into a small, sweet smile. “All right, I’ll hang out,” he says. “Don’t go to sleep, okay? I’ll be right back.”

With that, Midoriya turns on his heel and lumbers down the hallway before disappearing into the bathroom, muttering under his breath the entire time. Shouto hears the flip of a switch, and light spills out into the hallway in rich shades of amber as Midoriya sifts through drawers and cabinets to find what he needs.

Shouto sighs sharply, sinking back into the cushions like he can disappear between the hideously patterned weft if he tries hard enough. Surely that would be ten times less humiliating than this… disaster. He swallows and squeezes his eyes shut, wishing for the millionth time that he hadn’t agreed to that stupid belated family Christmas; he should’ve seen it for what it was, should’ve faked a mission call or a late night at the office with Momo. She would’ve backed him up, for sure.

Shifting slightly, Shouto reaches up and gingerly unzips his hoodie before peeling the scratchy fabric away from his skin, stifling every gasp that threatens to escape his lips as the sleeves brush his exposed wounds. His eyes water as the sausage-shaped burns and bruises come into view, and he clenches his teeth until they crack as some of the lesions weep a mixture of blackened blood and clear yellow fluid. The skin around each burn is wilted and peeling at the edges, bubbles of unopened blisters cropping up beneath his pale skin and ripe enough to pop.

Could be worse, he reasons. Not much worse, of course. But still. Worse.

He’s just discarded his hoodie in a heap on the floor when Midoriya returns with the first aid kit tucked under his arm, a few washcloths in a bowl of warm water, and the container of prescription-
strength burn cream Shouto’s kept around since that first-year sports festival at school. Midoriya’s reading the back of the container, lips moving soundlessly as he crosses the room. When he finally looks up, his eyes are soft behind his dorky glasses, the hint of a smile playing at the edges of his lips.

His gaze falls on Shouto’s exposed forearms, and his expression shuts in an instant.

“It’s not as bad as it looks.” Shouto tells him, hugging his arms to his chest as if hiding the wounds will make them go away. “Seriously. This isn’t bad.”

Midoriya’s eyebrows twitch. In the warm lamplight, Shouto can barely make out the fluttering muscle of his jaw as he clenches and unclenches his teeth, eyes raking over the wounds with unyielding scrutiny.

Shouto holds his breath as he waits for Midoriya to ask the dreaded question: did your father do this to you? He braces himself for the pitying tone, the simmering rage and frustration that he knows better than he knows his own happiness. He waits and waits and waits—

And Midoriya says nothing.

There is no question, no demand for answers. Midoriya simply exhales through his nose, nods once, and drops to his knees on the carpet between the couch and coffee table without a single word, brushing Shouto’s knee with his shoulder as he settles in comfortably. He begins laying out supplies—bandages, cotton balls, and needles, just in case. Not once does he meet Shouto’s gaze. Not once does he stop to ask a question. Not once does Shouto reap the skin-deep pity he’s come to expect from these kinds of encounters.

Shouto knows better than to poke at a scab just to see if it’ll bleed. Carefully, he reaches past Midoriya’s shoulder for the TV remote and turns it on for some background noise, flipping to a channel that’s running a non-stop barrage of infomercials for useless items no sane person could possibly need. Midoriya hums lowly in appreciation, but that’s the only reaction Shouto gets.

Shouto only half-watches the infomercials as they flicker across the screen in splashes of vibrant colors and ridiculous offers. (“But wait, there’s more!”) They never keep his attention for long. His eyes keep falling back to Midoriya as he works; his knees are bent underneath him as he leans over the coffee table, green hair falling into his eyes to touch the steep curve of his lashes. Midoriya’s fingers are nimble and practiced despite the gnarled scarring on his right hand—a reminder that Shouto’s never been very good at this whole friendship thing and that Midoriya really shouldn’t expect anything spectacular from him at this point for obvious, permanent reasons.

When all of the first aid supplies are laid out and lined up with laser-like precision, Midoriya holds out one of the damp washcloths in Shouto’s direction. He raises his eyebrows. “I’m assuming you’ll want to do this part,” he says.

Shouto takes the washcloth gingerly, wincing as the motion stretches his burned skin in all the wrong places. “Thanks,” he says, pressing the cloth against his wounds. It stings like hell, but he does his best not to show it.

Midoriya nods and leans back against the front of the couch, eyes glued to the TV. It’s a small amount of privacy, and Shouto is grateful for it. Carefully, he mops up the viscous fluids weeping from his lesions and tries not to pass out every time he gets a little too close to the affected area for comfort.

Midoriya’s shoulders fall with a soft sigh, and he leans his head back on the couch to look up at
Shouto. “We’ve really got to stop meeting up like this, you know. One of these years, we’re both going to be healthy and not bleeding and it’ll be great.”

Shouto gives him a doubtful look. “We’re heroes, Midoriya. I’d be more surprised if we weren’t injured.”

“Your positivity is inspiring sometimes, you know that?”

He smirks. “I try.”

Midoriya hums, turning back toward the television. “Hey, do you really think that thing can fry a whole potato in five seconds?” He presses the pads of his fingers against his mouth as he watches the on-screen demonstration with narrowed eyes.

Shouto glances up, squinting at the screen as the device supposedly air-fries a whole potato. “I don’t know,” he says. “Why?”

“ Asking for a friend.”

Shouto narrows his eyes and peels the washcloth from his ruined arm. “Probably not, but you never know.” He trades out the cloth for the fresh one Midoriya is blindly holding in his direction, not tearing his eyes from the infomercial for a second. “Why? Do you have an urge to fry a bunch of potatoes in a very short amount of time?”

Midoriya sniffs. “I might. Are you judging me?”

“Who, me? Never.”

Midoriya scrutinizes the commercial with his bottom lip held between his teeth. He snaps his fingers and points at it dramatically. “You know what?” he asks, looking over his shoulder at Shouto. “I’m going to buy you one of these for your birthday. We’ll see how judgmental you are when you’re frying potatoes super fucking fast. It’s gonna be the most amazing kitchen appliance you’ve ever gotten.”

“Bet.”

Midoriya snorts. “All right, you’re on. How much?”

“Ten bucks.”

“I’m good for it. Prepare to have your potatoes fried and your mind blown, Todoroki.”

Midoriya tilts his head back against the edge of the couch as a woman tries to drop a potato in a crusty-looking deep fryer and misses the boiling vat of oil entirely, despite the fact that it was six inches away from her hand. She looks considerably upset with her now-ruined potato, and she wails, “There has to be a better way!”

Time passes, commercials change, and after a while, Shouto stops paying attention altogether. Instead, he sneaks glances at Midoriya as he watches the infomercials with a disturbing amount of genuine interest. His hair’s a little shorter than it was last time he visited, tamed into a nice, manageable undercut, and his eyes are bright behind his glasses despite the dimness of Shouto’s apartment. He absentmindedly wonders how Midoriya always manages to look so put-together and dependable, even in situations like this. Like he could shoulder the burdens of the entire world with a smile on his face and zero hesitation, tilt the world on its axis with the snap of his fingers. Laugh, and make the sun shine a little bit brighter than before.
He’s almost envious of the rest of the world for capturing so much of Midoriya’s free time. Shouto only gets him for twenty-four hours every year. Shouto doesn’t know how long Midoriya’s staying in town this time around, but he imagines it isn’t long enough because it never is. The traitorous parts of his mind silently wonder what it would be like to have the undivided attention of the Symbol of Peace year-round, like when they went to school and Midoriya sat two rows over, trading notes and smiles and inside jokes with Shouto as if the rest of the world didn’t exist. What would it be like, Shouto wonders, to have this Midoriya—the tall, iron-clad professional hero with a smile that could light up the darkest night—two rows over?

It’d probably be like getting too close to the sun, Shouto realizes. All bright light and blistering heat, and before you know it, your wings have melted and you’re plummeting back to Earth where you belong. Shouto’s no Icarus, but wax melts just as fast as ice. Maybe even faster.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Midoriya asks at one point, his voice low and steady as he tilts his head back to look at Shouto. The television casts long shadows across the flat planes of his face, and Shouto finds himself a little more distracted than before.

“Not particularly,” he replies quietly, pressing a little harder against his wounds than absolutely necessary. “Do you want to ask?”

Midoriya watches him carefully, his mouth drawn into a tight line. “Not particularly,” he repeats.

A few seconds pass, and Shouto waits for him to push and prod at the already-open wound—to make it bleed a little more, to drive the knife a little deeper. In the end, however, Midoriya gives Shouto nothing more than a stiff nod and turns back to watch the current infomercial about a heavy-duty juicer that also toasts bread and poaches eggs at the same time. What a time to be alive.

“That thing looks like a safety hazard,” he says, cocking his head to one side. His eyes narrow. “I feel like it’d be super easy to forget part of it’s still turned on. Right? Like, you’re making eggs and your juice, but then you forget the toaster’s running and boom.” He mimics an explosion in his hands, puffing out his cheeks. “House fire.”

It’s an out. An attempt at getting back on track.

Shouto takes it, ignoring the way his skin tingles like hot wax is sluicing down the valley of his spine in steady, clacking drips. Their conversation is banal and generic, but not bad by any means. Just… different.

He doesn’t deserve this. He doesn’t deserve Midoriya.

But, then again, who does?

October 7, 2019

Eight letters, second letter e. Hint: liar.

Shouto chews on the end of his pen as he thinks, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. He’s been stuck on this one for the last ten minutes—an eight-letter word for a liar? That could be anything. His knee jiggles beneath the bistro table as he mouths vowels and consonants under his breath, running through the alphabet forwards and backwards no fewer than six times.
God, he’s always been shit at crosswords. Should’ve stuck with Sudoku.

It’s been a quiet ten months on Shouto’s end, as far as hero things are concerned. He’s on the cusp of being promoted from sidekick to pro hero, and he’s been putting in extra hours on patrol to push the envelope just a little bit more. The villains seem to have turned their eye to Western Europe and the United States in the past year, probably because Midoriya’s been operating in and out of both continents at the professional level ever since he cleaned up that mess in Tokyo. Japan, in comparison, has been relatively quiet. Shouto’s actually a little bored with his current lackluster workload, but he knows it’ll pass. Probably.

Cars zip by on the street with abandon, ruffling Shouto’s newspaper and rippling the surface of his tea; the honking horns and buzzing heartbeat of the inner city almost drown out the sound of his cell phone as it begins to ring. Shouto doesn’t remove his eyes from his crossword as he fishes the device out of his pocket and answers it, propping it between his ear and shoulder as he continues to tap his pen against the paper in thought.

“Shouto speaking,” he answers flatly, racking his brain for the correct word. *Cheater, maybe? No, that can’t be it. It doesn’t fit with the second letter—*

“Todoroki!” a breathless, garbled voice calls out through the receiver. “Hey, it’s Midoriya. Are you busy right now?”

Shouto’s heart drops out of his chest like a lead weight. Crossword forgotten, he pulls the phone from his ear to check the caller ID—and yeah, it says it’s Midoriya. This is happening. This is real.

It’s been ten months. Ten months since they stayed up until three in the morning, bundled up in bandages and blankets alike to watch crappy infomercials and talk about absolutely nothing. Ten months since Midoriya slipped out of Shouto’s apartment clad from head to toe in his skintight hero costume with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder and a whispered, “Sorry, there’s apparently a dinosaur in Kiev and I’m supposed to go take care of it.”

Ten months. It feels like forever.

Hesitantly, Shouto presses the phone against his ear again. “Um,” he stammers, glancing from side to side as he scrambles for words and syllables and *say something, oh my god.* “No. I’m, uh, free. What’s wrong?”

“What? Oh, nothing’s wrong. I just have a quick questi—” There’s a loud crash on the other end of the line and Shouto hears someone screaming ‘DIE, FUCKERS’ before a muted explosion crackles through the speaker. “Oh, Jesus,” Midoriya mumbles under his breath.

Shouto blinks. “Are you… in the middle of a fight?”

A brief pause, a breath of half-hesitation. Shouto’s eyes narrow in suspicion.

“…No?” It’s not convincing in the slightest and Midoriya knows it. He heaves a sharp sigh. “All right, yeah, sort of. But it’s just a small thing, so don’t worry. I really need to talk to you.”

Shouto pinches the bridge of his nose. “Nope. No way. I’m hanging up right now.”

“No!” he yelps, but it’s barely audible over another explosion on his end. “No, no, no, don’t do that. Hatsume installed this earpiece in my mask a few weeks ago, so I’m hands-free. And Kacchan’s taken point on this mission, so I’m just searching buildings for civilians right now but
“I’m pretty sure I got all of them and—” A few seconds of silence fall sharply, and he can practically hear Midoriya’s eyes widen. “Oh, god, you didn’t hang up, did you? Todoroki? Please tell me you’re still there.”

“You shouldn’t be on your phone during a mission.”

“But this is super important! Like, crucial.”

“More crucial than saving lives?”

“Oh, the lives have already been saved, don’t worry. It’s an open-and-shut thing, honest. I’m just running through the sector to see if I missed anyone. Don’t think I did though.” His tone takes on a pleading quality. “Come on, please?” he asks. “I promise I’m not distracted.”

Shouto’d be lying if he said he wanted to hang up—he hasn’t spoken to Midoriya in forever and it’s been eating at him. Maybe he can indulge his selfish side just a little while longer.

Shouto grits his teeth and steam curls past his lips as he sighs. “Fine,” he says, sinking back in his seat. “But the second something happens, you’d better hang up and take care of it. I’m serious.”

There’s another earth-shattering explosion on Midoriya’s end and maniacal laughter in the distance. “Sounds like Bakugou’s having a good time in America.”

Midoriya laughs, the sound low and familiar. “Believe it or not, he actually is, but I don’t think he’ll ever admit that willingly. Oh, and speaking of Kacchan—he’s sort of the reason I called.”

Another crash and more frustrated yelling, but Midoriya ignores it. “He’s being sent back to Japan for some corporate-mandated sensitivity training in a few days.”

Shouto stares. “You’re kidding.”

“Wish I was,” he replies, tone grim. “He’s going to be there for two or three weeks. Has to go camping in the mountains with some other heroes, have a few one-on-one sessions with a professional empath. The works.”

“Any particular reason why?” He pauses, then adds, “Besides the obvious, of course.”

“Oh, no. He’s just scaring too many civilians when he saves them, making babies cry in their strollers—you know how he is.”

“I’m shocked,” Shouto deadpans. “Shocked, I tell you.”

“Yeah, imagine how I feel.”

Shouto almost lets out a short, breathy laugh, barely trapping the sound behind his lips. Thinking about Bakugou in front of a campfire weaving friendship bracelets is a special kind of sweet justice that Shouto never knew he needed until now. But Shouto frowns faintly a moment later, noting the uncomfortable undertone in Midoriya’s voice.

“You’re… not happy about this,” Shouto concludes. It’s not a question.

Some pained grunting and rushed footsteps; Midoriya must be running. He pants, breathless. “I mean, I get that he needs the training and all that—ow, shit—it’s just really bad timing. The holidays are coming up. Villains are starting to get antsy.”

“I’m aware.”
“Right, so it’s just that I’m sort of stuck in a weird spot because of this.” There’s a pause, and he hears Midoriya swallow. “You, uh… you know what I mean?”

Shouto traces a faint scorch mark on the cuff of his jeans, eyebrows furrowed. After the Tokyo incident last year, Midoriya had been moved up to the professional level a year early, and Bakugou had been assigned to be his sidekick—after lots of cursing and complaining, of course. But, if Bakugou’s going to be out of the picture for a few weeks at minimum—

“You’re out a sidekick,” Shouto realizes, eyebrows shooting upward. “That’s why you’re calling me.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Midoriya says, his voice flooded with relief. He laughs nervously. “Oh, thank god. I thought I was gonna have to straight-up ask you or something. Been putting off this call for weeks, I sw—"

“You have to call my agency if you want recommendations, Midoriya,” Shouto interjects with a slight frown. He reaches for the spoon at his table setting and idly stirs his tea, disturbing the leaves that have settled at the bottom of the cup. “I don’t have the list of free sidekicks in front of me right now. I could have someone for you by Monday, if that’s all right.”

Silence. Another explosion, but this one is more muted than the ones before it, and Bakugou’s voice is little more than a distant echo through the tinny, bit-crushed speaker of the phone.

“You— wait, sorry, what?” Midoriya asks in bewilderment. His footsteps slow as he stops running, and he’s breathing heavily. Shouto can hear the frown in his voice. “What are you talking about? I’m asking you to be my sidekick, dude, not for recommendations from your agency.”

The tea in Shouto’s cup freezes solid around the head of the spoon and fractures the porcelain with a musical clink. Shouto knows he’s staring straight ahead, unseeing and probably looking like an idiot. He can’t help it.

Shouto doesn’t want to say he’s hopeful, but. Well, he’s hopeful.

Midoriya fills his silence. “Look, I…” he trails, sounding almost nervous. “I know it’s sudden. And I know America isn’t exactly close, but my agency can fly you home every weekend if that’s what you need to do. You can even crash at my place while you’re here so you don’t have to stay in a hotel.” He swallows thickly. “I don’t know, I was just really hoping— I mean, it’d be cool if we could work together again. Like old times. You know?”

“I’m already someone else’s sidekick,” he blurts, even though it’s the exact opposite of what he wants to say. The logical side of his brain is painting words onto the back of his throat faster than he can wipe them away. “I can’t just leave my agency without proper cause. You know that.”

“Already taken care of,” he assures him. “My agency called yours a few days ago and cleared everything legally, so you’d be good to go for a temporary transfer.” A pause, and he adds, “If you want, I mean. You can totally say no.”

“My agency didn’t tell me any of this,” Shouto says numbly. He sinks back in his seat, raking a hand through his hair and shaking his head in disbelief.

“Oh. Uh, yeah, sorry about that. That’s probably my fault.” Midoriya winces, and it sounds like he kicks something in the background—a piece of trash, maybe, or a drainpipe. “I wanted to be the one to offer the position to you when the time came. Figured you’d have an easier time shooting me down than some no-name executive over the phone.” His voice is wry, but Shouto’s
known him long enough to hear the undercurrent of nerves behind his syllables.

Shouto wants to say yes. He wants to get up from the bistro, dump his crossword in the trash, and hop on the first plane out of the city. He wants to fight by Midoriya’s side because it’s been years since they’ve worked together, and Shouto hasn’t meshed that flawlessly with someone in the field since—well, ever. Yaoyorozu comes close, but there’s still that horrible three-millisecond delay between their thought processes, and it’s enough to make things difficult in tight spots.

But Shouto can’t be selfish, even if he wants to be. The world has never been so kind to him; there’s no reason to think things have changed.

“There are better sidekicks out there, Midoriya,” he says quietly. “I shouldn’t be your first choice.”

Midoriya lets out a long sigh and mutters something under his breath that’s drowned out by more of Bakugou’s screaming and subsequent explosions. “Well, think about it for a minute,” he starts patiently. “I need a sidekick with long-range attacks and maneuverability—not sure if you’ve noticed, but you’ve got both in spades. I also need someone who can take care of themselves in close combat.” Shouto hears a smile curve Midoriya’s mouth. “You’ve kicked my ass more times than I can count, Todoroki.”

“Back in high school, maybe,” he mutters. He swallows. “Tokoyami could serve you just as well. Or Iida.”

“Iida’s got his own agency to worry about,” Midoriya supplies. “And, uh. I’m not exactly keen on sharing an apartment with Dark Shadow—no offense to Tokoyami. Nice guy and all, but, uh… yikes.”

Shouto bites the inside of his cheek until his teeth meet and he tastes iron. “You really had this argument planned out, didn’t you?”

Midoriya laughs breathlessly. “Well, duh. No joke, I was this close to making a PowerPoint presentation with, like, pie charts and infographics and shit. One of my friends at the agency had to talk me down from it. She said if I didn’t call you, she’d do it herself.”

Shouto feels one side of his mouth quirk up in a half-smile. His left cheek burns suspiciously hot, but he doesn’t bother to check if he’s on fire or not. “Pie charts, huh? I pegged you as more of a line graph kind of guy.”

“Well, it depends on the type of data, obviously—”

“Oh, obviously.”

“—but I’ve always been pretty fond of pie charts. Bar graphs are a close second.” There’s a stagnant silence on the other end of the line, and he can practically hear Midoriya’s creeping smile. “Is this your weird way of saying yes?”

“It’s my weird way of saying maybe.”

“So, that’s a partial yes. What percentage of yes are we talking about here, just for reference? ‘Cause I’m sort of on a tight schedule, you know—being the Symbol of Peace and all that. Keeps me busy.”

Shouto doodles little squiggles on his newspaper with his pen. He tugs his lower lip between his teeth. “Mm. Busy. Right.”
“Don’t make me beg.” Another pause, this one full of stifled smiles. “Come on, just accept already! You know you want to. It’s been, what, two years since we last worked together?”

“Two and a half,” he corrects.

Midoriya huffs. “Well, that’s two and a half years too long. What do you say?”

Shouto focuses on the frozen tea in his mug and slowly melts it, watching with pink cheeks as it seeps through the stress fracture near the handle and drips onto the concrete below the wrought-iron bistro table. He heaves a long sigh.

“I suppose I could use a vacation,” he says carefully.

Midoriya’s voice is ten times lighter with the sound of his thousand-watt grin. “Oh my god, really?” He’s breathless, laughing between his words. “‘Cause I can make that PowerPoint if you’re still hesitant. I mean, I can draw up all the pie charts for you. And maybe a few line graphs, since you’re apparently into that sort of—”

There’s another deafening explosion on the other end of the line, this one a lot closer than the last, and Shouto winces as he hears Bakugou scream for assistance in the background, making colorful usage of the word “fuck” in about seventeen different ways. He’s gotten more creative over the years, it would seem.

Midoriya sucks air between his teeth and wheezes a little. “Shit, I gotta go. I’ll have my agency call yours later today to get things set up. Sound good?”

“Sounds great.” Sounds perfect. Shouto hesitates for a moment before adding, “Be careful, Midoriya.”

A good-natured scoff cuts through the speaker. “What are you talking about?” he says. “I’m always careful.”

The line goes dead in the middle of one of Bakugou’s more long-winded curses, and the sudden silence plunges Shouto back into the heart of the city where he sits at a bistro table with a cracked teacup and an unfinished crossword puzzle covered in nonsensical squiggles. Servers dance between tables with pleasant smiles on their faces, and passersby seem oblivious to the fact that Shouto’s world just inverted for all the best reasons. Colors seem a little brighter than they did before, and gravity feels a little less restrictive. Shouto looks down at his unfinished crossword.

Oh.

The answer is perjurer.

He doesn’t bother to fill it in.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr | Twitter | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist
Chapter Summary

2019 — five days after Midoriya Izuku's phone call to Todoroki Shouto

Shouto: 20

Izuku: 21

Chapter Notes

We have FAN ART, IT'S SO AMAZING I CAN'T BREATHE. All credit to thacmis, who has changed my life in the best way possible.

October 12, 2019

Shouto really hates flying.

Maybe it’s because he’s been a part of too many search-and-rescue operations involving plane crashes in the forests north of the city where he operates. Maybe it’s the realization that being trapped in a metal tube 30,000 feet above the ground isn’t an ideal place for him to be in case of a spontaneous villain attack. Maybe it’s because airline food always upsets his stomach. Hell, maybe it’s a combination of all three, he doesn’t know.

The security line is too long and the lady in front of him steps on his toes no fewer than three times. The TSA agent feels him up a little too closely, and he sees a few camera flashes out of the corner of his eye as he shoves his sneakers back on his feet, being careful to keep his face tilted toward the floor so his fangirls don’t get a good shot of him. He knows the grey knit beanie doesn’t do much to cover the trademark colors of his hair from prying eyes, and it certainly doesn’t help that his scar is on full display in the fluorescent lighting of the terminal. As he trots toward his departure gate, he hears the whispers and sees security guards relax infinitesimally as he slips through the crowd. A few kids ask for his autograph here and there, but he barely has time to scrawl out a short message to each of them before he’s packed onto his plane like a sardine with his knees up to his ears in his tiny, verging on cruel-and-unusual economy-class seat—right next to the deafening engine on the right wing that proceeds to blow out his eardrum for the next twelve hours.

Amazing.

The in-flight movie is something American and edited for content, so all the funny jokes are taken out and the bad language replaced with kid-friendly words that make Shouto cringe and squirm. Somehow, this infraction is the most offensive to him. By the third hour of his flight, he’s ready to
As nighttime descends far too early, Shouto closes his eyes and reminds himself why he’s doing this. He’s going to see Midoriya. He’s going to help his friend, get a good endorsement from him, and then Shouto will be a pro hero in his own right. Things will fall into place. This will be worth it, dammit.

Repeating it over and over again in his head doesn’t really help.

Kilometers dwindle. Todoroki keeps his head down and his heart rate up the entire time, his muscles tensed and ready to snap into action at the slightest provocation—a villain, a crying child, turbulence, you name it. He keeps his beanie pulled as low as possible over his scar and his eyes downcast the entire time, refusing food when the stewardesses offer it, but relenting long enough to request a ginger ale in hopes of calming the bouncing nerves in his stomach. He trains his gaze on the blue-black expanse of the Pacific below them and tries to pretend he’s not keyed up enough to give himself an ulcer or three.

Sleep eludes him. Time creeps past. Todoroki tries not to claw his way out of his skin.

Todoroki doesn’t know what to expect from the criminals in a place like New York City, but he’s got his hero costume on beneath his civilian clothes just in case everything goes to shit the second he steps foot on American soil—which isn’t entirely out of the realm of possibility, he knows. It’s simple fact that Midoriya attracts trouble like a magnet on his good days, and now that he’s the official Symbol of Peace, it’s even worse than before. Shouto needs to be ready for anything. (Or maybe he’s just being paranoid and wants to make a good impression. It’s been two and a half years since Shouto and Deku have teamed up together publicly. What if Midoriya looks at Shouto and finds him lacking—the stainless steel of his skills turned inexplicably rusty in the damp air of too much time?)

He stashes that particular thought in a box and shoves it into one of the shadowed recesses of his mind. Happy thoughts, happy thoughts.

He has to be ready for anything, Shouto tells himself as he tries to keep his temperature from fluctuating dangerously. The last thing he wants is for Midoriya to regret his decision and send Shouto home prematurely, calling it quits on their yearly Friendship Day for the rest of forever because he finally finds out Shouto sucks that much.

He can’t sleep on the plane ride over to New York no matter how hard he squeezes his eyes shut and tries to count those fluffy white sheep. Instead, he entertains himself with the silver zipper on the cuff of his costume beneath his hoodie, fingers toying with the cold metal like it’s his only handhold on reality. He zips and unzips, relishing the sharp sound of the metal teeth as they clash together, all while his nerves manifest in the form of a twitching eye and a tapping foot. His seat neighbor probably hates him by the time they’re somewhere over Missouri (or maybe it’s Utah—Shouto never really paid much attention in geography class), but the man wisely says nothing upon seeing the grim set of Shouto’s jaw and the half-healed scratches on his cheek he received from a villain three days prior.

By the time the glittering glass spires of New York City come into view, Shouto feels like he’s about to die. Actually, he feels like he’s about to throw up, then die. He jumps about a foot in the air when the landing gear touches down on the runway with a sharp jolt that rattles him all the way down to his bones.
Once he’s off the plane, the sudden barrage of English in the airport makes Shouto’s head spin—bright advertisements and loud voices seem to come from every direction, drowning him in a deluge of stimuli that he can’t sort out for the life of him. Numbly, he makes his way toward baggage claim and the pick-up area, not entirely convinced he’s going in the right direction until he spots people from his flight walking a few feet in front of him.

Todoroki contents himself with leaning against a nearby pillar while baggage from his flight cycles through the carousel, keeping his eyes peeled for his own suitcase. Families are talking animatedly around him, gesturing wildly with their hands and tapping out texts on their phones with blurring fingers. He focuses on picking out sentences he recognizes, stretching his English vocabulary for the first time in two and a half years like an atrophied muscle he’s been too preoccupied to use. He misses a few words here and there in the conversations around him, but his English isn’t as rusty as he thought it would be, so that’s good, he supposes.

Suddenly, the hair on the back of Todoroki’s neck stands on end. Someone is watching him.

His fingers spasm in his pockets, going stiff with the rest of the muscles in his body, tight and ready to fight at the drop of a hat. He looks around the room—there’s no difference in the crowd that he can see, and the security guards on the perimeter don’t look half as tense as Shouto feels—but something electric floats on the air, something Shouto can’t quite identify. The buzz of the crowd gradually becomes muffled and indistinct as he tries to focus in on the source.

"Check your corners, do a full sweep. Mark your exits."

He feels a warm presence at his back.

“Hey, Todoroki— augh!”

Todoroki reacts automatically, his hand darting up to snatch the wrist of the person trying to tap his shoulder. His grip is like iron and he heaves, leaning forward sharply and twisting the person behind him painfully until Todoroki flips the villain over his shoulder, and he lays the guy out flat on the dirty airport tile. Shouto’s still got a firm grip on the villain’s wrist, twisting and bracing a foot against his shoulder to dislocate it when—

Green fills his field of vision. Lots and lots of green.

“Midoriya!” Shouto gasps, releasing the Symbol of Peace’s wrist like he’s been burned. He feels the blood drain from his face in horror as he looks at the splayed limbs of his best friend on the grimy tile floor of LaGuardia Airport.

Midoriya cracks open one startlingly green eye, his hair spread out behind him in a mass of loose curls. Todoroki feels like he’s frozen himself over, his skin tingling with the dull ache of numbness and abject nausea. He might as well get back on the plane and change his name at this point because there’s no possible way to come back from something as mortifying as this.

From his splayed out position on the floor, Midoriya gives Todoroki a weak thumbs up with his scarred hand. “Nice form,” he wheezes, smiling crookedly.

Todoroki’s face is blistering and he’s pretty sure his left side is smoking beneath his clothes because holy shit he just assaulted the Symbol of Peace in plain view of the entire world. He fights to control his temperature through the barrage of blind panic that’s set in, taking deep breaths and thinking of places like Antarctica and his mother’s frigid embrace. Bursting into spontaneous flames wouldn’t exactly endear him to the airport staff, he reckons.
Once his temperature is around a balmy 140 degrees, he reaches out and wraps his hand around Midoriya’s outstretched wrist, cinching his fingers against Midoriya’s pulse point beneath his cool skin. Todoroki gently pulls him to his feet, steadying Midoriya when he staggers to one side dangerously.

“I’m sorry,” Shouto stammers. He exhales sharply and shakes his head. “I didn’t— I mean, you just—“

“Hey, it’s okay.” Midoriya rolls the shoulder Todoroki tried to dislocate in his haste and winces slightly, but then his dimples crease as he smiles blithely. “It was my fault. I shouldn’t have snuck up on you like that.”

“I just judo-flipped you over my shoulder.”

“Yeah, and it was, like, the coolest thing ever.” He shrugs. “I’m impressed.”

Shouto rips his beanie off and rakes through his hair with his fingers, destroying the clean line of his part in his distress. He covers his eyes with a hand and squeezes them shut. If this is a dream, it’s a shitty one, and he’d really like to wake up right now and save himself from further embarrassment. He breathes deeply and tries pinching the skin of his forearm.

It doesn’t work. Goddammit.

Only then does the rest of the world begin to filter back in, trickling through the fine mesh sieve of his senses one droplet at a time. He hears panicked murmuring and sees the flashing of phone cameras through the spaces between his fingers, the gasps and half-hissed exclamations of, “Mom, that’s Deku!” and, “Do you think he’ll sign my notebook?”

Shouto even hears a few mentions of his own name, but those are few and far between; he’s not as well-known on this side of the planet, clearly. He’s never been more thankful for his lack of notoriety.

Suddenly, Shouto feels vibrations through the soles of his feet—somewhere, someone is running. Several someones, actually. Dropping his hand from his face, Shouto barely has time to suck in a breath before a handful of armed guards are on him with bruising fingers, half-shouted questions, and the cold touch of Quirk-suppressing handcuffs around his wrists.

He’s been in America less than half an hour and he’s already being arrested. Fantastic. Endeavor’s going to have a conniption when he hears about this.

Closing his eyes, Shouto resigns himself to his fate.

“—want to press charges, sir?” he hears through all the commotion.

“What?” Midoriya’s voice. He sounds flabbergasted. “N-no! He’s my friend! It was an accident.”

“He attacked you,” says another officer, his voice gruff.

“And I’m telling you it was an accident,” he says, his voice firmer than it was a second ago. A huff, and his tone turns pleading. “Come on, guys. You know I wouldn’t lie to you. It was my fault, really. Let him go.”

Todoroki feels the grip on his arms slacken ever so slightly. A hesitation. Tentatively, he cracks his eyes open, almost hopeful. The uniformed man standing in front of Midoriya looks conflicted, his gaze flickering back and forth between the two heroes in front of him. The crowd chatters
nervelessly all around them with their phones out to record the event down to the minutest detail. Not for the first time in his life, Todoroki wishes he could melt into a puddle and disappear into nothingness for the rest of forever.

Finally, the guard heaves a sigh and gestures at the two guys holding Todoroki’s elbows in a vice behind his back. He feels the release of the handcuffs and exhales in relief as his power courses through his veins, bright and burning in the best way possible. Steam curls past his nostrils.

Then there’s Midoriya’s warm, strong hand on his shoulder, pushing Shouto through the crowd with apologies spilling past his lips and blinding smiles sent into the depths of the crowd around them. He’s brighter than the sun, casting shadows in every direction so Todoroki can slip into one and disappear, hide himself from the prying eyes who look at him and think, ‘What the hell is someone like you doing with our Symbol of Peace?’

Todoroki wishes he had an answer. He wishes a lot of things, really.

As they pass the baggage claim, Shouto is lucky enough to spot his bag coming around the corner of the carousel; he scoops it up without missing a step and falls in beside Midoriya as they walk toward the far doors near the taxi pick-up. Midoriya’s hand has now migrated to the middle of Shouto’s back, pressing him forward with gentle strength that feels a lot more comforting than he expects.

Once they’re both tucked safely in the backseat of an Uber headed toward the heart of downtown Manhattan, Midoriya slumps in his seat and presses the heels of his hands against his eye sockets with a groan. “I saw that going differently in my mind. I’m so sorry, Todoroki.”

Todoroki waves him off and contents himself with watching the traffic race past them on the freeway. His cheeks burn. “It was my fault.”

“You almost got arrested back there because of me.”

“Because of me,” he corrects. “I’m the one that attacked you.”

“And I’m the one who snuck up on you in the first place. I should’ve known you’d react in self-defense like that.” Midoriya lets his hands fall into his lap and drops his gaze to his feet dejectedly. “It wasn’t exactly the welcome wagon I’d hoped for, is all. I wanted to surprise you.”

“Well,” he says carefully, his lips quirking slightly. “To be fair, you did.”

“Oh, ha-ha.” Midoriya snorts and kicks his feet up on the back of the passenger’s seat, his red shoes clashing horrendously with the scuffed upholstery. “Glad at least one of us is able to joke about it.”

As they near the epicenter of the city, the skyscrapers gradually grow taller, sticking out of the ground like half-sprouted glass shards covered in multicolored lights and flashing advertisements. Rust-colored leaves float through the air despite the suspicious lack of trees in the near vicinity, and people crowd the sidewalks in scarves and buttoned-up jackets as they make their way across town, lost in their own lives and problems. It’s a busy, bustling city, not entirely unlike Tokyo, but everything seems twice as large here in some way or another: the streets are wider, the cars louder, and the people choke the streets and walkways with too much personality for the trappings of their skin.

Everything here is simply… more. Like a cup of water that’s too full to move without some of it spilling over the sides. Todoroki doesn’t know how Midoriya can stand it, drowning daily in the
pulsing lifeblood of the too-bright-too-loud city of Manhattan.

But then again, Midoriya’s always been more, hasn’t he? He’s overabundance incarnate, the definition of “too much” made flesh. His smile is too bright, his Quirk is too powerful, and his laugh is a little too loud for fancy restaurants or libraries. He breaks buildings and smashes city blocks apart with his fingers and takes on impossible causes just because he knows he has enough heart to spare.

Maybe Manhattan suits Midoriya more than Tokyo ever did. Maybe Todoroki wishes this weren’t the case. Maybe Todoroki is selfish.

Maybe he’s okay with that.

Todoroki glances sidelong at Midoriya, who is toying with his shoelaces absentmindedly, twisting them into knots and untying them just as quickly. Now that they’re not high on adrenaline and under the scrutiny of total strangers, Todoroki takes a moment to notice the breadth of Midoriya’s shoulders and the way his hair is slightly shorter than he usually wears it; it’s trimmed closer at the nape of his neck, almost like a stylish sort of undercut that looks… surprisingly good on him. It highlights his square jawline and shows off the tendons in his neck that lead down to his sharp collarbones where they peek out above the collar of his t-shirt and zip hoodie.

“You look good,” Todoroki says quietly, turning back to his window to watch the buildings blur past.

It’s not a weird thing to say to a friend, not at all. Commenting on simple facts of nature is never weird. (What is weird, however, is the way Shouto’s ears burn as soon as the words are past his lips. That usually doesn’t happen.)


“Have you gotten taller?”

“Yeah, actually.” Midoriya laughs and ducks his head. “They claim it’s my last growth spurt. Would you believe I’ve got an inch on Kacchan now?”

The thought is more than a little amusing. “Bet he’s thrilled about that.”

“Oh, it drives him nuts. Seriously, next time we do an interview, watch him. I’m pretty sure he stands on his tiptoes when he thinks I’m not looking.”

Todoroki snorts and Midoriya begins to laugh, and suddenly it’s a lot like slotting the final piece into the center of a puzzle when the piece in question has been hiding underneath the carpet for a while. Todoroki can finally see the entire image laid out before him, a snapshot of things that used to be. He can finally fall into the familiar spot that’s been vacant in his chest for so long. This routine, this cadence of conversation they carry so effortlessly.

It’s like coming home.

“Hey,” Midoriya murmurs, catching Todoroki’s attention as they pass through Times Square. Todoroki turns his head from the thin layer of glass that separates them from the rest of the world and raises an inquisitive eyebrow. Midoriya gives him a concerned look. “You didn’t sleep on the plane, did you?”

Todoroki shrugs. “Not really. I don’t care much for planes anymore.”
“I know what you mean. I had to catch a few jet airliners over the Hudson last summer. Now, even looking at a 747 makes me twitchy.” He shudders dramatically, but Todoroki gets the feeling he’s not solely doing it for comedic purposes, if the shadows in the recesses of his eyes are anything to go by. Still, he plasters on a smile for Todoroki. “Want to nap when we get to my place? We aren’t patrolling until the day after tomorrow, so we’ve got some time to kill if you want to sleep a bit.”

“Thank you, but I’d like to get caught up with this time zone.”

His face scrunches. “A nap won’t kill you, Todoroki.”

“It will be easier for me to sleep later tonight if I stay awake now. And I’d prefer to use our time today to spar, if it’s all right with you.”

Midoriya blinks. “You just got off a twelve-hour flight and you want to spar?” He shakes his head, a disbelieving half-laugh escaping his lips. “Only you, Todoroki. Only you.”

Todoroki raises an eyebrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that most people would want to, I don’t know, see the Statue of Liberty or some crap like that when they’re in New York for the first time. Not spar.”

Todoroki frowns. Sightseeing isn’t on his list of things to do in America—it isn’t even in the top twenty. He’s here to do a job, not play tourist for two weeks, and he plans on not fucking it up like he does with everything else in his life. There were thousands of prospective heroes Midoriya could’ve chosen from—better heroes, Shouto reasons bitterly—but he chose to place his trust in Shouto, and damnit, that means something. Todoroki refuses to let him down.

He tells Midoriya as much, and gets another disbelieving laugh for his trouble. “Jeez. You’re as serious as ever,” Midoriya tells him warmly, his eyes effulgent with things unsaid.

Todoroki just looks at him, frowning slightly. “You were expecting something different?”

Two heartbeats pass as Midoriya watches him carefully, his green eyes soft and sweet and so fucking reflective that Todoroki wonders, not for the first time, how Midoriya never managed to have a girlfriend in high school. Why he never showed the slightest bit of interest toward anyone who threw themselves at him for the sake of those captivating, expressive eyes that always seem to pierce straight through Todoroki’s soul and see out the other side like he’s made of glass.

Why why why. Too many questions, not enough answers.

Midoriya’s mouth twists into a soft smile that sends Todoroki’s fingers curling into the leather seats of the car. It’s not enough to tilt the world on its axis, but it’s enough to shake the ground beneath his feet and rattle the window frames of his heart all the way down to the crumbling foundation.

That stupid smile. Those stupidly long eyelashes. Todoroki wants to hurl himself into oncoming traffic.

“No,” Midoriya says quietly, freckles disappearing into his dimples. “I wasn’t expecting anything. Just you.”

Chapter End Notes
It’s not bragging to say Midoriya Izuku is the number one hero in the world. He’s the Symbol of Peace, an icon of everything right and just in society, and he regularly risks his life to save people he’s never seen or heard of before just because he knows he can. He’s willing to take those risks and get his hands dirty, to sacrifice himself for the greater good and smile in the face of imminent death.

But that doesn’t mean he’s brave. Not at all. In fact, when it comes to Todoroki Shouto, Izuku is probably the biggest coward on the planet, and he’ll be the first one to say it.

Izuku can feel his palms sweating uncomfortably against the plastic handle of Todoroki’s suitcase as he pushes open the door to his flat with his shoulder, which is still slightly sore from being manhandled in the airport. Todoroki is frustratingly quiet behind him as they enter the foyer, as he always is, but his exhaustion-ringed eyes are bright with thinly-veiled curiosity as he takes in the expanse of Midoriya’s living space—the only part of Izuku’s life the magazines and interviews haven’t put on display.

Izuku bites his lower lip as he sets Todoroki’s suitcase next to the door of the guest bedroom. It’s no secret that being the Symbol of Peace pays well, but he can’t help but feel slightly nervous as Todoroki pads silently around his expansive living room, eyeing the modern appliances in the attached kitchen, or the pastel cushioned bench in the breakfast nook near the balcony, which Izuku usually swan dives off of whenever he gets an emergency call in the middle of his morning bowl of cereal. If Izuku had to guess, he could probably fit three of Todoroki’s apartments in this lavish space and still have room to spare.

Izuku watches as Todoroki eyes the floor-to-ceiling windows on the far wall warily, his gaze skimming across the sharp city skyline and the shimmering surface of the Hudson River where it churns idyllically in the distance. His hair is a tousled mess and his shoulders are slumped with jet-lagged exhaustion that he refuses to acknowledge for some stupid reason. The years have been kind to him, sharpening his features and broadening his shoulders more than Izuku ever thought possible.

And he looks so beautiful in the pale light of morning that Izuku wonders if requesting this sidekick transfer was a good idea after all.

_Hold it together, Izuku. It’s only two weeks._

But twenty-four hours per year is one thing—fourteen days is another beast altogether. And they’re only going to be separated by a flimsy wall that Izuku could punch through with his pinky finger.

Jesus. Izuku is _doomed._

“Nice view,” Todoroki says quietly, looking down at the jammed streets below them.

His voice is low and rough with exhaustion, and Izuku feels a shiver crawl up his spine involuntarily. Izuku’s heard that voice do all sorts of things over the years—call out orders across a battlefield, murmur amusing comments about Aizawa-sensei’s lectures he thought no one else
could hear, explain mathematical concepts that Midoriya always had trouble with during study sessions when they were in school—but that specific tone is the one meant specifically for Izuku, not anyone or anything else. It’s low and personal and stunning, and Izuku swears he’ll take the sound of it to his grave.

He swallows thickly. “Uh, yeah. It’s a nice location, I guess. My agency picked it out for me.”

“This is the center of the city.” It’s not a question. Todoroki simply understands that this is the best place for Izuku to be in case of an emergency—equidistant from everyone and everything that needs protecting.

“Pretty close to it, yeah.”

He hums. “Nice place. Convenient.”

He shrugs. “It’s a little too big for my tastes, but it serves its purpose,” Izuku says, laughing awkwardly. He rubs the back of his neck, which suddenly feels very warm. “It’ll be nice to share it with someone for a change.”

Todoroki glances at him, eyebrows twitching together for half an instant. “Are you sure it’s okay for me to stay here? I don’t want to impose.”

There’s literally no one else in the world Izuku would ever even consider letting in here, much less allow to stay in his guest bedroom, but he doesn’t say that because that opens up doors he’d much rather ignore for the sake of his own sanity. Instead, he simply smiles. “After all the times I’ve crashed at your place? It’s more than okay, Todoroki.”

Todoroki’s eyes are piercing and unreadable, but his lips twitch in a semblance of a smile after a heartbeat. He dips his head. “I appreciate it.”

Not as much as I do.

Izuku swallows his feelings like crushed glass and rakes a hand through his unruly hair, choosing to focus on giving Todoroki the tour without stuttering horrendously every time Todoroki’s arm accidentally brushes his own (because dear god it feels like his skin’s burning to a crisp even when it’s Todoroki’s right side that touches him). Izuku babbles senselessly to fill the silence, going on about the kitchen appliances and how to operate the shower they’re going to be sharing for the next two weeks, as well as detailing the location of Izuku’s room and apologizing for not buying flame-retardant sheets for the guest bed Todoroki will be sleeping on.

Todoroki absorbs all of this information in like a sponge, only stopping Izuku’s word-vomit to ask the occasional question or comment on how lovely the wall art in the bathroom is. His face is impassive and gorgeous and unreadable beneath the silken fringe of his hair. Izuku wishes Todoroki would just immolate him and get it over with before he starts reciting the Gettysburg Address out of sheer desperation for something to say.

When the tour is done, Todoroki and Izuku are left standing an arm’s width apart in the guest bedroom. The lights are dim and accentuate the shadows beneath Todoroki’s eyes, casting shadows across the sharp angles of his cheekbones. (Izuku bets he could probably cut himself on those cheekbones, given the chance. He’d gladly bleed for a cause like that.)

Izuku follows Todoroki’s tired gaze to the inviting surface of the mattress. He bites back a smile. “It’s really soft, if you want to try it out,” he hints, elbowing Todoroki softly in the ribs.

Todoroki gives him a flat look. “That’s never worked before. It’s not going to work now.”
“Oh, come on.” He gestures up and down at the slumped figure Todoroki cuts in the doorway. “Humor me just this once. You look dead on your feet right now. I’m not kidding.”

“Gee, thanks.” His voice is dry.

Izuku huffs and rolls his eyes. He’s pretty sure Todoroki could roll around in a garbage dump and not shower for three months and he’d still look like he came straight from a magazine photoshoot. “Shut up, you know what I meant.” He bumps Todoroki with his shoulder good-naturedly. “Please? A one hour nap is all I’m asking.”

But Todoroki is resolute. He shakes his head. “You know that’ll throw off my sleep cycle.”

“One hour will not throw off your sleep cycle!”

“You sleep more easily than I do. Of course you’d say that.”

“Fine.” Izuku crosses his arms. “How about forty-five minutes?”

Todoroki is not swayed. “No.”

“Thirty?”

“No.”

Izuku sighs dramatically and flops backward onto the bed, spearing Todoroki with a pouty look. He pats the bed next to him and exhales slowly, trying to sound enticing. “You know, it’s the least you could do for me since you attacked me in the airport—”

That’s what does it.

Todoroki’s face crumples into something vaguely shocked and horrified at Izuku’s words. Abruptly, like someone went and knocked out his knees with a lead pipe, Todoroki turns around and sits down heavily on the edge of the bed, fisting his hands in his lap while he glares down at his socked feet. It’s hard to tell in the darkness of the room, but Izuku thinks his cheeks are slightly pinker than they were a few seconds ago.

(Izuku wonders how far down that blush goes. He wonders if it’s as warm as Todoroki’s left side.)

“It’s… very comfy,” Todoroki mutters. He glances over his shoulder at Izuku, the blueness of his eye practically glowing from behind the ruddy fringe of his hair. He lifts an eyebrow. “Happy?”

“Not even remotely.” Before Izuku can think twice about it, he lunges forward and snags the back of Todoroki’s t-shirt, clutching the fabric between his fingers and yanking him backward so he’s laid out across the mattress with a soft grunt of protest. Izuku grins, lacing his fingers behind his head. “There. Now I’m happy.”

Todoroki glares up at the ceiling, his soft-looking mouth turned down at the corners in vague annoyance, but he doesn’t attempt to sit back up. His hair is splayed out beneath him against the grey comforter and his jawline carves a harsh shadow against the line of his neck, but the regal slope of his forehead and nose is all Izuku sees in that moment. He fights to tear his gaze away, feeling hot shame course through his veins like molten metal. He shouldn’t be ogling his friend like this. Honestly, has he no shame? (The answer is a definitive no. No, he doesn’t. And he’s okay with that.)

He loves it when Todoroki’s hair gets pushed out of his face. It’s stupid and vapid in every
discernable way, but everything about this is stupid, so maybe it’s okay. Just as long as Todoroki never finds out about it, everything will be fine. *Normal.*

Several moments of silence pass by. The only sound between them is the companionable sound of synchronized breathing and the muted rush of blood in Izuku’s ears. Todoroki’s right side sends ripples of goosebumps up and down Midoriya’s arm.

“Hey, I… I missed you,” Izuku finally mumbles, keeping his eyes glued to the pale ceiling. He chokes out a faint laugh and shakes his head. “Like, so much. I know it’s dumb. I mean, it sounds dumb. You don’t have to tell me.”

He waits for a response, but he’s unsurprised when it doesn’t come. Todoroki’s always been a man of few words. The silence yawns like a bottomless canyon, begging to be filled with something—no, *everything.*

Izuku stands on the precipice, teetering dangerously. He’d tumble in head-first if he thought he’d survive the fall, but he’s never even glimpsed the bottom before. He’s not that brave.

But *god,* he wants to tell Todoroki so many things. Like that the past ten months have felt like ten years, waiting anxiously for the news to tell him that Todoroki’s been killed in action or injured or missing; Izuku’s mind has always been an expert at filling in the blanks with frightening possibilities. He wants Todoroki to know how he keeps tabs on his blossoming career over in Japan, and how closely he watches Endeavor to make sure that asshole isn’t bothering his son more than absolutely necessary. (Endeavor’s always been at the top of Izuku’s shit list, but seeing Todoroki’s horrific burns last year sealed Endeavor in the Number One position for the rest of time. That bastard has it coming, and when that day arrives, Izuku will be there to watch him burn. Happily.)

Izuku yearns to tell Todoroki that every time he’s picked up the phone to call and check in, he’s chickened out because he’s convinced he’ll suddenly blurt, “Hey, I know it’s been a while, but I’ve been in love with you since third year and I just really wanted you to know that because I can’t bear the thought of you being with anyone else except me, so will you please have dinner with me sometime?”

Every word sits on the tip of Izuku’s tongue, threatening to tumble out. He swallows them back. *Someday.*

“I’m glad you’re here,” Izuku whispers, tucking those strangled feelings down where no one can ever find them. He curls his fingers into the fabric of his zip hoodie directly over his heart where it’s most painful. “It… it means a lot to me that you came. So, thank you.”

Izuku holds his breath. Did he give too much away? Todoroki’s always been too perceptive for his own good. Izuku turns slowly, scared of seeing the look on his face…

Oh.

Todoroki’s eyes are closed, red and white eyelashes casting lengthy shadows across his face as he sleeps peacefully. His lips are slightly parted and his face is relaxed as he takes long, even breaths; it lends his features an innocent softness that makes Izuku's lungs seize up painfully, swelling until they feel three times too big for the confines of his ribcage. He longs to reach out and trace the outline of his mouth with his index finger, to tangle his fingers in Todoroki’s hair just to see if it’s as soft as it looks. It’s just so *tempting.*

Izuku rolls onto his back and presses the heels of his hands against his eyes until he sees stars
imprinted on the backs of his eyelids.

“I am so unbelievably *fucked,*” he mutters.
As Shouto awakens, he becomes aware of several things all at once.

- He is not in his own bed. He is in someone else’s bed, in someone else’s room, and he has no idea how he got there in the first place. He’s never been the type to get black-out drunk and go home with strangers, but there’s a first time for everything, he supposes. Maybe he’s finally embracing his twenties like Ashido is always telling him to do. It’s just a shame he doesn’t remember any of it.
- Even without a visible clock somewhere in the darkened room, Shouto knows it’s verging on late afternoon or perhaps evening, both of which are frightening possibilities. He never sleeps past eight in the morning unless he’s hospitalized for injuries, and even then he feels bad dozing past nine-thirty.
- Despite the who-knows-how-many hours of sleep under his belt, Shouto is still really fucking tired.

He reaches up to rub at his eyes, groaning slightly as he feels the faint headache that’s cropped up right between his temples in the most unpleasant way. There’s an aching emptiness in his stomach and molten lead weighs down every vein in his body, making it extremely difficult to sit up. A thin flannel blanket with All Might’s symbol embroidered in the center crumples into his lap with the sudden movement.

Huh. All Might. Todoroki fingers the symbol, frowning as he tries to remember—

_Plane. Airport. New York._

_Midoriya._

Horror crests in his stomach. Scrambling off the bed, Shouto drops the blanket in a heap on the floor and bursts through the entrance of the guest bedroom, skidding down the hallway in his socks as he repeats _no, no, no_ in his head like a skipping record. He slides into the living room area, wheeling his arms to keep his balance as he rights himself and scans the room frantically.

He finds Midoriya flipping through his cell phone on the sofa nearest to the ridiculously large windows on the far side of the living room, the setting sun casting splashes of orange and gold across his serene features. His hair is messy and he’s wearing a thin t-shirt with grey sweatpants, multicolored socks on his feet that Shouto can’t help but stare at as Midoriya swings his right leg lazily where it hangs off the side of the sofa. He’s the picture of relaxation. Shouto considers burning himself at the stake right then and there.

Midoriya glances up from his screen with furrowed eyebrows, concern etched into his features, but a smile splits his face when he sees Shouto. “Oh, good,” he says. "You're awake. Do you want dinner? I don’t have much here, but I figured we could go out for your first night in town.”

“How long was I asleep?” he asks bluntly, feeling his face heat uncomfortably.

Midoriya glances at the scuffed face of his watch, pursing his lips. He shrugs. “Four hours, give or take.”

“Four _hours_?” Shouto notes the low position of the sun above the city skyline and rakes a
distressed hand through his tangled hair. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“I did. Twice. You attempted to set me on fire both times.”

Shouto blinks. “You— you’re lying.”

“Yeah, I am. But you almost believed me, didn’t you?” He laughs, eyes crinkling, and waves him off. “Nah, it wasn’t anything that bad. You just tried to hit me and mumbled something in your sleep about soba noodles or something like that. I figured it’d be easier to let you rest.”

Shouto doesn’t remember dreaming about soba noodles, but he wishes he did. A sudden craving for soba crests in his empty stomach with an inaudible growl. *Maybe later?*

Midoriya locks his phone and drops it into his lap, leaning back on the couch with his fingers laced behind his head; his t-shirt stretches across his chest and muscled shoulders in the most fascinating way. “Do you feel better now that you’ve slept?”

“No.” His voice is flat and scratchy with sleep and it feels like he’s been gargling with sand.

“Oh.” He shrugs. “Well, you look better. That’s got to count for something.”

Shouto sighs softly through his nose and rubs at his eyes. He looks around the apartment, noting the soft, amber lamplight and the curio shelf of All-Might action figures on the far wall that he remembers from Midoriya’s dorm room in high school. “You know I hate sleeping during the day, Midoriya. My sleep schedule—“

“Will be fine after we spar for a little bit,” Midoriya finishes insistently, standing up from the sofa and stepping toward Shouto. He stuffs his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants, which hang low around his hips as he rocks back and forth on his heels, smiling sheepishly. “That’s what you wanted to do, right? Because I, uh, called while you were sleeping and reserved the practice room at my agency—if you’re feeling up for it, I mean. We don’t have to if you’re too tired now, but I figured going a few rounds with me would tire you out enough to help you sleep through the night.”

Shouto’s fingers twitch at his side. He’s suddenly very distracted by the thin strip of skin he can see above the waistband of Midoriya’s sweatpants. “Oh. Um.”

Midoriya doesn’t sense his strife, thankfully. “It’s only a few blocks from here, so we could walk and get dinner on the way back or something.” A pause, and Midoriya bites his lower lip. Then, hurriedly, he adds, “B-but it’s really up to you. If you’re not up for it—“

“No.” Shouto tears his gaze from the tanned, scarred skin of Midoriya’s hip and instead stares at his neon socks like they’re the most interesting things he’s ever seen in his life. Shouto swallows thickly. “I mean yes. Yes. Fine. That sounds… fine.”

Relief blossoms in Midoriya’s eyes. “Oh. Good.”

“When are we leaving?”

“Well, it’s about a ten-minute walk to my agency from here.” He raises an eyebrow. “We could go now?”

“Now is fine.”

He really needs to stop saying fine.
“All right, then. I’ll grab my shoes.” Midoriya turns toward the front entryway where his ridiculous red shoes are piled haphazardly, but he stops, frowning. He eyes Shouto up and down pointedly. “Are you going to wear that, or…?”

Shouto suddenly realizes that he’s still wearing his civvies with his hero costume layered underneath—not the best outfit for sparring with Midoriya, unless he plans on losing every round because his jeans are too tight around his ankles for ideal movement. He tries not to flush in embarrassment. “Right. I’ll just go… change.”


Shouto nods, excusing himself with a low mutter. Once he’s tucked back in the dim safety of the guest bedroom, he attacks his suitcase and fishes out a pair of stretchy black track pants and a grey shirt that’s only slightly charred on the left side near the sleeve. He zips his hoodie up over it, cinching the collar in around his neck to fend off the autumnal chill, and grabs his water bottle before heading back out to the foyer. *(Hydration is important. He hears Iida’s voice in his head—it sounds like something he’d say.)*

When Shouto emerges, he finds Midoriya near the door, one shoulder braced against the wall casually. His jacket is zipped up and he clutches a bright red water bottle in his free hand as he scrolls through his phone aimlessly, no doubt keeping up with hero activity in the area.

He looks up with raised, expectant eyebrows as Shouto nears. He pockets his phone. “Ready to go?”

Shouto nods. “I’m right behind you.”

The elevator ride is long and silent, so Shouto contents himself with watching Midoriya’s fingers as they play with the plastic cap on his water bottle; he clasps and unclasps it every time they pass another floor. It’s quite possibly the most annoying thing Shouto’s ever heard in his life. Were it anyone besides Midoriya making that noise, Shouto probably would’ve said something by now, or perhaps melted the bottle with an ill-tempered huff and moved on with his life.

But it is Midoriya, so he doesn’t, and instead fingers one of the half-zippered pockets on his track pants like it’ll help him control his body temperature.

That is, until Midoriya finally speaks.

“How’s your mom?” he asks in between floors thirty-five and thirty-four. His tone is casual but quiet, almost like he’s sharing a secret.

Shouto thinks of his mother’s pale hair. Her cold, soft hands. Her warm smile. “She’s good. She’s taking painting classes twice a week at the hospital.”

Midoriya looks up with bright eyes and a smile that could jump-start the sun. “That sounds awesome. Is she any good at it?”

“Not really, but that’s not going to stop her.”

Midoriya hums, rubbing the back of his neck with his scarred hand. His smile has turned vaguely wry. “Sounds like someone else I know.”

“Who?”

“You.”
Todoroki’s heart stutters in his chest like an engine on the verge of turning over and his fingers spasm around his water bottle. He coughs awkwardly. “Oh. I see.”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” he murmurs, nudging Shouto with an elbow. His eyes are crinkled at the corners, his freckles look like flecks of cinnamon, and even in the shitty fluorescent lighting that flatters absolutely no one on planet Earth, Midoriya is… unmistakably adorable.

Ten floors to go.

Shouto drops his gaze to his shoes. “Thank you, Midoriya.”

“Don’t mention it,” is the reply he receives.

The silence is a bit more palatable after that.

The training room, Shouto discovers, takes up two entire floors of the agency’s building all by itself—the 57th and 58th floors, to be specific—and its ridiculous size means it was probably built with giantification and destruction Quirks in mind. Grey cinderblocks stretch as far as the eye can see and the ground is spongy beneath Shouto’s feet, a kinetic-absorbent navy surface that’s only minimally scratched up. A few scorch marks stain the pale walls here and there, and he sees some spidery cracks in sections of the walls that look like someone was forcibly thrown against them at some point in the past.

“So,” Midoriya starts, shedding his jacket and leaving him in a thin, stretchy t-shirt that makes Shouto’s mouth go dry. He gestures out at the cavernous room with a nervous smile. “Uh, this is… it. I know it’s not super fancy or anything, but we’ve got a lot of destructive heroes here, so we—” he shuffles his feet and winces “—um, we can’t have nice things.”

Shouto eyes the crumbling cinderblocks on the eastern side of the gymnasium. “Bakugou?” he guesses.

Midoriya actually looks sheepish, his cheeks flushing slightly. “Actually, it’s, ah… usually my fault. They’ve had to replace that back wall three times in the last six months.”

The wall in question is the only part of the room that isn’t covered in questionable stains and scuffs. Todoroki wonders how many people have been punted through the cinderblocks on accident, and how many times it was done on purpose. The thought leaves a coil of apprehension in his stomach as he eyes Midoriya’s more-than-toned arms, remembering a particular punch from the Sports Festival that left him with internal bleeding he didn’t bother to tell anyone about—except Recovery Girl, of course.

“Well, try not to send me through one of these walls, if you can help it. I’d hate to die my first day in America.”

His eyes brighten. “Oh, Support’s got a mesh BioNet around the perimeter at the twentieth floor, so you don’t have to worry. Even if you fell, you’d be fine, mostly. Just feels sorta tingly, like Kaminari’s hugs or when your foot goes numb after sitting in one position for too long. Like, uh. TV static, I guess? I don’t know. But it feels the way that stuff looks. It’s not loud though, so—.”

Shouto gives Midoriya a flat stare.

Shouto sheds his jacket so he’s just in his track pants and t-shirt, setting it and his water bottle on one of the benches near the door for safekeeping. Midoriya sets his things there as well, and both boys begin to stretch.

Shouto has his fingers clasped around his heel in a deep floor stretch when Midoriya speaks. “So,” he starts lightly, reaching for his toes, “what’s new with you? Update me on all the goings-on in Japan. I wanna hear it all.”

Somehow, Shouto highly doubts that Midoriya doesn’t know about every heroic occurrence in Japan, but maybe he’s just asking to be polite, or to fill the silence.

Feeling the burn in his ligaments, Shouto shrugs—or he does an approximation of one from his hunched position. “Not much. Everything’s pretty much the same.”

Midoriya levels him with a disbelieving stare. “You’re telling me that in ten months nothing interesting has happened to you?” He scoffs. “Come on, Todoroki. You’re a lot of things, but you’re not boring. Surely something is new in your life that I don’t know about.”


“Totally counts.” Midoriya bounces up onto his toes and begins stretching his shoulder muscles. The scars on his forearms ripple, shining silver in the harsh lighting. “Who’s the lucky guy?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never met him before. Apparently he lives in Fukuoka, and I don’t get down to Kyushu often enough to justify visiting. She says he’s really nice though.”

“What’s his Quirk?”

“He’s some kind of technopath, I think?” Shouto frowns, trying to remember. “Works for an engineering company. Can’t think of the name of it right now, but it’ll come to me.”

Midoriya raises his eyebrows and lets out a low whistle. “A technopath, huh? Those are pretty rare.”

“Yeah. She seems happy with him, as far as I can tell.”

Midoriya grins at him while rolling his shoulders. “Is your mom excited to help plan the wedding?”

“Thrilled, actually. It’s a little scary.” Shouto rolls up to his feet and begins stretching his arms across his chest. He grunts noncommittally. “But… she’s frustrated, too. She can’t do as much as she’d like from the hospital, and since the wedding will be in Kyushu, it’s even harder for her. She’s doing as much as she can though.”

Midoriya goes quiet for a moment. “And what about Endeavor? How’d he take the news?”

The sound of his father’s name used to make his blood boil. Now, it’s barely a simmer, but it’s unpleasant nonetheless. Shouto tamps his resentment down as deep as it will go.

“You know how he is.” Shouto shakes out his arms and bounces on his toes to keep his blood flowing. “When Fuyumi told him, he went on about ‘diluting the bloodline’ and familial disappointment—the usual stuff.”
“Charming.”

“Yeah.” Shouto snorts. “Fuyumi basically told him to fuck off and that he wasn’t invited.”

Midoriya barks out a laugh before clapping a hand to his mouth to stifle the sounds, but a few choked guffaws manage to make it past his fingers. His cheeks turn red and his eyes are full of shining delight that makes Shouto’s mouth twitch at the corners, unbidden.

He’s always loved Midoriya’s laugh, even when it emerges at Shouto’s own expense. He especially loves it when it bursts out of Midoriya’s mouth like a bottle of soda that’s been shaken to bursting, spilling past his lips in wave after wave of beautiful, sweet sound.

“I’m sorry,” he sputters, words muffled through his hand. His eyes are wide and watering. “I’m so sorry, but— oh my god, that’s amazing. Your sister is so cool, Todoroki! Like, fearless.”

Shouto aims a smile down at the scuffed floor. He thinks of his sister’s crooked smile and her tight-enough-to-suffocate-you hugs, the glasses she always forgets to take off before bed with the headache-inducing prescription reserved for the legally blind (she failed her driver’s test twice), and the mug of ginger tea that always seems to be in her hand no matter the time of day.

He thinks of the fierce set of her jaw and trembling hands when she stared Endeavor down across the dinner table and told him that he wasn’t welcome at her wedding. That she’d have Ichiro or Natsuo or even Shouto walk her down the aisle because she wasn’t going to sacrifice the happiest day of her life just for the sake of upholding the “fucking family image.”

Fuyumi is a badass. A badass who teaches kindergarten.

Shouto misses her.

“Yeah,” he murmurs, glancing up at Midoriya with a barely-there smile. “She really is.”

Midoriya’s eyes dart down to Shouto’s mouth, noting the curve of his lips that isn’t usually there. His face brightens, like he’s been given the most precious gift in the world, and he exhales a laugh that makes Shouto feel lighter than air. “I’d… I’d like to meet her one day. I mean, if she’s anything like you, she’s got to be amazing.”

A flood in his brain, fire in his bloodstream. Shouto’s ears sizzle and pop and blister, and he almost dares to hope for half a second that Midoriya wanting to meet his family (the parts of his family he likes, anyway) is a half-step toward a label Shouto’s never dreamed of having.

He dismisses the idea just as quickly.

“Sure,” is what he ends up saying, but his tone is full of empty promises. “Maybe someday.”

Midoriya doesn’t pick up on the lie. (Is it a lie?) He simply smiles, nods, and then gestures toward the expansive training area.

“All right. Ready to do this?” he asks.

Shouto squares his shoulders and nods, crossing the room to stand opposite Midoriya about thirty meters apart. He lowers his center of gravity and hesitantly calls forth a thin layer of frost to cover his left side—just in case. He always burns a little hotter when Midoriya’s in the room.

“Ready,” he calls out.
Midoriya raises his fists. He takes a step forward—

Then, he hesitates. Looks out from behind his clenched fists. “Are—” he frowns, a conflicted look on his face. “Are we going all-out or starting small? Just for, uh. For reference.”

Shouto raises an eyebrow. “You scared?”

“Of you? Not since second year of high school.” Midoriya grins cheekily. “If anyone should be scared, it’s you. But I still don’t want you to get hurt on accident or anything because I punch you too hard. Call me cautious.”

Shouto smirks and rubs his left index finger and thumb together, coaxing orange flames to life in his hand until they lick up the lengths of his fingers like a living, breathing glove. “Quit stalling and come at me, Deku. I’m getting bored.”

Midoriya blinks, stunned. Then he laughs and shakes his head. “All right, Shouto,” he says playfully. “You asked for it.”

“Loser buys dinner?”

“You’re on.”

They fight. And as Shouto sends wave after wave of ice and fire after Midoriya’s green, sparking figure, he realizes several things:

First, Midoriya is fast. Very fast. Even faster than he was a year ago, and that’s saying something. He bounces off the walls faster than a ricocheting bullet, kicking and flipping as he avoids Shouto’s blasts like he knows where they’re going to hit before they leave his hands. His eyes glint manically as he closes in on Shouto, but a wall of fire blocks his way before he can get close enough, forcing him back so Shouto can reevaluate his strategy. I don’t telegraph my moves that badly, do I?

No, he decides. Midoriya is just that quick to avoid them before they land.

Damn.

Second, Midoriya’s reach has increased exponentially. Gone is the short, lithe boy from UA, replaced with six feet of solid muscle mass that leaves Shouto on the defensive for several minutes. He ducks every time he senses Midoriya closing in, rolls when he sees the spectral shadow of an outstretched hand in the steam that surrounds him, and leaps when he feels the telltale electric current that runs up his spine at the overpowering presence of One for All. Midoriya hasn’t touched him—yet—and Shouto intends to keep it that way for as long as he can. His only chance is to wait for Midoriya to expend his initial burst of energy and attack during his cooldown period.

The third thing Shouto realizes?

Midoriya doesn’t have a cooldown period.

Todoroki comes to this conclusion right as he feels Midoriya’s fist plow into his stomach out of fucking nowhere, knocking the wind out of him and sending him flying fifty feet into the nearest wall like a ragdoll Uraraka’s touched with all five fingers. The impact is jarring and awful and Shouto wheezes, feeling cinderblocks behind him crumple into a fine dust that makes his eyes water.

His vision is blurry and his lungs aren’t accepting air anymore, and Shouto knows he is done, done,
Another fist. Shouto drops like dead weight to avoid it, taking half a millisecond to feel satisfaction as Midoriya punches nothing but concrete.

He hisses in pain. Shouto doesn’t care. Oxygen comes back to Shouto in a rush and he rolls, pivoting on his knees to face Midoriya for a counterattack.

Fire erupts from his left hand, blowing Shouto’s hair back from his face as he pours everything he has into the blaze. The heat makes it hard to breathe, impossible to see, but there’s no way Midoriya could’ve avoided it—

“Too slow!” Midoriya chirps from behind Shouto.

There’s a hand fisting the back of Shouto’s shirt, hauling him around as if to throw him across the room. He feels the floor disappear beneath his feet. It happens in slow motion, a heartbeat, a flash in time.

Shouto thinks fast.

Just as Midoriya’s winding up for the pitch, Shouto grabs Midoriya’s wrist and freezes them together in a frigid vice up to their elbows that locks them together.

“Speak for yourself,” Shouto grits out, baring his teeth. A smile. A grimace. It’s some kind of mixture of the two, etched into his features with a sheen of satisfaction.

Midoriya’s eyes widen in realization just as he hurls Shouto across the room—but Midoriya trails behind him with a yelp, unable to fight the momentum he unwittingly created for them both. They sail through the air, all limbs and gasps and numb, clawing fingers. Shouto can’t tell which way is up and which is down until he sees the floor approaching rapidly from his left.

Right before they crash-land, Shouto melts the ice holding them together and twists away, landing on his feet with a burst of hot air from his left side to pad his fall. Midoriya isn’t so lucky, landing on his ass and rolling several feet to a stop in a heap of limbs.

A groan, low and guttural, and Midoriya rises to his hands and knees, shoulders hunched.

“Cheap shot,” he calls out, his voice rough as he drags himself to his feet unsteadily. He sways, bracing a hand against the wall for support as he fights the dizziness.

Shouto winces, feeling the stiffness in his back from being thrown against the wall. “You’re one to talk. I thought I asked you not to chuck me through the building.”

“If I wanted to punch you into the next county, I would’ve. I was being nice.”

“Oh, so you’re pulling your punches now? Never thought I’d see the day.”

Midoriya winces and rolls his left shoulder, glaring half-heartedly across the clearing at Todoroki. “Murdering my best friend wasn’t exactly on the agenda this afternoon, so yeah, I’m pulling my punches. Aren’t you?”

Shouto fights down his embarrassment at getting caught red-handed. “Maybe a little.”

“Oh-huh. Thought so. Anyway, let’s keep going—we’ve only got this place to ourselves for the next forty-five minutes. ‘Cause I am not paying for dinner, Todoroki-kun. No way in hell.”
Shouto loses. Barely.

Midoriya pays for dinner anyway.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

I kinda reverted to my baseline writing style for this one. More flowery and metaphorical instead of irreverent, like the last few chapters. Hope no one minds. We're heading into Angst City, so this is the wind up for that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Routines, Shouto knows, make life a whole lot easier. Expecting something to happen and then watching it unfold before your very eyes, frame by frame and second by second, can be one of the most satisfying experiences a person can have. Rewarding to the point of fruitful. Cathartic, even.

It’s really no surprise that Shouto has built his life around such routines for the sake of his own comfort and well-being as much as his sanity.

At six o’clock sharp, he wakes up and stretches his weary muscles before going on a run through the suburbs of the city; he does not listen to music, save the steady beat of his own heart, which he relies on to set his pace. When he returns to his apartment, he records his heart rate in a little notebook on his kitchen counter, puts the kettle on, and stretches again until the spout steams like Shouto’s nostrils after a good spar with someone from the agency. He drinks his tea with careful, constrained sips—jasmine, because that’s what his mother has always loved. Then, he showers. He dons his costume. He goes to work. When he comes home, he putters around his apartment until the residual itch under his skin settles. Eats dinner. Sleeps, but rarely dreams. The ever-echoing litany of domesticity.

Like a builder laying a courtyard around an old, gnarled tree, he has arranged the cobblestones of his life so carefully around his daily routine that any irregularity will inevitably trip him up, make him falter in his sure steps. Shouto has arranged every habit tediously, pressing each one into the soft mortar of his life until the surface is smooth and level. Every single moment of Shouto’s routine has a specific time window in which things are expected to occur, and the predictability of it all is a spot of peace in his otherwise hectic life.

Unexpected things do happen, however, despite how much Shouto loathes the inevitability of such events. The crumbling flagstones in the form of unexpected villains and botched paperwork? These are things Shouto cannot abide. So, he patches things as needed and moves on with his routine, slipping back into the rhythm of things like a hand in a perfectly-fitted glove as soon as he can.

Life never stops moving, so why should he?

But then there’s Midoriya. He’s never quite fit between those tight cobblestones before. If rogue villains and paperwork are loose pebbles, Midoriya is a landslide, ripping everything apart by its seams until Shouto spirals into the blank nothingness of unpredictability. He’s a force of nature that bowled into Shouto’s life at the ripe age of fifteen and tore up his routine with his broken, bloodied fingers and his solar flare smile, and Shouto never minded one bit.

Though for a while after the Sports Festival, Shouto had floundered, unsure how to proceed when everything laid out before him was inky black and completely unknowable. Midoriya had been the one to help him through the darkness with an outstretched, scarred hand and warm words. Shouto had followed his lead until he found his footing once again in the form of UA’s schedule and
Being in New York feels a lot like the aftermath of the Sport Festival. Things change from day to day and there is no discernable pattern in Shouto’s daily activities—sometimes he and Midoriya will wake up at six-thirty, and sometimes they’ll stay up late the night before and sleep in until noon just for the hell of it. They’ll go for a run one morning, keeping pace with one another easily, and race each other to Greenwich Village using their Quirks the next simply because it feels good. When they’re out and about on patrol, Midoriya will drag him into sketchy shops and shove souvenirs in his hands that no one in the world could possibly want or need, claiming that Shouto needs “the New York City experience” in full before he heads back to Japan. Shouto is always too distracted by his smile or his freckles to argue with him, so he subjects himself to unflattering selfies and quietly admits to himself that he’s actually having fun.

Shouto wouldn’t be able to find a pattern to it all if he tried. Their time together, he determines, is a swirling supernova without a center, a gravity well with an indomitable pull in a thousand different directions. A tangled, ridiculous mess.

And Shouto has never been happier.

It’s about six days into his excursion to America when he realizes it. It’s early morning in the apartment and Midoriya is in the breakfast nook with the crossword on the table and a pen stuck in his mouth, reading off the clue for number twenty-four across with a crease between his brows. Shouto listens placidly, thinking about possible answers as he reaches for the kettle and moves it off the burner. His mug of jasmine leaves is off to the side, and he goes to pour—

And it hits him.

Happiness is a strange concept, but it’s not entirely foreign to Shouto. He’s felt happiness before—in his mother’s embrace, for example, or the years he spent at UA, the League of Villains notwithstanding. He’s better acquainted with unhappiness, certainly, but he’s not so unfortunate enough to not recognize the feeling when it strikes him upside the head. Still, feeling the blistering burn of joy and contentment in his chest is strange, compared to the blank nothingness he’s felt for the last few months in Japan.

“—hinking about, Todoroki?”

Shouto startles ever so slightly, dribbling some boiling water on the granite countertop where it pools at the foot of his mug. He sets the kettle down on a trivet and glances over at Midoriya, who is watching him. “Sorry, what?”

“I asked what you were thinking about. You looked kinda confused about it, whatever it was.”

Shouto mops up the boiling water, feeling lighter than he did five minutes ago. A smile threatens his facial expression, but he keeps his lips in check. “It was… nothing of consequence. Just zoned out for a second. Go on.”

“Oh, okay.” He smiles, and the hesitant flame in Shouto’s chest burns a little brighter. “Need me to repeat the clue again?”

“Yes, please.”

Midoriya nods, turning back to the crossword with concentration writ across his features. “All right. Nine letters, the third letter is…”

Shouto hates crosswords—they’re frustrating and subjective and Sudoku is far superior in every
feasible way—but he doesn’t hate them as much when Midoriya’s cramped handwriting fills the boxes.

Happiness is weird.

“So, are you seeing anyone?”

Shouto’s foot promptly slips off the air conditioning unit he’d braced himself against in order to tie his shoe. He sucks in air between his teeth and catches himself before he eats dirt, but just barely. His boot crunches into the gravel and the air conditioning unit makes a large hollow sound that echoes across the rooftop they’ve been camped out on for the last half hour. Shouto stares at Midoriya, who looks like he might as well have asked about the weather, or the general economic situation in Kyoto. “I’m sorry, what?”

Midoriya looks up from the slight tear on the elbow of his suit, eyebrows raised innocently. There’s a smudge of ash on his cheek from one of the flame blasts Shouto had let loose earlier when they were chasing down a bank robber. “I asked if you were seeing anyone.”

“Why?”

Midoriya gives Shouto a funny look, mouth twisting. He gestures vaguely between the two of them. “Uh, because that’s a typical conversation between friends? Family, love life, hobbies—you know, all that stuff. Figured I’d ask.”

“You’ve never asked me that before.”

“Well, I’ve never had a reason until now.”

“What reason is that?”

A huff. Midoriya shuffles his feet nervously and looks out across the city skyline with his cloverleaf eyes, the muscle in his jaw fluttering faintly beneath his skin. There’s a small crease between his eyebrows that Shouto rarely sees. “Just… whatever. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. It was just a question.”

Except it wasn’t just a question, Shouto wants to tell him. It’s the question. The question Shouto’s been wondering about for the last six days but hasn’t had the guts to ask because it might open the floodgates of permission for Midoriya to share about his love life. Shouto’s perfectly content to bask in his own ignorance for a little while longer if it means he can pretend that no one else has captured Midoriya’s attention on this side of the Pacific.

But lying is something Shouto’s never been very good at. Not when it comes to Midoriya, at least. Sighing heavily, Shouto turns and lounges against the air conditioning unit, leaning into the sensation of the cool metal where it digs into his lower back. He fights to get the words past his teeth.

“I’m… not,” he manages quietly. “Seeing anyone, that is.”

Midoriya’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise, but he still doesn’t look at Shouto. Instead, his eyes are determinedly glued to the shell pink and gold splashes of the sunset over the cityscape laid out
before them. He opens his mouth, then closes it. Opens it again.

“Huh,” is all he says in the end.

Shouto stares. What the hell does that mean? He’s left feeling like he’s reached the end of a staircase, but he took an extra, unnecessary step that jarred every bone in his leg with the impact of unfulfilled expectation. Shouto pushes his hair back nervously. “I don’t know what you mean by that.”

“Nothing.” Midoriya crosses his arms over his chest and shrugs ambiguously. “It doesn’t really mean anything. Just… surprised, I guess.”

“I don’t see why. You know relationships have never been a priority for me.” And that, at least, is partly true—relationships with heroes are dangerous and distracting, and usually end in tears. He just leaves out the part that a relationship with someone other than Midoriya is the primary reason relationships aren’t high on his list of Important Things to Accomplish.

“I guess.” Midoriya cocks his head to one side and nods slowly, turning Shouto’s words over in his brain. His hair flops into his eyes in a mess of waves that look impossibly soft, even after a full day of chasing down villains and walking old ladies across the street.

Shouto swallows, feeling ice spread down the back of his throat as readily as his cheeks burn. He’s never been good at this whole give-and-take thing in conversation, but he likes to think he’s better at it now than he was when he first met Midoriya. “Are you seeing anyone?” he asks, rubbing his fingers together at his sides.

At this, Midoriya looks over at him. The sunset casts a kaleidoscope of colors across the planes of his face, and Shouto tries to commit the image to memory. He’d engrave it into the backs of his eyelids if he could. “Come on, Todoroki,” he says, lips curling wryly. “You know I’ve never been very good at that stuff.”

It’s not a yes or a no. Todoroki feels his heart clench painfully in his chest. “Now who’s avoiding the question?”

The laugh that escapes Midoriya’s lips is breathy and amused, and he shakes his head from side to side. “All right, fair enough. The answer is no,” he says. “I’m not seeing anyone. I barely have enough time in the day for myself, let alone another person.” A pause, and Midoriya purses his lips. “I have no idea how the pros balance stuff like that, honestly.”

So, he’s available. The words tumble over and over in Shouto’s brain, which seems to have short-circuited somewhere between “no” and “I’m not seeing anyone.” Something thrilling shoots from Shouto’s head down to his toes.

…Not that his admission means anything per se, but the fact that a relationship with Midoriya is at all possible to begin with is a thrilling discovery—even if a relationship is only an option in some parallel universe where they’re both civilians with no Quirks or obligations to the rest of the world.

Shouto tries not to let the relief show on his face, but his muscles betray him in the form of an eyebrow twitch. He feels like he could float up into the sky if only he had the guts to jump. “I don’t know either,” he murmurs. “Aizawa-sensei never taught us any of that stuff.”

Midoriya’s face brightens into a grin that puts the setting sun to absolute shame. “Oh my god, could you imagine? A sex ed class taught by Aizawa. That’d be amazing. And awful.”

“ Mostly awful,” Shouto agrees, but he can’t fight the half-smile that escapes. Dammit.
When he looks up to see if Midoriya caught the slip, he finds Midoriya watching him with a soft look in his eyes. He’s searching Shouto’s face for... something. It’s the same face he makes when he’s trying to figure out the crossword, or when he’s poring over his old hero notebooks for information on the other pros in the ranks. It’s his I-want-to-know-everything-about-you-and-then-some face. Shouto’d be lying if he said it didn’t make him nervous.

“What?” he asks, hating how defensive his own voice sounds.

“Nothing.” Midoriya shoves his gloved hands in his pockets, kicking at the gravel beneath his feet. “I’m just happy you’re here, is all.”

There’s a knot in Shouto’s throat. He swallows past it. “Better than Bakugou?”

At the mention of his sidekick, Midoriya’s expression twists into something horrified. He shudders. “Way better.”

“Try to enjoy these last eight days, then.” It’s meant to be a reminder for both of them—a reminder that this arrangement, no matter how ideal, is only temporary. In a little over a week, Shouto will be back on a plane headed for Japan, and Midoriya will resume his working relationship with Bakugou like nothing ever happened. (Shouto is dying to know how they manage to work together without killing one another, but he’s too afraid to ask at this point.)

Midoriya’s gaze is suddenly piercing, his expression serious. “It doesn’t have to be eight days, you know,” he says, voice low.

Shouto blinks, jarred out of his thoughts. “What do you mean?”

“You could stay here, in the city,” he clarifies. Midoriya bites his lower lip and looks out toward the disappearing sunset, his eyebrows drawn low in consternation. “My agency could keep you on. You could sign a contract with us and stay in New York with...” He swallows. “W-with me.”

In an instant, he can picture it: going to work and seeing Midoriya’s smiling face, patrolling the city streets with him and eating lunches from street vendors. Working together like two cogs in a clock, relying on each other and fighting side-by-side like a well-oiled machine. This past week has been a testament to their professional compatibility. In a perfect world, it would be a wonderful arrangement and Shouto would take him up on it in a heartbeat.

Except it’s not a perfect world. Not even close.

Shouto sinks his teeth into his cheek until he tastes blood. “I... can’t,” he says quietly. “My mother — she needs me. I couldn’t leave her like that.”

Midoriya nods as if he expected this answer. He gives Shouto a soft smile that only looks partially strained. “I figured.” He sighs, long and heavily. “Oh, well. I had to ask at least once. Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Midoriya meanders over to stand in front of Shouto, his gaze flickering between grey and blue like he can’t quite decide which eye he wants to look at more. “Never apologize, Todoroki. Not for something like that. Your family should always come first. Besides,” he says, cracking a smile, “if you left Japan, it would probably sink into the ocean when I’m not watching. And then where would we be?”

Shouto snorts softly. “You’re giving me too much credit. I’m just a sidekick, remember?”
“Not for much longer,” he reasons. “And when you go pro, you’ll break the top ten pretty much overnight. I’d bet money on it.”

“You have a lot of faith in my skills.”

“Of course I do.” His eyes are soft and lovely. “I *always* have.”

And—

And Shouto’s heart *aches.*

It’s a special kind of hurt that sings in his bones and pours out of his mouth in a pale curl of steam that Midoriya follows with his eyes as it floats *up up up* and dissolves into nothingness. *God,* what Shouto wouldn’t give to stay here, in this moment, for the rest of forever. He wishes the seconds would stretch into infinity so he could see Midoriya’s face every morning over breakfast, hear his soft-voiced questions and listen to the familiar melody of his laughter. So he could read the Sunday comics over Midoriya’s shoulder, close enough to smell the clean scent of his soft t-shirts. So he could ruin himself, burn into ash like a phoenix, and love the man he’s been too scared to ever love before.

The sky is now tinged pale lavender with splashes of magenta that break up the horizon in long, narrow streaks. Cars honk their horns, cabbies scream their frustrations, and the soft murmur of civilians ten floors below provides a comforting backdrop of white noise to complement his pounding heart.

Shouto wants to map Midoriya’s freckles with his mouth until neither of them can breathe. Until touch speaks louder than his words ever could.

“I wish I could stay,” he murmurs, dropping his gaze from Midoriya’s face before he does something stupid. He clenches his fists, feeling his fingers heat up and freeze over, respectively. “I… like it here.” *I like you.*

Midoriya blinks slowly, tilting his head to one side as he considers Shouto’s face. “Well,” he says carefully, exhaling through his nose, “we still have December 27th, don’t we? It’s not like I’ll never see you again after this whole thing is over.”

The thought strikes him. He swallows, quashing the hope that threatens to rise. “Oh. I, uh… wasn’t sure if we were doing that this year.”

“I’d like to.” Midoriya lifts his eyebrows, hopeful. He bites his lower lip, and Shouto’s eyes are drawn to the movement like a magnet. “If you’ll have me, anyway. I’d hate to mess with tradition, you know?”

*If you’ll have me.*

Like Shouto would ever say no to something like *that.*

“Of course. You’re always welcome in my home,” he says, curling the corners of his mouth ever so slightly. Midoriya follows the movement closely, his eyes brightening and creasing at the edges—he always treats Shouto’s smiles as rare gifts.

“Great,” he breathes, greens eyes glued to the seam of Shouto’s mouth. “*Great.* I mean, not great, but… cool. *Not to say that it isn’t great!* It’s just. Um. I’m looking forward to it?” Shouto watches him carefully and Midoriya’s cheeks stain crimson as he realizes where he’s been looking. He laughs nervously, raking his fingers through his hair. “Sorry. Ignore me. Let’s, uh— let’s go.
We’ve got to make it back to the agency before dark. Indian food sound good for dinner?"

Shouto stares as Midoriya spins on his heel abruptly and marches toward the edge of the rooftop, pulling his metal mask up to cover his mouth and nose like it will do something to cover his blush. Adorable. Shouto’s cheeks are also burning steadily, blazing beneath the cracked glass of his expression; he reaches up to make sure he isn’t actually on fire.

He isn’t. But he might as well be.

Chapter End Notes

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A Handful of Dust

Chapter Notes

Keep the rating in mind, please. This is also where everything starts to go to shit. Warnings/spoilers in the endnote!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todoroki and Midoriya measure their remaining time together carefully and try not to think about the fact that it’s all coming to an end. Some days are easier than others.

Tuesday, for example, is a great day. Wednesday isn’t half-bad either, if Shouto’s being honest with himself. The two of them patrol central Harlem from noon until midnight, their costumes fitting snugly to their bodies and earpieces buzzing with a constant loop of information courtesy of Midoriya’s agency. They stroll down cracked sidewalks and monitor suspicious street corners for gang activity and trafficking, avoiding urban tumbleweeds along the way in the form of plastic bags and grimy pigeons that fear no man, woman, or monster. They catch some drug dealers here and there and they snag a bank robber with a teleportation Quirk; muggers fill up the rest of their time like Styrofoam insulation, swelling into every nook and cranny and leaving little room for anything else. It’s steady and satisfying, so Shouto really has nothing to complain about.

On Thursday and Friday, villains pour out of every orifice of Harlem for no discernible reason other than to give both heroes a headache. Midoriya speculates their activity is due to the anniversary of the demise of the League of Villains, but Shouto doesn’t much care to discover their motivations—whatever reason they’re doing this for, it’s annoying as fuck. He’d really prefer to go back to their casual patrols from the week prior, thank you very much.

Still, the villains are creative and brutal, and damn near impossible to predict. Only one villain actually slips through their fingers—a young lady with a phasing Quirk and too much fear for any one person to bear alone. It’s a bitter failure that sits in Shouto’s chest like a piece of rusting metal, poisoning his bloodstream until he dreams about the terror in the girl’s expression when she saw Midoriya round the corner shop.

Frightened. Desperate. Raw.

At the end of each day, the two heroes are too scraped and bruised to do anything except fall into bed, their bodies still covered in soot and blood and the stale stench of not enough, never enough. Thursday night, Shouto doesn’t even make it to the guest bedroom, crumpling instead on the sofa in the living room with hardly a mumble in explanation. Midoriya simply covers Shouto’s sleeping form with a blanket and promptly passes out on the nearby loveseat, boots still on with his knees pulled up to his chest because he doesn’t have anything else to hold onto.

They dream of fear and phasing and never being enough, and somehow they wake up more tired than before.

They never put a label on the ticking time bomb in the corner. Ignoring it is just as easy, they figure, and perhaps if they ignore it long enough it’ll go away entirely. Maybe Shouto won’t board his plane in four days and stay in New York instead. Maybe Midoriya will be brave for once in his life and confess his feelings in the throes of passion.
Maybe.

Or maybe this isn’t that type of story at all.

Shouto is restocking the vials in his utility belt early Saturday morning, his ankles crossed beneath the living room coffee table where he sits on the plush carpet. The sunlight streams through the floor-to-ceiling windows across from him, painting the apartment in shades of warm, familiar gold that reflect prettily on the sleek kitchen countertops and appliances; the sunrise is beautiful today, cresting over the jagged, crystalline teeth of downtown Manhattan.

In this moment, New York City is almost… gorgeous.

It doesn’t have to be eight days, you know.

Barely twenty-four hours remain. Shouto is aware of every second as they sing through his veins one by one, throbbing in time with his heartbeat in painful palpitations. He thinks of Midoriya’s offer constantly, replaying the entire conversation on repeat because Shouto’s a masochist like that. He knows he can’t take Midoriya up on his offer, but damn if it isn’t tempting.

He thinks of his mother, trapped in her hospital room with heather-grey eyes that are only just now starting to come back to life. He thinks of Fuyumi and her wedding next year, and how he’ll likely be roped into participating somehow—not that he’ll mind, really; he’d do anything for his big sister. He thinks of Natsuo and Ichiro and his friends at the agency—people he’s sworn to protect as an up-and-coming professional hero of Japan.

He wishes he could stay. It’s stupid and selfish and unrealistic, but dammit, Shouto wants to stay in this apartment with Midoriya for the rest of forever.

On the other side of the living room, Midoriya is curled up in a recliner with a novel in his hands that Shouto recommended several days ago, softly turning pages and muttering the words under his breath. There’s a cup of coffee at his elbow, his hair is damp from the shower he just took, and he’s biting his lower lip as his eyes scan the pages slowly and methodically, absorbing every word like a sponge. Despite himself, Shouto warms at the sight. Midoriya is wearing his second-favorite pair of sweatpants and his fourth-favorite oversized hoodie, thick-framed glasses slipping low on his nose so he looks less like the Symbol of Peace and more like a frumpy librarian. (“They’re reading glasses, Todoroki-kun. I need them to read small thi—stop laughing!”)

It’s so frigging domestic he could vomit. Or maybe the swirling sensation in his gut is just unfamiliar contentment. Whatever it is, it tastes bitter in the back of his throat and he doesn’t like it.

Or does he? Feelings are so confusing.

With great difficulty, Shouto swallows it down and returns to the task at hand: restocking his hero suit supplies for his return trip to Japan. Since he’s leaving first thing tomorrow morning, he and Midoriya aren’t on patrol today; Midoriya had mentioned something about sightseeing and buying more obnoxiously overpriced souvenirs in Midtown, but staying in the apartment like this sounds just as nice to Shouto. He’s not picky either way. Maybe they could walk through Central Park again and feed the pigeons like last week, or maybe they could play the part of tourist and take the actual elevator up to the top of the Empire State Building instead of jumping. (Security hadn’t
appreciated that particular stunt.)

Suddenly, a faint buzzing noise fills the apartment. A cell phone. Shouto glances up through his lashes at Midoriya, his fingers pausing in the middle of emptying a vial of expired antiseptic he’d used on Midoriya’s skinned knee two days ago. Not taking his eyes off of his novel, Midoriya digs around in his pocket for his phone, slipping it out and fumbling blindly to answer it.

He holds the phone between his ear and shoulder. “Hello,” he intones, voice low and soft with disuse.

There’s a garbled noise from the other end of the phone that Shouto can’t make out. He frowns, wondering who would be calling this early; his mother always taught him it’s impolite to call anyone before nine. Clearly Americans don’t have the same scruples.

“Oh hey, Amelia,” Midoriya says, his voice brightening ever so slightly. His eyes still don’t leave the page he’s on, nor does the crease between his brows diminish. “No, I’m not doing anything. What’s up?”

More tinny noise. Shouto busies himself with stuffing cotton balls and new bandages in his belt, trying his hardest not to listen in.

“I—“ Midoriya stops reading. He blinks. “Oh. Well, I didn’t have anything planned, but…”

Shouto looks up, raising an eyebrow in Midoriya’s direction, but he’s waved off with a faint, slightly embarrassed smile. “Maybe,” he says to Amelia, shrugging. “I’m not sure. What time are you thinking?” He pauses. “Mm. Okay. Can I bring Todoroki with me?”

Shouto’s fingers spasm, crumpling the sterile cotton pads in their wrappers.

“Great,” Midoriya says, leaning back in his recliner with a smile. He closes his book and sets it off to the side next to his cup of coffee, pulling his knees up to his chest. “Okay— yeah, yeah… all right. Mhm. Who else is going?”

A pause. Midoriya’s eyebrows fly up into his hairline. “Oh, wow,” he says. “Um. Okay, then. That’s… fine, I suppose?”

Midoriya bites the inside of his cheek, nodding and humming at whatever this Amelia is saying over the line while his eyes flicker between Shouto and the city skyline like he can’t decide which one is safer to look at. Shouto sets his utility belt down on the coffee table and leans back against the front of the sofa, crossing his arms to await the final verdict—socialization or hermitage?

Suddenly, Midoriya’s eyes bug out and his cheeks turn bright red. He glances at Shouto, seemingly horrified. “What?” he squeaks into the phone. “No! No, I will not—”

More inaudible jabbering, and crimson begins to spread down the length of his neck. “Oh my god, Mia.” He’s covering his face with his hands. “Stop. Just… stop. Please, I’m begging you.”

Shouto has always liked Midoriya’s cherry-stain blush. It makes his freckles stand out more.

Midoriya runs a hand over his face and sighs, pressing against his closed eyes with his thumb and forefinger. “I’m hanging up now,” he tells Amelia flatly. “Goodbye— yes, we’ll see you later. Probably. No.” Another pause, and a long-suffering sigh. “We’re officially not friends anymore. Goodbye, Mia.”

With a weary exhale, Midoriya locks his phone and drops it into his lap before groaning and
pressing his forehead against his curled-up knees, wrapping his arms around his legs. Shouto tries not to find the display adorable and fails miserably.

“Dare I ask what that was about?” Shouto drawls with no small amount of amusement.

A whimper. “Trust me, you don’t want to know. I didn’t even want to know.”

He hums. “I take it we’re going somewhere tonight?”

Midoriya sighs and peeks out from behind his knees, propping his chin on them. “Maybe. Mia organized an office party at this place downtown she likes. She wants us to come and be social with everyone from the agency—or something like that.”

Being social is Midoriya’s thing, not his, but he’s not going to be the one to isolate the Symbol of Peace just for the sake of selfishness. Shouto frowns. “Do you want to go?”

“I figured you wouldn’t want to go.” Midoriya frowns thoughtfully. “I’ve been to this place before. It’s… not really your scene. Or mine, honestly.”

Shouto huffs air through his nose. “Well, whatever this place is, you’ll be there with me. So, it can’t be that bad.”

“It’s a club. A really pretentious one.”

“My father is the definition of pretentious. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Your father is also the definition of asshole, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to take you to the Jersey Shore anytime soon,” Midoriya says, exasperated.

Shouto doesn’t know anything about the Jersey Shore, save that it was a television show a long time ago about… something. He’ll have to Google it later. He shrugs. “Well, if you want to go, go. I’m comfortable with whatever you decide.”

Midoriya huffs and pushes up from his chair, grabbing his empty coffee mug before lumbering over toward the kitchen. He rinses it out and sets it on the dish rack with steady, assured movements. He says over his shoulder, “But I don’t want to waste our last day together. I mean, can you honestly say you’d enjoy spending your final hours in New York wearing pants that are way too tight to be comfortable, surrounded by my ridiculous friends for, like. Hours.”

Shouto’s brain unhelpfully supplies a glorious mental image of Midoriya wearing very tight pants, and suddenly this office party seems like a very good idea. The details are fuzzy at the edges, but the most important parts are filled in with memories of their sparring session last week when Midoriya had broken out his workout leggings because he was out of sweatpants.

Sparks sputter from Shouto’s fingertips, unbidden.

“Um—” he flounders, trying to think of letters and phonics and words. The sounds that come to mind aren’t in any language at all, much less English or Japanese.

“See? You’re hesitating,” Midoriya accuses, whisking around and pointing at him as he chokes silently. He crosses the room and flops down on the couch behind Shouto, his long legs thrown over the armrest dramatically. He pokes Shouto in the back of the head. “Look, if you’re not comfortable with it, then I’m gonna tell Mia we won’t be joining them. No big deal, all right?”

“That… wasn’t hesitation,” Shouto mutters, picking up his utility belt again. He can’t remember
which compartment he was working on—bandages? Gauze? Midoriya’s presence behind him is putting his left side to shame with its heat. “I’m not opposed to going. If you want me to come, I will.”

“But it’s your last day!”

He shrugs. “And I want to spend it with you. The location makes no difference, Midoriya. As long as you’re there, I’ll be happy.”

Silence. Shouto continues to fill his belt with medical supplies, purposefully ignoring the pressure of Midoriya’s hip where it’s pressed against his left shoulder blade. It gets harder and harder to disregard as the silence ticks on.

Then: “So, if I took you to a really dirty back alleyway off Tenth Street, you’d—”

Shouto freezes Midoriya’s sweatpants to the sofa.

As it turns out, going to a pretentious club with A-List American heroes means wearing pretentious clothing—something that Shouto didn’t bother to pack in his suitcase when he left Japan two weeks ago.

Midoriya bites his lip, grimacing as he scans the shirts and trousers laid out on the guest bed for perusal. There are cardigans and sweatpants and ratty sneakers as far as the eye can see, but nothing that would qualify as nice, per se. He looks at Shouto, who stands near the door with hands stuffed in his pockets, and winces sympathetically. “You’re going to kill me,” he says.

Shouto exhales frost through his nose, resigned. He drops his head back against the doorframe. “We have to go shopping,” he asks flatly, dreading the answer he already knows.

“We have to go shopping,” Midoriya repeats gravely.

The next few hours are filled with the bustle of city streets, sleek glass storefronts, yellow measuring tapes, and turtleneck-clad sales associates who tut in disapproval every time they see Midoriya’s cargo shorts and Shouto’s hair—that is, until they notice that Midoriya is Deku, the hero responsible for saving their stupid city time and time again. After they realize that, things become a lot easier.

Sales associates and managers roll out the red carpet for the Symbol of Peace and his guest the second they’re in sight. No one seems to know who Shouto is, but he’s strangely okay with that; being the center of attention has never been Shouto’s favorite thing in the world, anyway. Instead, he wordlessly submits to seamstresses and tailors, donning and shedding button-ups and trousers quicker than he can fluctuate his body temperature. Midoriya is the lucky one—he gets to eat pastel macarons and sit on velvet couches while Shouto is poked and prodded in front of a three-panel mirror for hours on end. Midoriya bites back his laughter every time the store puts him in something ridiculous, but barely.

“You look—” His eyes are watering from the effort of withholding his laughter when Shouto comes out in a draped lilac sweater that barely covers any part of his torso. “Great,” he wheezes.

This pattern continues from store to store: Shouto is paraded like a circus animal and Midoriya gets...
the celebrity treatment. It’s grueling work, and Shouto would almost prefer to be back out in Harlem patrolling for murderers and cats stuck in trees… but seeing Midoriya smile brightly in the company of the sales clerks gives Shouto pause. If he’s making Midoriya smile like that just by wearing funny rattlesnake trousers and suspenders, surely the humiliation is worth it.

It’s just past noon when Shouto emerges from the dressing room, bone-tired and sapped of all his humor. He’s been stuck with needles and peeled out of leather far too many times for his taste, and his patience is wearing thin at this point. It doesn’t help that he’s starving. Maybe he can convince Midoriya to break for lunch before resuming the hunt for this bullshit outfit that’s apparently so important for tonight’s outing at the Pretentious Mystery Club of Heroes. Or whatever it’s actually called.

The store they’re in currently is large and white-walled with black shelving and silver accents. Everything is minimalist and sharp enough to cut him if he gets too close. Truth be told, Shouto’s not entirely sure why they’re even in such a ridiculous store—the prices are nauseating considering it’s just an outfit for one night. He’ll probably never even wear it again.

“Midoriya,” Shouto starts, coming around the corner of the dressing rooms. He sees the hero in question sitting on a black leather bench with a shopping bag over his arm from the comic book store a few blocks down the avenue; he’s speaking in hushed tones with the sales associate who’s been waiting on them hand and foot since they arrived. Shouto approaches carefully. “Sorry to interrupt,” he says to the sales associate before turning to Midoriya, “but I think we might want to move to a different—“

“That,” Midoriya blurts.

Shouto stops short. He blinks down at Midoriya, who is staring at his outfit with wide eyes and flushed cheeks. “I’m sorry, what?”

Midoriya’s cheeks color even darker and he sputters wordlessly for a moment. He swallows, averting his gaze to the tile floor. “Um. That outfit,” he clarifies. He coughs. “It’s… nice. I like that one. You should—you should get it. For tonight.”

Shouto glances down at the artfully torn straight-leg denim trousers he’s wearing and the navy-and-white striped shirt with sleeves that reach the middle of his forearms. It’s the simplest outfit he’d picked out of the pile the store had given him to try upon their arrival—no accessories or ridiculous panels of fabric to be seen—and he’d mostly thrown it on just so he wouldn’t have to approach Midoriya shirtless. Now that he’s looking at it, he supposes it’s not a terrible outfit, but definitely not what he pictured purchasing for an evening out with celebrity heroes.

The shirt is soft though. He’s definitely worn worse things.

The sales associate begins nodding frantically, her violet eyes lighting up as she looks him up and down. “Oh, you have such good taste, Mr. Midoriya! I totally agree—that outfit is perfect. I’ve never seen it fit anyone better, honestly.”

Shouto somehow doubts that—she’s likely paid on commission, and the check she’d get from the sale of this outfit would be a rather hefty sum. She’d probably say anything to get Shouto to pull out his wallet at this point.

But Midoriya is looking at him like Shouto is something beautiful he’s never seen before, and that might be worth the ridiculous price all by itself.

In the end, Midoriya buys the outfit for him. A parting gift, he calls it. An early Christmas-slash-
birthday present. Because why the hell not?

(Shouto only complains a little bit. He does like the shirt, after all.)

“Todoroki, are you sure you want to do this? Because we can still turn around and go back to my place if you want. Seriously. No harm, no foul.”

It’s the fifteenth time he’s asked that question since this afternoon. Shouto’s been counting.

He sighs softly in exasperation as they step into the elevator that will take them to the top floor of the skyscraper they’re in. Next to him, Midoriya presses the button for floor seventy-five and the doors slide shut behind them, locking them both away in a box of shiny mirrors. They begin their ascent.

Shouto looks at Midoriya and raises an eyebrow. “It sounds more like you don’t want to do this. I told you earlier, it’s fine. I want to go.”

Midoriya shakes his head, raking a hand through his tousled hair. “No, that’s not it. I just… I don’t want you to be uncomfortable tonight. My friends can be a bit… much. Even for me, and I’ve known them for a while now.”

“So you do want to leave.”

“No! I mean, maybe. I don’t know.” He sighs and rubs his eyes. “Maybe we can just make an appearance, then leave. No more than thirty minutes, tops. Sound good?”

Shouto laces his fingers together behind his back and shrugs. “If we leave early, that means you spent your money on this outfit for nothing. I hardly think it’s worth it, do you?”

Midoriya’s eyes skitter up and down Shouto’s reflection before dropping to the polished toes of his Oxfords. “No, it was worth it. You look… um. Nice.”

Shouto eyes Midoriya’s reflection—he’s not wearing those hideous red sneakers for the first time in, well. Forever. The slim blazer over his v-neck tee and dark wash jeans also make for a nice image. Shouto tries not to think about how difficult it would be to peel Midoriya out of that tight denim at the end of the night.

He wants to say, “You look stunning,” because it’s true and Shouto is pathetic like that. What he actually says is, “Your fashion sense has… evolved since high school.”

Stupid.

Midoriya blinks at him, stunned, and for a horrible moment, Shouto thinks he’s offended him. But Midoriya sputters, laughing with his entire body just as Shouto opens his mouth to spew apologies. He shoves Shouto’s shoulder lightly, earning a faint half-smile for his trouble. “Jerk.”

“A jerk who isn’t wrong.”

“Never said you were.” Midoriya chuckles softly, his breathy exhalations filling the elevator with warm familiarity. He shuffles his feet awkwardly, tugging on the cuffs of his jacket like they’re too short for him—which is woefully untrue, Shouto thinks. The blazer fits him perfectly. Unfairly so.
Midoriya catches his gaze sidelong. He smiles sheepishly. “Hey. Want to know a secret?”

Shouto’s lips twitch. “Sure.”

Fast as lightning and two times as shocking, Midoriya reaches over to catch the crook of Shouto’s left elbow, pulling him close enough so Midoriya can whisper in Shouto’s ear like a lover murmuring sweet nothings. His fingers are strong around the girth of Shouto’s arm; they squeeze reassuringly, and in that moment, Shouto feels safe.

“My publicist buys me these clothes,” Midoriya whispers. There’s wry amusement in his voice, and Shouto tries not to let his eyes flutter closed. “They stopped letting me out in public without approval when I wore my All Might socks to the park one day. My fashion sense hasn’t changed at all.”

This is somehow less mind-blowing than the feeling of Midoriya’s hot breath against the shell of Todoroki’s ear, damp and private and sexier than anything Shouto’s ever felt before in his life. He struggles for several pounding heartbeats to have a normal reaction outside of oh my god oh my god. Is this what it feels like to have a levitation Quirk? Like nothing in the world could keep him down, even if it wanted to? He’d gladly float into infinity if it meant he could relive this moment over and over again for the rest of his life.

With incredible difficulty, Shouto swallows and puffs air through his nose in amusement before gently pulling away from Midoriya’s too-tempting mouth. Not the time, never the time.

“Really?” he asks, and hopes he’s imagining how strangled his own voice sounds. He coughs to clear the emotion that’s lodged in his throat. “I, ah. Never would’ve guessed.”

Midoriya is grinning, his freckles tightening around his eyes subtly. “Good. That means my PR person is doing her job. I’ll have to tell her tomorrow morning.”

Shouto tries very hard not to set his brand new shirt on fire. He nods. “Definitely.”

The elevator dings softly, the doors sliding open of their own accord. And suddenly, everything is more. Much, much more.

The club itself takes up the entire top floor of the building, as Shouto discovers. Electric blue lights flash and flare as they step out of the elevator and into the throng of heroes and sidekicks that make up the majority of the crowd here—an exclusive club, Midoriya had said earlier; a place where heroes can unwind without their faces being plastered all over social media. The bouncers standing outside the elevator doors nod when they see Midoriya, waving him through with meaty hands, but they narrow their eyes at Shouto. He stops dead in his tracks, feeling very cold all of a sudden.

He knows he’s underage by American standards. Technically, he shouldn’t be allowed in here at all—not for four more months. Why hadn’t he thought of this earlier?

The reassuring press of flesh against his icy, stiff palm. Shouto looks down and sees Midoriya’s gnarled, scarred fingers tangling with his before Midoriya lifts their hands up above the heads of the people in front of them. He’s with me, Midoriya is saying, and the bouncers nod in acquiesce after a brief moment of hesitation.

Shouto supposes being the Symbol of Peace gets you a lot of free passes. Must be nice.

Midoriya squeezes Shouto’s hand once more before he pulls him deeper into the throng of slinky
dresses, stale sweat, and the unrelenting press of bodies. They slither through the crowd together, still holding hands like they’re each other’s lifeline in this neon blue madness. They avoid stray elbows and dancing feet, broken glasses and sticky alcohol puddles, and heroes with size Quirks they apparently feel like unveiling at very inopportune moments. Shouto’s senses are in overdrive, trying to process it all piece by piece as the nightclub experience is poured into his brain like a pitcher of blazing stimuli that never runs dry.

Midoriya escorts Shouto across the dance floor toward the terrace windows before taking a sharp left. They go up some sleek, white stairs beneath an overhang and end up on a balcony overlooking the pit of surging, dancing heroes below. There are a few white couches and low tables on the balcony; they are filled with a handful of strange-looking people Shouto has never met before.

There’s a man leaning an elbow against the balcony railing with a drink in hand and black, opaque goggles fitted over his eyes, despite the darkness of the room. Another girl stands nearby with short, periwinkle blue hair and sharp teeth that rival Kirishima’s lethal incisors; she’s talking to Goggles animatedly, not caring that he doesn’t appear to be listening in the slightest. Lastly, two twin guys are lounging on the couch closest to Shouto, arguing about something he can’t make out from this distance; they each have black, spiky hair and blue eyes that rival the color of the neon strobes above the dancefloor.

And then Shouto sees her.

She’s perched on the edge of one of the pristine couches nearest to the large windows that overlook the city as it glitters against the night sky, nursing a glass of amber liquor in her hands. She’s wearing a form-fitting red dress that showcases her long, toned legs, and her chestnut-colored hair curls over one exposed shoulder in silky strands that never seem to end. Her lips are painted a glossy crimson color to match; her winged eyeliner is sharp and lethal. She turns to look at Shouto when she notices Midoriya’s approach, and at first, everything is fine.

Until he meets her eyes.

They’re golden and shining with pupils so dark Shouto instantly forgets where he is. He forgets he’s holding Midoriya’s hand and forgets his own goddamn name. He feels like this woman, whoever she is, has unzipped him and turned him inside out, shaking him loose of all his secrets and hidden thoughts like loose change in a pocket. Flashes of images cycle through his brain—Endeavor’s training, the hiss of the kettle in his house on the night his mother burned him, the sports festival all those years ago and the way he’d tended to his injuries alone afterwards. Each memory replays in startling clarity behind his eyelids, the details oversaturated and sharpened to the point of giving Shouto a massive, splitting headache.

He sees Midoriya. His smile in the morning. The way the sunlight always catches on his hair when they’re out on patrol. He sees Midoriya’s freckles and the way his costume hugs his shoulders and the way he leaps into action without thinking because he’s amazing like that and his mouth and and and—

Midoriya slaps a hand over Shouto’s eyes. Everything goes dark and quiet.

He gasps, feeling his lungs drink in the stale, musty oxygen of the nightclub like it’s the purest fresh air he’s ever tasted. His knees are shaking and his chest feels unusually tight, like a sponge that’s been wrung out one too many times.

“Shit,” Midoriya hisses, and hearing him swear so violently is enough to keep Shouto from crumpling to the floor in a heap of shaky limbs. “I should’ve warned you. I didn’t think she’d be right there, honest. How much did she get? Todoroki, can you hear me?”
But Shouto can’t answer because he doesn’t know. He knows he saw flashes of... something in his mind. Colors, shapes, sounds. Something bad. Or was it something good? The images are fading, replaced by current memories of—

He can’t remember.

There’s a shuffle, then the clack of heels against tile floor. “Oh my god,” a female voice says, her lightly-accented voice tinged with panic. “Izuku, I’m sorry! I thought it was you coming up the stairs, so I figured—“

“It’s okay, Amelia. It was my fault. I forgot to tell him,” Midoriya says quietly. Shouto’s vision is still dark and the hand pressed against his face is warm, but the body standing in front of him is warmer. “Todoroki?” Midoriya asks softly. He’s close. “Hey, Todoroki. Can you hear me? I need to know how much she got from you.”

A murmur—it must be Amelia. “He won’t remember,” she tells Izuku. “I panicked when I realized he was looking at me and severed the connection too fast.”

Midoriya’s hand spasms over his eyes. In the back of his mind, Shouto thinks he should probably be worried about the fact that Midoriya is so casually touching his scar, but the pounding headache behind his eyes is sort of taking priority at the moment. He’ll have to worry about it later.

“Shouto?” Midoriya tries again. “Shouto, come on. Please say something.”

_I like it when he says my name._

Hesitantly, Todoroki reaches up and wraps his fingers around Midoriya’s wrist, pulling his hand away so Shouto can finally see again. He keeps his gaze lowered nonetheless, blinking and flinching against the bright blue lights of the club as his eyes adjust to the sudden onslaught. “I’m fine,” he tells Midoriya quietly, staring at the toes of his shoes. “Just... wasn’t expecting that.”

He feels more than sees Midoriya’s shoulders slump in relief. “Oh, thank god. I thought she fried your brain on accident. I am so sorry, man, I should’ve told you before we got here.”

“No, it was my fault,” Amelia offers, stepping forward next to Midoriya. Her shoes are strappy and way too tall to be comfortable. Shouto feels a finger tap the underside of his chin. “You can look up now, you know. I’m so sorry about that—you just caught me by surprise. It won’t happen again. Pinky promise.”

She holds out a pinky that Shouto doesn’t dare to touch. Slowly, he looks up at the tall woman standing next to Midoriya, eyes following the seams of her red dress and the necklace around her neck that matches her eyes—or, it matched her eyes a few minutes ago, anyway. Her irises are a dull amber color now, and there’s a crease of worry between her perfectly-plucked eyebrows, marring her features. She looks incredibly guilty.

“What did you do to me?” Shouto asks, wincing when his headache spikes dangerously. He frowns, rubbing his temples. “I don’t... I don’t remember. You have some kind of psychic Quirk, I’m guessing?”

Amelia’s lips twitch in a grimace. “Sort of. Izuku can probably explain it better than I can, honestly.”

“Mia can sort through long-term and short-term memory when she looks at someone,” he explains softly. Midoriya is watching Shouto’s face with abject worry etched into his features, his teeth pressing into the soft flesh of his lower lip. “Her Quirk is always active unless she consciously
switches it off. Sort of like keeping a door closed that doesn’t like to latch, you know?”

“So, mind-reading,” Shouto says flatly. He has no doubt what she saw in his long-term memory. “Great.”

“It’s not mind-reading per se,” Amelia says, manicured fingers fidgeting. “Only memories. I wouldn’t be able to tell what you’re thinking right now or anything. I’d only be able to see the event happening from your eyes, not how you felt about it.”

“You’re really not helping yourself here,” Midoriya groans, noting Shouto’s sudden stiffness.

Amelia notices as well. She waves her hands frantically, eyes going wide with horror. “I won’t tell anyone if that’s what you’re worried about. Not that I really saw anything, but—”

“Mia,” Midoriya says flatly.

She shuts up. Her cheeks color faintly. “Right. My apologies. I’ll just… go sit down now. Sorry again.”

Mia returns to her seat and throws back the entire contents of her glass without even wincing. She then drops her face into her hands and hunches her shoulders, suddenly looking a lot smaller and considerably less composed than she did a moment ago.

Green fills Shouto’s vision as Midoriya steps in front of him, blocking his view of the woman on the couch. His eyes are lined with worry and his mouth is turned down at the corners in displeasure.

Shouto hates seeing that expression on his face.

“Are you all right?” Midoriya asks softly. He’s searching Shouto’s face again for any sign of distress. “Do you want to leave? I know her Quirk can be pretty jarring when you first feel it, so I won’t blame you if you want to head back and sleep it off.”

“She’s done that to you?” Shouto asks incredulously.

“Yeah.” He nods. “Once, when I first got to New York. It was an accident. She, uh, has trouble remembering to turn it off when she’s in a relaxed setting. At least your connection got cut off pretty quickly.”

“About twenty seconds,” he says, wincing. “She asked me my name when I got to the agency the first time, not knowing what she was doing. When I didn’t respond, she severed the connection and gave me a headache for a week. She brought me six baskets of apology muffins.”

Shouto hums discontentedly and eyes the woman on the couch over Midoriya’s shoulder. He lowers his voice. “I think she saw Endeavor. And… and my mom.”

Midoriya’s face darkens. “Are you sure?”

“No.” He scowls down at the ground. “But if she went looking through my long-term, that’s probably what came up first. I’d bet money on it.”

Midoriya sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. He looks impossibly weary all of a sudden. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, she definitely won’t tell anyone. She’s got all my secrets, too. I can
vouch for her discretion.”

There’s a moment, a pause, in which nothing happens. Then the implication hits Shouto like a slap in the face. He stares. “She knows about One F—“

Midoriya winces. “Yeah.”

“And she’s—“

“Yep.”

Shouto blinks, stunned. “And she hasn’t told anyone? You’re certain?”

Midoriya shakes his head resolutely. “Not a soul. Her hero name is Vault for a reason, man. She keeps everyone’s secrets. If you’re worried about what she found in your head, don’t be. She’s reliable, I promise.”

Shouto feels himself relaxing ever so slightly. The thought that someone else in the world knows about Endeavor’s parenting is not a comforting one, but if Midoriya is vouching for her, it can’t be all bad. Right? Hesitantly, Shouto nods and offers a faint, strained smile in agreement.

It’s enough of an olive branch for Midoriya to gently lead him over to the seating area with the other heroes, where they sink down onto the bleached cushions of one of the loveseats in terse silence. Amelia looks up at them with apologetic, miserable eyes. The twins across from them stop arguing and cock their heads in the same direction with mirrored eyebrow lifts as they take in Shouto’s appearance.

“Oh, Izuku, is this him?” a high-pitched voice squeals. Shouto looks over, startled, as the girl with periwinkle hair skips over from the edge of the balcony and sinks down onto the couch next to him without so much as a nonverbal request for permission. She melts into his right side like a languid cat and blinks up with beguiling brown eyes that look a lot older than the young girl they’re attached to.

“Um—“ Shouto starts, but Amelia cuts him off.

“Ignore Reyna,” she tells Shouto, her voice tinged with fondness. There’s a ruby red lip print on the rim of the glass in her hands. “She loves new people—especially pretty ones like you. And Izuku’s been talking about you for months, so she’s been waiting for this.”

Midoriya turns bright red. “M-Mia!”

“What?” she asks innocently. “It’s true. Nothing to be ashamed of.”

Goggles man crosses the balcony to lean a hip against the armrest of one of the sofas. Shouto can’t see his eyes behind the goggles, but he has a feeling that what’d find behind them isn’t pretty. The man grins deviously and sticks out a weathered, scarred hand. “I’m Daxton, but you can call me Dax. Mia wasn’t kidding—the kid talks about you almost as much as he talks about All Might. And he talks about All Might a lot.”

“Damn right he does,” says the twins. The left one scoffs and rolls his eyes. “Like, dude. Get a new hobby. The man is retired.”

“And still badass!” Reyna chirps. She’s taken up stroking down the length of Shouto’s arm—something he is not fully comfortable with, but he honestly fears that any sudden movements would only make things worse. He suffers in silence.
Midoriya grips Shouto’s sleeve, jarring Shouto from his thoughts. “Kill me,” he begs. “Set me on fire. Throw me off the building. Anything.”

“Aw, Zuzu, you’re no fun,” Reyna pouts. “We’re just trying to know your boyfriend a little better. Every time we try to see him at the office, you always steal him away!” She glares at him. “I thought you and I were friends.”

“We are friends,” he squeaks. “Just… friends with, like. No boundaries, apparently. At all.” He jabs an accusing finger at the point of contact between Reyna and Shouto’s arm. “See, that is why I kept him away. You’re being creepy.”

She looks affronted. “I’m not creepy. You’re creepy.”

“No, you—“

The twins cross their arms in tandem, huffing and slumping their shoulders like petulant children. “When the fuck is Katsuki coming back from Japan? ‘Cause Jesus Christ, you guys are annoying.”

Amelia clucks her tongue in disapproval, frowning. “Trey, be nice. Shouto—may I call you Shouto?—is our guest. You’re being incredibly rude right now. Try to contain your personalities for one night.”

“Fuck that noise,” Trey (?) snaps. “Katsuki was the only one of us who made this goddamn club tolerable and you know it.”

Reyna hums. “Oh, I don’t know, I think the music is pretty nice sometimes. And the food is amazing!”

“Nobody asked you, cotton candy.”

“Make fun of my hair one more time, and I’ll shove that cheese knife down both your throats. Fucking try me, Trey.”

Trey, Amelia, and Reyna all begin arguing with one another—Trey with insults and snappish gestures, Amelia with calm, collected words that carry astounding weight, and Reyna with quick jabs that sound more affectionate than annoyed. Dax joins in when Trey insults Reyna’s ridiculous hair color once again, and after that it’s a free-for-all. They all raise their voices above the deafening music and somehow manage to order rounds of drinks in the middle of flipping each other off and trading insults, but as the evening wears on, Shouto learns that the insults are just covers for actual conversation. *Fuck you* means, “Can you pass me the lime wedges?” and *get fucked* means, “I’m going to the bathroom.” *You’re the worst partner ever* translates to, “Your methods are annoying but effective, and I respect you for it.”


Midoriya and Shouto sit back and watch the fireworks, taking drinks from hands when they’re offered even though they’re both slightly underage. The liquid burns down Shouto’s throat and tastes slightly like floor cleaner, but it loosens his muscles and keeps him from snapping like piano wire under stress, so he supposes it’s okay to have one or two more glasses.

He’s never been good at socialization before, but people-watching Midoriya’s friends is… almost enjoyable.

He learns that Amelia’s memory Quirk is used in interrogations with villains who don’t want to admit their crimes. She often ends up on the stand in court, testifying to what she’s seen—and most
of the memories aren’t very pretty things. Shouto doesn’t envy whatever she managed to find in his head, that’s for certain.

Reyna has a disguise Quirk that allows her to change her appearance at will. She doesn’t know what her original, Quirkless form looks like anymore, but she shows him an approximation with pixie-cut blonde hair, bottle-green eyes, and a crooked smile that he says looks very nice on her. She gets a little somber after that, but her bubbly personality and blue hair returns when the tequila is passed around, and soon everyone’s forgotten the conversation altogether.

Trey has a multiple personality Quirk that manifests as a mirror-image clone of himself. According to Midoriya, Trey is really good at undercover work and prefers to work underground, like Aizawa-sensei. He’s volatile and loud, but he’s good at his job and dependable—a lot like Bakugou, which is why they’re friends. Somehow, Shouto doesn’t strain himself thinking about how the hell that works.

Dax doesn’t say anything. He’s quiet as he sips his beer, goggles hiding his line of sight from prying eyes. Midoriya tells him that Dax has a freeze-frame Quirk—whatever he looks at directly will freeze in place, locked in time until he finds a new target. The goggles help, but they’re no less unnerving to look at. Still, he seems nice enough, and Shouto gives him a pleasant nod every once in a while.

None of them ask about Endeavor. None of them needle Midoriya. They drink and laugh and nibble on salted peanuts as the dancefloor surges below them, full of heroes letting loose for the weekend. Shouto hates the oppressive heat—the stench of bodies and the sour tang of alcohol that floats on the breeze—but he can appreciate the freedom of it all. Here there are no cameras, no cell phones. It’s just a bunch of heroes looking to unwind after a week of horror and mayhem.

It’s almost nice.

At one point during the evening, Reyna bounces up on her toes (because she hardly does anything without bouncing) and grabs Midoriya’s hand in a death grip that yanks him off the couch. She pulls him toward the stairs.

“Dance with me!” she giggles, swaying slightly on her feet. Her hair is a periwinkle halo and her eyes are fluctuating between pink and red and green, like she can’t quite decide which to wear for the night. Midoriya casts a hopeless look over his shoulder in Shouto’s direction.

Help me, he mouths. His cheeks are flushed with alcohol and his hair is messy.

Shouto smirks and shakes his head imperceptibly, chuckling quietly at Midoriya’s outraged, “Traitor!” as he’s forcibly dragged down the stairs and into the mosh pit. He peers over the edge of the balcony to spot them, but with so many people down below, it proves to be an impossible task.

When he turns back to the three remaining heroes, he feels Amelia’s heavy gaze on him. He flinches automatically, expecting to feel the telltale poking and prodding in his mind like before, but she’s just… looking at him. Watching him. Trey is glaring at him from across the table, but that’s nothing new. Dax could be looking literally anywhere and Shouto wouldn’t know it.

“Are you fucking with him?” the left Trey suddenly asks, brows slanting severely.

Shouto blinks, caught off-guard. “I’m sorry?”

“I asked if you’re fucking with him,” he repeats impatiently. When Shouto looks confused, Trey jerks his chin in the direction of the dancefloor and rolls his eyes. “Izuku. The goddamn Symbol of
Peace. Like, I honestly can’t tell if you’re just stringing him along or if you’re really that stupid.”

Dax heaves a lengthy sigh and rubs his temples. His blond hair turns faintly green in the blue lights overhead. “Trey, come on—”

“No, leave him be,” Amelia says, her voice smooth as honey. She purses her lips, watching Shouto carefully. “I feel like I already know part of the answer, but I’d like the whole picture, if that’s all right with you.”

Shouto feels his defenses locking into place one by one. He eyes each hero warily, pressing himself back against the couch as far as he can go. “I’m… not sure what you’re asking me.”

“Darling, there’s no need to play coy. What we’re asking,” Amelia says quietly, waving both men off as she leans in closer, almost secretively, “is whether or not you care for our Izuku as much as he cares for you.” She rests a comforting hand on Shouto’s knee, ignoring the way he stiffens at the contact. “That’s all, dear. We just want to know your intentions for him.”

Shouto blinks. He doesn’t really know how else to react, to be honest. “I’m not sure that’s any of your business,” he states robotically. “Midoriya and I have been friends for a very long time—”

“You dense motherfucker,” Trey snaps. Both of them groan and drop their heads back against the couch. “God, I wish Katsuki were here.”

Dax sighs. “Trey, I swear to god—”

Amelia silences both of them with a sharp sweep of her manicured hand through the air, keeping her eyes on Shouto with alarming attentiveness. She cocks her head to one side, dark tresses spilling past her shoulders in a waterfall of soft curls, and her eyes flash gold for a moment before they return to amber, orange and translucent and endless. “You’re right,” she says slowly, carefully. Her tone is deceptively light. “I suppose it is none of our business. What you choose to do with Midoriya during your free time is between the two of you. You’re both adults, and I know you can handle yourselves in the field. I’ve read your mission reports—you’re a good hero, Todoroki Shouto. Very good.”

Amelia suddenly leans in further, stopping just short of Shouto’s nose. She narrows her eyes and she bares her teeth in a facsimile of a smile befitting a scarecrow, or maybe a wolf. “But if you mess with Izuku,” she says lowly, dangerously, “you mess with us. And we hold grudges, unlike some people. You’d do well to remember that, Hero Shouto.”

Shouto’s right side feels uncharacteristically cold all of a sudden, and he stares at Amelia with undisguised shock. He glances over at Trey and Dax, who are both watching the display with serious faces, as if this is nothing out of the ordinary and not completely disturbing.

“Are you…” he trails, swallowing. He turns back to Amelia, whose face hasn't softened one bit. “Are you giving me the shovel talk?”

“Well, you obviously like him,” Amelia says simply. She leans back in her seat and reaches for her glass of Scotch, shrugging daintily as she takes a slow sip. She watches him over the top edge of the rim. “It’s all right, Shouto. We won’t share your secret.”

Shouto clenches his jaw, tightening his fingers around his knees. “We’re not like that. It’s not—it’s never been like that.”

“Ah, but it could be.” Amelia winks, eyeliner slashing dangerously low. “Reyna’s downstairs distracting him as a favor to me, you know. If you want, you could go down there and find him.
Buy him a drink, dance a little, confess your feelings—"

“I don’t dance.”

She waves her hand dismissively. “Just an example. You don’t have to dance. Either way, he’s
down there right this second, ready to be swept off his feet by the prettiest sidekick in New York
City.” She arches an eyebrow expectantly, the painted slash of her mouth curled up on one side.
“What are you waiting for?”

The apocalypse. The day Midoriya announces his retirement. Opposite Day. Shouto knows these
are the only conditions under which Midoriya would agree to have dinner with him in a less-than-
platonic manner. Shouto’s a lot of things, but he’s not stupid.

But he’s also not brave.

“I can’t,” he says, his tongue heavy in his mouth. He’s too warm all over and the room is fuzzy at
the edges. “I can’t… do that. He’s too important. He’s the Symbol of Peace and I’m… me.”

Dax shakes his head and sighs, almost in disappointment. Shouto feels an unfamiliar pang in his
chest—how could he have disappointed a man he only met three hours ago? Why does he even
care? God, even Trey looks let down—or, as let down as he's capable of looking. He scowls a lot,
like Bakugou. No wonder they get along.

Dax lets a hand rest heavily on Shouto’s right shoulder, not even batting an eyelash at the chill that
pervades his skin. He smiles sadly. “Even the Symbol of Peace needs someone to care about, kid.
Someone to come home to every night. If you make each other happy the way I think you boys do,
then you shouldn’t have anything to worry about.”

“He’s annoyingly in love with you,” Trey snaps. “Just fuck already and save us all a lot of trouble.”

“Shouto.” Amelia’s voice tears his gaze toward her, and this time when he meets her eyes, he
doesn’t flinch. She smiles warmly at him. “I know it’s not our place to meddle, but it seems like
you need a push to get you going. So, I’ll ask you again: what are you waiting for?”

Shouto doesn’t have an answer. He opens his mouth to say something, to refute it all like he’s done
for the past several years of his life to friends and family and even the press, but nothing comes
out.

He’s out of excuses. He’s out of time.

He’s waited and waited for Izuku and he’s tired of it. So goddamn tired.

Shouto is in New York City, sharing an apartment with his best friend. They patrol the city
together and buy groceries on Tuesdays and Thursdays and they do fucking crosswords together in
the morning over their tasteless, healthy breakfast cereal. Shouto hates crosswords.

What are you waiting for?

Abruptly, he stands up from the sofa, hands clenched at his sides. He can feel frost spreading
across his knuckles and up the insides of his wrists, locking his fingers in place as his heartbeat
jackrabbits inside his chest. His left side steams beneath his clothes. The room is spinning around
him and he takes a deep breath through his nose to steady himself, ignoring the raised eyebrows
from the three heroes around him as they trade surprised expressions with each other.

Don’t think about them, he orders himself. Think about this.
Think of now.

Think of everything.

It’s right there. All he has to do it reach out and take it.

“Excuse me,” he mumbles before pushing past Amelia, Dax, and the two Treys, heading straight for the stairs. He hears a whoop and a whistle from behind him along with a grumbled threat involving his legs and ripped joints, but he pays them no heed—not now, not now. His brain is functioning too much, all cylinders firing one after another in rapid succession, too fast to refuel before coming back around. He has no idea what he’s doing. None. Not even a little bit, and yet he still feels his feet moving toward a goal he can’t see or even begin to understand.

What are you waiting for?

He’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. He’s waiting for the building to blow up and Shigaraki Tomura to come leaping out of the shadows to ruin everything like he always does. He’s waiting for Izuku to wake up one morning and realize that Shouto’s been painfully in love with him since the end of high school. He’s been waiting for everything to fall into place like a magical jigsaw puzzle, never once thinking about how ridiculous it is to hope for something like that when he’s done absolutely nothing to tip the scales in his favor.

Shouto doesn’t hesitate. He slips into the undulating throng of people, elbowing his way past Spandex-clad heroes and sidekicks wearing basic street clothes because they didn’t feel like going home to change. His shoes crunch broken bottles and stick in some places, but the lights are pulsing overhead and the music is making his blood vibrate. He has to find Midoriya. He has to. Before he loses his nerve, or the sun implodes. Whichever comes first.

Suddenly, someone catches his elbow, yanking him to one side. It’s a young man with brown hair and a forgettable face, but he places a finger over Shouto’s lips before he can protest. The man giggles melodically, eyes scrunching up with glee before his irises flash hot pink for a split second.

Reyna spins Shouto around by his shoulders and pushes him forty degrees to the left, altering his path through the crowd. “Go get him, tiger,” she sing-songs before shoving him forward with all her strength.

Shouto stumbles and catches himself as he breaks through the edge of the crowd. He’s close to the bar, near a shadowed alcove on the far wall. A few couples mill about here and there, talking and laughing and taking selfies with each other, away from the violence of the mosh pit behind Shouto.

Midoriya is leaned against a pillar underneath the overhang, frowning as he scrolls through his phone. His hair is a mess and the nape of his neck is damp with sweat, and he’s long since abandoned his blazer in the stifling heat of the club. It’s folded neatly over one muscled forearm, leaving Midoriya in his pale grey v-neck tee that hugs him tightly across the shoulders.

He looks up when Shouto approaches. The smile that breaks out across his face is both relieved and confused at the same time. “Todoroki,” he greets, his voice strangely breathy. “What are you doing down here? I thought—“

“Let’s get out of here,” Shouto says abruptly.

Midoriya blinks. He opens his mouth, then closes it. “Um.” He scratches the back of his neck, frowning. “If that’s what you want, then sure. Is everything okay?”

No. Yes, I don’t know.
Impulsively, and before he can lose his courage, Shouto reaches out to grab Midoriya’s hand in a vice grip. He laces their fingers together, studying the way Midoriya’s blunt nails reflect the turquoise lights all around them until Shouto has every hill and valley of his damaged knuckles memorized. Words are stuck in his throat, choking him on their importance.

“Everything’s great,” Shouto says, meaning every word. He looks up, meeting Midoriya’s wide-eyed stare, and actually lets a real smile slip through. “Do… you want to—“

“Yes,” Midoriya blurs. He closes his eyes, squeezing them shut, and shakes his head as if trying to clear his vision of spots. He looks at Shouto as if he’s not quite real, like he’s a beautiful mirage that he wants to believe in, but can’t. Not yet, at least. Not until he has all the facts. “I—yes. Yes, let’s go. But I need to tell Amelia we’re heading out. She’ll worry.”

He starts to move, but Shouto tugs on his hand, pulling him a few inches closer. “She knows already. I told her before I came to find you.”

Midoriya is standing close—too close, and Shouto can feel the gentle brush of his breath against the sizzling skin of his neck. His lips are slightly parted and soft-looking, begging to be devoured. Those green eyes are watching Shouto, wide with shock and confusion, but there’s a hint of pure wonderment in them that almost gives him hope. Hope that this will all work out. Hope that come morning, everything will be fine and perfect and different.

Midoriya bites his lower lip as he looks between Shouto’s eyes, almost nervous. “Are you…” he trails, exhaling through his nose. “Are you drunk right now?”

“No,” he answers honestly. He takes half a step closer to Midoriya until they’re practically nose to nose, fighting the way his free hand trembles violently at his side. “Are you?”

“No.” Midoriya swallows. “But I feel like I should be.”

Midoriya meets Shouto’s gaze, and what he finds there is frightening and wild and completely unknowable in every possible way. The sheer greenness of his eyes is overpowering and heart-stoppingly familiar; the emotions swirling behind them make his breath catch in his chest. The world tilts on its axis. He thinks of velvety soft cloverleaves and the forests in the mountains back home, the bamboo forests and plush moss on the northernmost sides of the trees.

Shouto could drown in Midoriya’s eyes, plunge headfirst and never come up for air. He could die, and die happily.

What are you waiting for?

Shouto tightens his grip on Midoriya’s hand and drags him toward the elevator, dodging the other club-goers and trading nods with the bouncers who’d eyed him suspiciously not three hours ago. One of the elevators is open and waiting for them when they arrive. Shouto doesn’t waste time pulling Midoriya inside and slamming a palm against the panel to take them to the lobby. The doors make a musical ding, sliding shut behind them and wrapping both men in a cocoon of muted silence.

Someone moves first.

Before he knows what’s happening, Shouto is surging forward and Midoriya is meeting him halfway with searching hands and a passionate mouth that opens immediately on contact. There’s a sharp intake of breath through teeth and the pleasing pressure of Midoriya pressed up against one of the mirror-like sides of the elevator as gravity dwindles away beneath their feet, floor by floor,
meter by meter. Shouto doesn’t care. The primary cable could’ve snapped like piano wire the second the door closed, dropping them like deadweights down the shaft. They could be free-falling right now.

And Shouto would not care.

His long, burning fingers are curled around the back of Midoriya’s neck, tilting his face this way and that for easier access as Midoriya gasps into his mouth. Midoriya’s fists curl into the front of Shouto’s shirt, stretching the fabric like he wants nothing more than to tear it off—or maybe he’s hanging on for dear life, Shouto doesn’t know. All he knows is that he's burning alive from the inside out, every nerve ending overstimulated with foreign pleasure-pain and he doesn’t know how to stop it. He doesn’t know if he even wants to stop it.

“Todoroki,” Midoriya whispers against Shouto’s lips, his eyes closed in inarticulate bliss. He opens his mouth to say something else, but Shouto dives back in with tongue and teeth and too much, not enough, need more more more.

“No,” he manages between kisses. He runs his thumbs along the ridges of Midoriya’s soft cheekbones, nibbling on his lower lip. “Shouto. Call me— call me Shouto. Like you did earlier. Please.”

Midoriya sinks into the kiss, molding to Shouto’s mouth with a soft sigh. “Shouto,” he says again, and Shouto can’t help the small noise that escapes him at the sound of it. Midoriya murmurs his name over and over again as mouths move to necks and hands wander places they shouldn’t. Steam curls past Shouto’s lips, unbidden, but Midoriya whimpers every time the vapor brushes his skin, shivering and leaning into the sensation like he’s chasing the warmth.

Shouto pulls on Midoriya’s lower lip with his teeth and drops his hands to Midoriya’s hips, slipping his fingers beneath the thin cotton hem of his t-shirt so he can trace the ridges and valleys of his torso, mapping them out like a navigator in uncharted territory. He rubs small circles into Midoriya’s muscled hipbones, follows the steep angle of them until his fingers brush denim seams and brass buttons, and commits every centimeter to memory because he never knows when he’ll have this so readily again.

Midoriya lunges forward when Todoroki’s hands slip around to knead the soft muscles of his lower back, fingertips finding the two dimples above his waistline that Shouto’s only seen from a distance up until now. Midoriya presses every inch of himself against Todoroki like he can’t get enough, urging him to go further, do more, be more. Then Midoriya’s hands are in Shouto’s hair, pulling and tugging and oh—this must be what the storybooks are always talking about.

Shouto is so stupidly in love with Midoriya Izuku. So stupid, so lost. So full, full, full of him and them and the looming expanse of who cares that stretches out in front of them both. The world could be ending and Shouto wouldn’t move a muscle if it meant leaving Midoriya’s mouth unattended for more than a second.

“Where,” Midoriya huffs, angling his neck where Shouto’s mouth is currently attached, “did this come from? Not that I’m complaining! Not at all. Just—god, Shouto, yeah, right there— I’m surprised.”

Shouto sinks his teeth into the pliant muscles and tendons at the juncture between Midoriya’s neck and shoulder, sucking gently before blowing frosty air over the spot, relishing in the way that Midoriya shudders beneath his hands. He leans back in, moving further up beneath the razor-sharp angle of his jawbone.
“I don’t know,” Shouto murmurs, noting the goosebumps on Midoriya’s skin with satisfaction. He smiles and scrapes his teeth against the spot just below his ear, savoring the way Midoriya goes limp and pliant underneath his fingers. “I don’t know, I don’t know,” he repeats, the words becoming muffled and indistinguishable until he’s humming against his neck wordlessly.

“Oh, god,” Midoriya moans. There are hands against his chest, but he can’t tell what they’re doing. Pushing? Pulling? “Shouto. Shouto, our floor is coming up.”

“Don’t care,” he mutters, brushing his lips across Midoriya’s face to capture his lips in a searing kiss once again. Shouto cups his cheeks and takes mouthfuls of every noise Midoriya makes, tucking them away in the corners of his mind for a rainy day—or any day, really, because there’s no way he’ll want to forget a single second of this for the rest of his goddamn life.

Midoriya laughs, and it’s such a sweet, sincere sound that Shouto feels himself smiling against Midoriya’s open mouth without a care in the world. “You may not care—‘ Midoriya kisses him chastely ‘—but I sort of care. Because we’re totally about to be in a lobby where a bunch of strangers are going to be able to watch us make out in one of their elevators. Exhibitionism isn’t exactly my thing, you know.”

Shouto reluctantly pulls back and watches Midoriya—Izuku—with unrestrained fascination, scrutinizing his swollen, kiss-bitten lips, and his mussed, ridiculous hair. Up close, Shouto can count every freckle on the bridge of his nose. God, there must be thousands.

Midoriya bites his lip, and the movement draws Shouto’s attention like a magnet. Midoriya laughs tremulously, his cheeks stained a dark pink color that only enhances his freckles. Hesitantly, Midoriya reaches out between them and adjusts the stretched collar of Shouto’s shirt until it lays flat and even across his flushed collarbones; Midoriya also fusses with his hair, rearranging the strands until his part is clean and undisturbed.

“There,” he says softly, eyes full of wonder and unbridled happiness. He drops his hand to Shouto’s cheek, where he strokes his thumb back and forth until the skin feels tingly and imaginary. “You’re perfect.”

The door dings, announcing their arrival at the lobby. Shouto seriously considers welding the doors shut for an entire three seconds before he decides against it. (“Setting an example for society” has never felt so suffocating before.) Still feeling brave, he surges forward to steal one more open-mouthed kiss before the light spills into the elevator car, sucking in Midoriya’s surprised sound like a keepsake—something he can unwrap later and remember. Remember what it was like to live, just once, with a cute boy in an elevator who happened to be wearing nice trousers and had a blinding smile that could power the lights of New York City for the rest of infinity.

This time, it’s Midoriya who takes his hand, squeezing tightly.

“Come on,” he tells Shouto, grinning that stupidly beautiful smile with his stupidly gorgeous eyes. He tugs Shouto along, pulling him out of the elevator with a knock-kneed stumble. “We’ve got better places to be.”

Shouto follows.
from the first elevator to the one in his building. Fifteen minutes max if they get the timing wrong on all the crosswalks and have to wait for the lights to change.

Thirty-seven minutes later, Midoriya and Shouto are running through Central Park—the scenic route, Midoriya told him—with hands held and laughter bouncing off the massive tree trunks, wooden benches, and the iron lampposts that cast amber hues across the pale gravel paths and wilted grass. It’s late and the park is technically closed for the night, but the security guards are either familiar with Midoriya’s antics by now or they deem both men aren’t worth the trouble of chasing down. They’re essentially alone in Central Park beneath the blanket of cold, distant stars with only each other and a few squirrels for company. It’s freezing outside and there are a few snowflakes here and there; Shouto keeps his left hand warm as he’s dragged along by Midoriya, fending off any shivers that might threaten them.

They race each other down the bike paths, Quirks left behind in the dust as they simply live. Shouto has never known freedom like this—this fluttery feeling of lightness in his chest, like helium, that makes him feel like he’s floating in the middle of space, twisting and turning and so fucking happy he could burst. They run and run and run, tripping over rocks and stumbling into each other with breathless laughter. Games of tag go unfinished in favor of Shouto pressing Midoriya up against a tree or a signpost or the underside of a footbridge—he’s not picky. Just as long as Midoriya’s warm in his arms, warmer against his mouth, and giggling like a lunatic because that’s what he is. Shouto’s not convinced he’s entirely sane, either, so he supposes he doesn’t have a leg to stand on in the situation.

I love you, Shouto thinks as he tangles his fingers in Midoriya’s hair for the umpteenth time that evening, spelling secrets into his mouth. I love you and I’ve been so, so stupid.

They sprint out of Central Park, stealing into the darkness like twin bandits attached at the fingertips. They jaywalk. They stagger. They duck into alleyways when they think no one’s looking, sighing into each other the second they’re obscured by shadows, and loving with teeth and tongues and touches that sear Shouto through his shirt. He feels pressure building behind his chest, turning him to ash where he stands. He’s weak for this. He doesn’t care. He doesn’t care.

When they finally reach the apartment building, Midoriya yanks Shouto into a tight embrace in an alleyway east of the main entrance.

“Hold on,” he whispers, and green lightning skitters across his skin as his Quirk activates. Shouto barely has time to lock his arms around Midoriya’s shoulders before he leaps, soaring straight up into the sky like a rocket. Shouto’s half worried they’ll keep going forever, drown in the inky blackness of the sky until they can’t see the sun anymore, but they reach the zenith of the jump sooner than he anticipates. They fall, wind whistling past Shouto’s ears as they plummet.

They land on Midoriya’s balcony with a landing that’s, admittedly, softer than Shouto was anticipating. A lot softer. He feels the abrupt change of direction when Midoriya’s feet touch down, but his knees absorb most of the shock without so much as a grunt of effort.

“That was…” Shouto trails, breathing embarrassingly hard as he staggers back against the guardrail. “Dramatic.”

Midoriya shrugs and sheds his blazer on the ground before crossing the balcony to stand in front of Shouto again. He drops a swift kiss on Shouto’s lips, smiling. “I didn’t feel like waiting for another elevator, did you?”

His eyes are coy and playful, and Shouto feels his smile meet his eyes. He rests his hands on
Midoriya’s waist, pressing his fingers into the softness of his stomach simply because he can. “Not particularly, now that you mention it,” he murmurs, leaning in.

He ducks in to press another kiss to Midoriya’s mouth, but the pressure of callused fingertips stops him mere centimeters from his goal. He frowns and opens his mouth to ask why, but then Midoriya’s fingers are pushing up the sides of his mouth to mimic a smile.

Shouto blinks. “Um—“

“No particularly, now that you mention it,” he murmurs, leaning in. He ducks in to press another kiss to Midoriya’s mouth, but the pressure of callused fingertips stops him mere centimeters from his goal. He frowns and opens his mouth to ask why, but then Midoriya’s fingers are pushing up the sides of his mouth to mimic a smile.

Shouto blinks. “Um—“

“How that again,” Midoriya says softly. His brow is furrowed in concentration as he tries to move the corners of Shouto’s mouth into position, and he huffs when he’s ultimately dissatisfied with the final product. “Please?”

“What? Smile?”

“Yeah, doofus.” Midoriya pokes at his lower lip as if he could instill life in it with a magic touch. “Come on, do it. I asked super nicely and everything.”

Shouto snorts. “Calling me a doofus is you asking nicely? I’m scared to see what it looks like when you’re not asking nicely.”

Midoriya scowls and swats at him. “Jerk. You know what I meant.” Hesitantly, he reaches up and traces the outline of Shouto’s lower lip again, a bit more tenderly than before. His eyes soften as he takes in the rest of Shouto’s face. “Please?” he whispers, leaning in closely. “You smile so rarely that I… I don’t know. I just feel like I missed it the first couple times back there. I wanna remember this one—for real this time.” He bites his lip. “You know what I mean?”

He knows. Shouto absolutely knows what Midoriya means, because he thought the same exact thing back in school. Back then, Shouto had wanted to measure the angles of every single one of Midoriya’s smiles until he knew them backwards, deathly curious about the boy who handed out grins like pieces of taffy and never felt like a piece of his soul left with each one.

So, he smiles for him, softly this time, and he knows it’s a good smile because Midoriya’s face lights up brighter than the sun. He has the urge to touch, to reach out and clutch at the thing he’s wanted for long. He reaches up and cups Midoriya’s face in his hands just because he can, fingertips brushing the ends of his hair where they tickle the tips of his ears.

“There,” Midoriya murmurs, looking at Shouto with raw wonder on his face. “Now, was that so hard?”

“No, he thinks. It really wasn’t.

Shouto kisses him, long and hard until they’re tangled up in every facet of each other. They’re still on Midoriya’s balcony and the wind is blowing hard enough to make Midoriya’s teeth chatter, so Shouto heats up his left side until the shivers subside, hands slipping beneath Midoriya’s shirt to press against the hard planes of his abdomen.

“Have I ever told you,” Midoriya shivers, “how— how handy you are to have around during winter? Like, s-seriously. Please be my space heater.”

Shouto chuckles lowly, splaying his fingers out across Midoriya’s stomach. “Well,” he says, dragging the word out as he traces his fingertips up Midoriya’s sternum, “I suppose I could. Since you asked so nicely, anyway.”

Midoriya shivers and rolls his eyes. “You’re the worst.”
Shouto’s smile is wicked. “The worst, really? Hmm. I could leave, if you’d prefer.”

Midoriya’s eyes darken in an instant and he grabs Shouto’s collar, pulling him forward roughly into a kiss that sucks all the oxygen out of Shouto’s lungs and leaves him weak in the knees. When Midoriya pulls away with a wet-sounding smack, he narrows his eyes and tells Shouto, leaning in dangerously close, “Don’t you dare.”

Shouto swallows. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Good.” Midoriya slips a hand around the back of his neck, tangling his fingers in Shouto’s hair and pulling gently until he’s at eye level. He leans in with hot breath and presses his mouth against the shell of Shouto’s ear, murmuring, “Now, quit talking and take me inside. I’m freezing.”

Shouto couldn’t move any faster if he tried. Midoriya slants their mouths together once again, slipping behind the seal of Shouto’s lips with startling ease and a raw ferocity that makes Shouto’s blood boil salaciously in his veins. He staggers backward toward the glass door he knows is somewhere behind him, feeling blindly as Midoriya traces the tip of his tongue over Shouto’s teeth and sucks on his lower lip. He knows he’s making undignified noises, but he’s going to burn his very expensive, very new shirt if he doesn’t get it off right fucking now and he can’t. Find. The. Damn. Doorknob.

Midoriya is toying with Shouto’s belt buckle when his hand finally touches cold steel, and he nearly laughs in relief as he opens the door to the apartment—one more second of that and Midoriya may have been short one un-scorched balcony. They spill inside, all heavy breathing and reaching, grasping hands where they tumble against the back of the couch in Midoriya’s living room, wood biting into Shouto’s lower back. His utility belt is still on the coffee table, laid out and only half-stocked with medical supplies—he makes a mental note to refill it before he leaves in the morning, but that thought is quickly erased as Midoriya strips his shirt off in one swift movement and slots his hips against Shouto’s where they’re pinned against the back of the sofa.

“Izuku,” he wheezes, toes curling inside his shoes. Shouto grips the back of the couch with his right hand and he knows there are fractals of ice spreading out across the cushions, manifesting shards of ice that will melt and make a really annoying mess sooner rather than later. “I-I can’t—“

But Midoriya only grins and ducks down to drag his tongue across Shouto’s collarbones where they jut out above his shirt collar. “Bedroom,” he murmurs, voice low and rumbling.

“Right. Bedroom,” Shouto breathes, and he swears he can see tendrils of smoke coming off his shoulder, but he’s too preoccupied to even consider dousing himself with ice to put it out. If he’s really burning—

Well. Occupational hazard.

Midoriya’s large hands settle on either side of Shouto’s hips and he pulls gently, standing Shouto up from his spot against the sofa before walking him back down the hallway with short, uncoordinated steps. They kick off their shoes as they go, shedding jackets and shirts and belts as they get closer and closer to their intended destination. The wood floor is cold beneath their feet, but Shouto is warm enough for the both of them and the rest of the apartment, so he figures it breaks about even, all things considered.

When they reach Midoriya’s bedroom door at the end of the hall, Shouto fumbles to unlock it before throwing it wide open, his mouth still attached to Midoriya’s in the filthiest way imaginable. They’re all teeth, sharp incisors and half-whispered words of worship as they do their best to cram in all the things they’ve never had time to feel or even think about before tonight. Shouto feels like
Midoriya is peeling him apart cell by cell with every touch, every bite, every wordless nuzzle of affection that’s lavished upon him.

When Shouto feels the edge of Midoriya’s bed hit the back of his knees, he lets gravity take control and sits down, his hands coming up to rest on Midoriya’s denim-clad hips. In the low light, his eyes are dark and indescribable and so fucking needy that Shouto feels himself wilt in some unseen place.

“Izuku—“ he starts, but he's cut off by a swift, breathtaking peck on the lips.

He’s bent at the waist, peering into Shouto’s eyes with unbridled joy and curiosity. “Do you want this?” he asks, tracing the outline of Shouto’s scar lightly, lovingly. His brows furrow with worry and his fingers falter in their course. “Please, tell me, Shouto. I need to know before anything… happens.”

“Yes,” he exhalles, leaning into Midoriya’s touch. He huffs out a laugh that’s almost incredulous in nature—who wouldn’t want this? “Yes, I want this. I want you.”

Midoriya’s smile is small and bright, like a fallen star. He leans forward and presses his lips to Shouto’s forehead, lingering there for a breath, a moment, before pulling away. He jerks a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the hallway. ‘I’m, uh, going to go freshen up really quick, all right? I’ll be right back. Don’t… move. Or put on any clothes.” As an afterthought, he adds, “Um. Please?”

Shouto leans back on his hands. “All right. I’ll be here.”

Midoriya shuffles awkwardly for a moment, digging his cell phone and wallet out of his pockets before tossing them on the bed where they fall in a haphazard pile. He then walks backwards out of the room, a goofy smile plastered on his face as he looks Shouto up and down in stunned admiration, like he can’t believe how lucky he is. He takes one more long look at Shouto when he reaches the doorway—and then he turns around, scurrying down the hallway with padded footsteps and faint muttering.

Shouto flops back on the bed and exhales, blowing steam out of his nostrils in a thick cloud that obscures his ridiculous grin from the rest of the world, including himself. He’s laid out on the bed of his best friend in nothing but his unzipped trousers and one sock on his right foot, hair a tangled mess and lips sore from all the kissing he’s been doing.

He’s so happy. God. He feels so stupidly, unequivocally happy.

Maybe Izuku would come to Fuyumi’s wedding as Shouto’s date, providing Shouto works up the courage to ask him. He tries his hardest to imagine Izuku in a sleek suit with a tie that’s actually the correct length for once in his life, hair done properly and—and no, he can’t really see it. He scraps that idea in a heartbeat.

Maybe Friend Day will happen more than once a year now. Maybe Shouto will be able to visit Izuku’s apartment in New York during the summer for a few days, and maybe Izuku will stay with Shouto during the fall or winter. He’s not sure how that will mesh with his schedule once he goes pro, but he’s sure they’ll figure it out.

Maybe Midoriya will actually want to take him to dinner as a non-friend sort of thing. Who would pay? Would they argue about it and end up splitting it like usual? Or maybe Izuku would pay for dinner and Shouto would pay the tip? Shouto doesn’t know the proper etiquette for that—he makes a mental note to do some research later tonight.
A thought occurs to Shouto.

Does this mean they’re *boyfriends* now?

*Oh, god.* Shouto doesn’t know the first thing about being someone’s boyfriend. A few flings over the years totally don’t count, obviously. Someone like Midoriya will want a stable, normal relationship-type thing with his *boyfriend.* Jesus, even saying the word makes Shouto seize up like an armature. Maybe he can call Yaoyorozu after Izuku’s asleep and ask for advice. Or maybe he could shoot Fuyumi a text—she’s getting married, so she’s obviously doing something right. Right?

Shouto is jarred from his impending panic attack by the buzzing of a phone and blinding glow of a screen near his left eye. He squints, reaching out with a wince to cover it up with his hand, but the light escapes through his fingers. It buzzes evenly and steadily—a phone call, then. Frowning, Shouto sits back up and reaches for the phone, peering down at the too-bright screen.

Oh. It’s the agency. Shouto wonders what they want at this hour.

He hums, frowning as the phone continues to buzz. It couldn’t hurt to find out what they want. Slowly, he goes to swipe his thumb across the screen—

**3 missed calls**

Shouto deflates. Well, so much for that. Maybe they’ll leave a voicemail. He goes ahead and opens up Midoriya’s phone to check the voicemail screen and wait for the message to come through—

His eye catches on something in Midoriya’s messages before he can hit the home screen.

**From: Headquarters**

10:13 PM

>> Assistance rqstd with S&A at 1174 S. 49th, calling all active duty responders. 913F

>> Code YELLOW, mass casualties reported at disaster site

>> Hero Groups A, B, and E respond ASAP

>> Heroes Deku and Nucleic respond ASAP

Shouto stares at the messages, confused. A 913 is an arson-related crime. A search-and-rescue mission for a city block fire? *Mass casualties?* Shouto’s head spins, trying to remember if he’d seen any heroes exiting the club when they’d left, but they’d been too preoccupied to see anything past each other. He can’t remember.

*Heroes Deku and Nucleic respond ASAP.*

The message isn’t recent, nor is it unread. A cold feeling of dread uncurls in Shouto’s chest as he swipes over to the list of missed calls, only to find multiple from the agency, scattered over the past hour at different intervals. Shouto isn’t stupid by any means. It only takes him a millisecond to reach the conclusion that Midoriya saw these messages, felt those phone calls vibrate, and he ignored them.
Fumbling, Shouto reaches in his own pocket for his phone to check the news. *Please be a false alarm, please be a rumor, please be smaller than described...*

A block fire in Brooklyn. Thirteen injured. No casualties—yet. Rescue efforts will continue into early morning, it looks like.

Shouto feels more than he hears Izuku return to the room. He doesn’t dare to look up for fear of what might be written over his own face—confusion, maybe? Disappointment? Bitterness? The fire in his blood dies bit by bit as he processes the full implications of this discovery.

“Hey,” Midoriya breathes, and Shouto can hear the smile in his voice. Footsteps, soft and nearing him. “Are you—“

“Why did you ignore these?”

Midoriya stops short. Shouto looks up with furrowed brows and downturned lips, holding out the glowing phone with all the incriminating characters illuminated on its surface. He silently hopes and prays and *wishes* Izuku will have some handy explanation for him, some kind of excuse that could make this all right so they can continue the night they had planned.

*Please, explain this to me. Pleasepleaseplease.*

Izuku looks at the phone in his hands and he goes paler than the moonlight, eyes widening in horror. “You—“ he stammers. He frowns. “You looked through my phone?”

“The agency was calling you. I went to answer, and saw your messages on accident.”

Izuku’s face sours. “On accident,” he repeats.

Shouto feels dismay settle in his stomach like a lead weight. “Yes, on *accident.* I didn’t go fishing through your phone on purpose, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I wasn’t—“ Midoriya rakes a hand through his messy hair and exhales, squeezing his eyes shut. “All right, fine. This is... um. Shit.” He laughs nervously, rubbing a hand across his face. “I-I don’t know what you want me to say, Shouto.”

Shouto pushes off the bed and approaches, cell phone brandished and casting blue light across the planes of Midoriya’s face to make him look more like a ghoul than the Symbol of Peace. “You ignored this,” Shouto repeats.

Something in Midoriya’s eyes cracks open. He blinks, dropping his gaze to the floor between their feet. His voice is quiet. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Are you seriously asking me that?”

“Don’t make light of this, Midoriya.”

“I’m *not.* I just think it’s a stupid thing to ask since you obviously know the answer already.” His voice is defensive and chipped at the edges like a ceramic teacup that’s been put through the washer one too many times. His brows are furrowed, set low above his eyes. “I figured if it was really important, Mia or someone would call me. You *know* my agency likes me to respond to every little thing, Shouto. It’s my night off.”
“Except this one wasn’t little.” Shouto holds out his own phone with the news article splashed across the screen. “Thirteen injured, Izuku. Thirteen.”

Izuku’s eyes widen and he grabs the phone from Shouto’s hand, pulling it close so he can scan the tiny text for more information. He mouths the words to himself, but when he gets to thirteen, he recoils as if the letters had reached out and struck him. He looks up at Shouto, horrified.

“I-I didn’t—“ he stammers. “I couldn’t have—“

“That number could’ve been zero if you’d been there,” Shouto says weakly. Gravel lines his throat, harsh and jagged, and each word digs a little deeper, draws a little more blood. “You shouldn’t have ignored this. It wasn’t worth it. I’m not worth it. You shouldn’t have blown these messages off just so we could—“

“Sleep together?”

The brazenness of the phrase makes Shouto’s cheeks color slightly. “Yes. So we could sleep together.”

Izuku laughs harshly, and it’s an awful, grating sound that makes Shouto’s blood run cold; he’s breathing hard and there’s a familiar sheen to his eyes that makes Shouto’s gut twist. “Oh, yeah,” Izuku says bitterly. “Because fuck my happiness, right? I’m just the Number One hero, the Symbol of Peace. Sacrifice is all part of the game, isn’t it? Why should it matter what I want for my own life?”

Shouto frowns. He’s never seen this expression on Izuku’s face before, and it’s tripping all of his sensors. Red flags pop up and alarms blare, silent and unseen inside his head. “Izuku—“

“God,” he exhales, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes. His grin is watery and jagged and wrong, and when he looks up at Shouto through his fingers, something breaks in Shouto’s chest. “I just… I just wanted to be selfish for once. That’s all. One stupid, selfish night with you, and it was gonna be perfect. So fucking perfect.”

Shouto stands frozen in front of Midoriya, eyes wide as he fumbles for something to say. He’s not good with tears or emotions because he doesn’t have a lot of experience with them himself, but Midoriya’s specific brand of saltwater is something he’s never even tried to tame because he’s absolute shit at it. He bites the inside of his cheek and strategizes. Hesitating, he reaches out to touch Midoriya’s bare shoulder in what he thinks is a comforting manner.

Midoriya bats his hand away blindly. “Don’t,” he bites out, voice wavering. When he looks up again, there are smeared, silvery tear tracks on his cheeks, and his face is so impossibly shattered that Shouto’s stomach twists.

“Midoriya,” he tries, biting his lip. “Please don’t… um, cry. All I’m saying is that you can’t—“

“Can’t what?” he snaps. “Can’t live my own life because the other seven billion people on the planet think I owe them something?”

“You do owe them something,” Shouto emphasizes. “You’re the Symbol of Peace. It’s what you signed up for.”

“No, I signed up to save people, not to throw my own happiness through a wood chipper.”

“We all make sacrifices in this line of work, Midoriya. This qualifies.”
“I’m not sacrificing you.”

“Then I’ll do it!” Shouto snaps sharply. He slices his hand through the air definitively. “I won’t be held responsible, Midoriya. If you can’t compartmentalize this… whatever this is, appropriately, then we aren’t going to work. I won’t let you ruin yourself for me. I won’t let people die for me. I’m not… I’m not worth it.”

Midoriya flinches back, stunned. He stares at Shouto like he’s a stranger, looking him up and down with eyes that bleed of hurt and confusion and too many other swirling emotions to name. Shouto feels like his chest has been cracked open and drained of blood, leaving him wheezing.

Midoriya swipes angrily at his eyes and glares out the window at the glowing skyline. “So, that’s it, then? We’re not even going to try?”

Shouto's ice creeps up his spine, cracking and hissing. His heart is stuttering, stopping, and splitting apart. He clenches his jaw to keep from vomiting. “I…” he trails. His mouth tastes bitter. “I don’t think we can. Not without harming the people we’re sworn to protect.”

A tear slips down Midoriya’s face. He’s not smiling, and his eyes aren’t smiling or sad or even angry anymore. They’re just… lifeless. Green has never looked duller.

Shouto hates himself.

Midoriya takes a deep breath, shoulders tightening. He nods once, stiffly. “Okay. If that’s what you want.”

No, it’s not what I want. I want you, I want you, I’ve always wanted you.

“It is,” he says quietly, and tries to ignore the sound of his heart breaking over and over again. “I’m sorry.”

Midoriya doesn’t give any indication that he hears Shouto. Instead, he rubs his face and takes a shallow breath before spinning on his heel to march toward the silver suitcase that leans against the far wall. He grabs it, slings it onto the mattress, and cracks it open to begin donning his hero costume. Shouto watches, glued to the spot and unable to move his legs for fear of his knees giving out.

“I’m heading to the disaster site to see if they need extra help,” Midoriya mutters, lacing up his boots. He doesn’t look at Shouto, doesn’t acknowledge that he’s even in the room aside from the fact that he’s clearly not talking to himself. “I’ll be back in the morning.”

Shouto swallows. “Should I come—“

“No. I’m going alone.”

Somewhere behind the trappings of his ribcage, Shouto’s lungs are rending apart. “Okay,” he says. Because he’s scared that if he says anything else, he’ll break.

It only takes a moment for Izuku to do up the final zipper on his costume and settle the metal facemask loosely around his neck. He heads toward the nearby window, reaching for the latch—

He hesitates, fingers scant centimeters away, arm outstretched. Shouto mentally traces the outline of his back against the cold backdrop of the night sky and tries not to think about the frost that’s gathering beneath his nails. Stay, please stay, he wants to plead. Light the world on fire and just stay with me for the rest of forever.
But this isn’t that type of story. Not at all.

Izuku leaves. When he returns late the next morning, covered in soot and ash and dried blood that isn’t his, he finds that Shouto has packed his things, put his sheets in the wash, and finished the Sudoku puzzle in the morning paper.

He’s gone.

Chapter End Notes

WARNING: they totally break up before they even officially get together. Sexytimes are almost had. Everything is terrible now.

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Shouto’s apartment has always been barren and empty, but it’s never felt more like a bottomless pit of nothingness than it does now.

He sits on the floor in his foyer, back pressed against the wall and knees pulled up to his chest as he focuses on breathing in and out, in and out. He has one sneaker tied tightly on his left foot, the other one discarded in the pile near the door where his luggage, tagged and stuffed full of stupid souvenirs, sits on its side. He supposes he should reach down and take the other shoe off, arrange them carefully on the shoe rack parallel to each other like he always does whenever he arrives home. But he just… can’t.

Instead, he stares at the wall opposite him and wonders how that grey scuff got there. It’s about mid-way up the expanse of eggshell white, right below the mounted coatrack where he puts his scarves and keys. When he was moving furniture in, perhaps? Or maybe when he yanked his luggage through the doorway, he’d accidentally bumped the wall along the way? He’ll have to tell his landlady about it—she’s nice, so she probably won’t mind too much. He can touch up the wall tomorrow for her, if he has time.

Tomorrow is a weird concept right now. Tomorrow will probably always be a weird concept, now that Midori—

Izuku.

Unbidden, a foreign pain shoots up his throat, curling like a snake and squeezing until his vision goes blurry. He blinks once, hard, and it disappears. But the threat still remains, floating just beneath the surface of his calm, composed demeanor.

He will not cry. He will not.

Gritting his teeth, Shouto reaches down and rips his shoe off, throwing it at the rack with a grunt of effort the task doesn’t really require. The shoe lands with a crunch of ice crystals that have
gathered along the rubber sole in his haste. He exhales sharply, squeezing his eyes shut when glittering frost curls past his lips in a soft cloud that doesn’t dissipate as quickly as it should. He knows the wall behind him is covered with fern-shaped fractals of blue-white rime, but he doesn’t dare look back at it to see the damage because it’s evidence. Evidence of the pain in his chest that Shouto doesn’t want or need. Evidence that he may have just destroyed one of the few good things he had going for him in his life.

Shouto needs a distraction. He needs… god, he doesn’t know what he needs. He needs something to hit, something to burn.

So, he calls Momo and requests a transfer to full professional hero status.

It’s approved within the hour.

The next few weeks are standard for a hero such as Shouto: he wakes up, dons his costume, and patrols the streets of the city until his knees ache and his fingers are numb from overuse of his Quirk, head spinning with the sheer number of villains he encounters. As a professional hero in his own right, Shouto's allowed to roam the city and use his Quirk however he sees fit, at all times of the day or night. He turns down sidekick offers and ignores Momo’s concerned looks in favor of throwing himself into his work. To say he’s successful is an understatement. By the end of November, he’s #16 on the Pro Hero Roster and getting higher every day.

It’s a solitary existence, but he figures that’s not too different from what he had before, so he embraces his new professional life with a Shouto-typical amount of gusto—that is to say he doesn’t give a shit about any of it and continues on his not-so-merry way like he’s not breaking apart on the inside. Sometimes he’ll patrol with Momo if Jirou’s out of town, and occasionally he’ll go to lunch with both of them when they forcibly drag him from the premises. Most of the time, though, he keeps to himself. He feels almost like Aizawa when he perches on rooftops in the middle of the night, ears straining for any sounds of distress in the immediate area. He works alone because that’s how he likes it, and for a while, it’s enough to distract him.

However, some mornings are… difficult. Sometimes the sidekicks will have the TV on in the breakroom at the agency, running a constant stream of hero-related news so they can all stay updated on the goings-on of the industry. It’s a perfectly reasonable excuse to have the TV on, and sometimes there’s really interesting things happening that pique Shouto’s interest for a moment or two before he moves back to his desk for the afternoon.

Shouto sees Midoriya on that screen more often than not. He’s usually shown doing backflips through fiery rubble and bouncing off walls of crumbling structures to save people just in the nick of time, mainly because he’s dramatic and doesn’t know any other way of doing things, but also because he’s a self-sacrificing idiot who doesn’t know the meaning of calculated risk—but that’s beside the point. On those particular mornings in the breakroom, Shouto will watch Midoriya’s interviews with calm indifference etched into his features while he consciously tries not to remember what Midoriya’s mouth tasted like under the gentle scrutiny of the stars all those weeks ago.

(He’s usually not very successful, and ultimately ends up excusing himself from the breakroom with a murmured excuse that nobody in their right mind would believe is authentic. The sidekicks know better than to ask at this point, and Momo has stopped trying to wheedle the truth out of him.
He's alone, and he's fine with that. Everything is fine.

Shouto starts getting antsy as the end of December rolls around. He spends the holiday with his mother, Fuyumi and her fiancé (Aane is his name, and he’s frighteningly polite, Shouto discovers), and Natsuo at the hospital; Ichiro is stuck in Tokyo for work, unfortunately, but he promises to make it to the wedding in the summer. Christmas is noisy and wonderful and his mother’s hospital room is way too small to contain all five of them—especially Natsuo’s too-loud laugh and bubbly personality that seems to ooze out of every pore—but they make it work. For once, Endeavor is not around, and their family is not dysfunctional.

Baby steps, Shouto thinks. Maybe in a few years they’ll almost be close to normal. Wouldn’t that be grand?

They end the holiday with promises to write and discussions of color schemes for Fuyumi’s wedding. Hugs are shared and Natsuo ruffles Shouto’s hair because he’s an ass like that, and for a little while, everything is okay.

December 27th rolls around shortly thereafter.

Shouto is restless the entire day. He taps his foot under his desk until Momo threatens to staple his toes to the floor (albeit politely), but she ultimately sends him home claiming he looks like he’s coming down with something. He certainly feels ill, what with the churning in his stomach and the sweat that keeps freezing on his right palm; Shouto takes her up on the offer and heads back to his apartment, telling her he’ll catch up on his paperwork tomorrow morning when he’s feeling better.

His apartment, when he arrives home, is clean to the point of sparkling and the sheets are turned down in the guest room, ready for visitors at a moment’s notice. There are fresh flowers in the vase by the window and his fridge is stocked.

Except there are no visitors. No one knocks on Shouto’s door, and his phone does not ring.

Midoriya does not come.

Shouto awakens on the morning of December 28th feeling sick to his stomach and shaken to his core. He calls in, telling Momo that his “illness” has gotten worse and that he won't be coming into work today. She accepts his excuse with only minor hesitation—Momo is a lot of things, but she’s never been stupid; she knows why he’s ill—but she promises to cover for him anyway and wishes him a clear road to recovery. Shouto hangs up the phone with an empty promise to feel better and a tremble in his voice that isn’t half as well-disguised as he’d like it to be.

He then promptly hurls his phone at the wall with a frustrated cry that echoes in the hollow part of his chest, and the screen shatters upon impact.

Shouto is alone.

Shouto is alone and he is fine.

Everything is fine.

(Meanwhile, in New York City, Izuku lies awake in bed, staring at the ceiling like he can see the
stars past the sheetrock if he simply tries hard enough. He wonders if Todoroki ever looks at the stars the way Midoriya does, like they’re something to be touched with the tips of curious fingers, to be felt and held and stolen away in fits of impassioned possessiveness.

Probably not, he decides brokenly, sinking back into his sheets with a shudder. Todoroki has better things to do with his time than stare at stars all night.)

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Summary

2021 — one year and seven months after the events of New York City

Shouto: 22

Izuku: 23

Chapter Notes

Even more angst. Shocking, I know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next year is full of non-stop villains, mountains of processing paperwork, and a suspicious number of cats stuck in trees. Shouto tackles every instance head-on, left side blazing with righteous fury, just so he has something else to think about.

It’s a calming sort of repetition, he thinks—a steady rock in the churning sea of Shouto’s otherwise hectic lifestyle that only weathers a little bit as the days and months wear on. He wakes up early and goes to sleep far too late, fills out paperwork and refuses talk shows and interviews as his popularity increases bit by bit. The media calls him “cold” and “distant,” but Shouto simply likes his privacy. His social media is a barren wasteland of blank pixels, save a few birthday wishes here and there for Uravity, Ingenium, and Creati because Shouto is nothing if not polite, and he never misses his friends’ birthdays.

After a while, the media stops pushing for him to get a Snapchat and instead focuses on the new generation of heroes out of UA that look promising. Shouto doesn’t complain. He’s a hero. He saves people and puts villains away, and that’s good enough for him. He doesn’t think about anything else.

Shouto doesn’t think about Midoriya either. He doesn’t think of much outside his prefecture really, not that that’s entirely shocking. He sends letters to his sister in Fukuoka and receives phone calls from Natsuo and Ichiro every once in a while when they have the time—which isn’t often, admittedly, but it’s better than nothing. Shouto visits his mother at the hospital every Sunday like clockwork. She’s taken up crocheting because she’s anxiously awaiting the sixteen-or-so children Fuyumi is supposed to have now that she’s happily married and settled in Kyushu. (Shouto’s just glad she’s not asking him about his love life. He pities his sister a little more every time he sees a new onesie or crocheted booties scattered somewhere in his mother’s hospital room.)

Months pass. The slipstream of time is powerful and silent, and Shouto doesn’t fight its indomitable pull. He rises through the ranks and doesn’t look past himself for fear of what he might find.

He is satisfied.
Not happy, his mind supplies rebelliously one afternoon in July. Satisfied.

May 16th, 2021

In a world of chaos and unpredictability, Shouto will always feel comfortable falling back on his routines. They keep his head above water and prop him up when he feels overwhelmed, an invisible support system he’s relied on since he was old enough to rely on anything. One routine in particular is his favorite: his weekly trip to the farmer’s market.

Every Tuesday morning, Shouto gets out of bed and walks three blocks south to the market near the riverside to restock his fruits, vegetables, and bread supply for the upcoming week. He tries his best to go as early as he can in order to beat the crowds—now that he’s the number four hero, he can hardly go anywhere without being recognized, so the fewer people there are at the market, the better—but he also goes simply because he enjoys the sound of his own footsteps against the pavement before the rest of the city rouses to full wakefulness. He cherishes the temporary peace of early morning, the hesitant catch-breath in his day before the restless entropy of the city catches up with him in the form of villains and petty crime. Tranquility, Shouto knows, is fleeting, so he does his best to savor every instance.

The city is painted in pastel gold this morning, the buildings carved out of soft ivory blocks that seem to melt together in the tentative warmth of dawn. The puddles in the street reflect butternut as the sun rises over the snow-capped mountains, casting long grey shadows across the pavement. Dewy mist rolls in off the nearby river to make the air hazy-looking and crisp-smelling; in the distance, the churning of the river water blends into the general white noise of the waking city. Shouto spots an elderly woman sweeping the front steps of her apartment across the street, and down the block he sees a young man with flour on his nose flipping the sign in the front window of a bakery to open.

Shouto keeps his beanie tucked low over his hair and his hands in his pockets as he meanders down the road, feeling more like a visitor in a museum than an actual participant in the goings-on around him. He smiles at the people who recognize him despite his poor attempt at a disguise, and he compliments the geraniums in Mrs. Shi’s flowerboxes because it always makes her smile. He nods to the two young neighborhood boys waiting at the bus stop with their matching Red Riot backpacks, carefully skirts the crookedly-drawn hopscotch court, and stops to pet a stray cat that rubs his left leg and purrs like it’s having a religious experience. He’s far from jovial, but he tries his best to be the friendly hero the media makes him out to be in the magazines—even though he’s not very good at it most of the time.

Shouto loves Tuesdays. He can handle Tuesdays.

When he finally arrives at the farmer’s market in the square, Shouto begins perusing the locally-grown produce with a dutiful frown on his face. He stocks up on vegetables and gets a few cartons of fresh berries for his yogurt, along with a small loaf of fresh bread that should last him until next week. The stall keepers all greet him with smiles and offer him discounts for his service even though they know he won’t accept—but it doesn’t stop them from trying. He politely turns them all down, citing, “Maybe next week, Tachibana-san.”
This Tuesday, however, is a little bit different from the rest.

Shouto is in the middle of deliberating between two squash when he sees it. And at first it doesn’t really register. The lady running the vegetable stand is slouched in a lawn chair behind the table of produce, reading a brightly-colored tabloid with her nose practically stuck between the pages. It’s amusing, in a way. Like she thinks getting closer to the words will help her absorb them faster. Shouto can’t see her face at all—a terrible habit, really, considering that this is a business and anyone could walk up and steal something while her attention is diverted like this—but it’s the cover that makes Shouto’s stomach drop out from under him, leaving all thoughts of preventative security and squash behind in the dust.

Midoriya is on the cover of the magazine, decked out in his hero costume and wearing that mega-watt smile that (justifiably) earned him the number three spot in People’s Sexiest Man Alive contest early last year. This photo isn’t professionally taken, however, nor is it an exclusive with the Symbol of Peace. It’s not one of those fashion snapshots or a recount of his daily activities (because people are apparently interested in that sort of thing, Shouto has discovered). Rather, the photo on the cover is grainy and slightly blurred at the edges, like someone had taken the picture with their phone. It shows Deku outside a small coffee shop somewhere in Queens with his hand against the back of his neck like he’s nervous about something. He’s smiling down at—

Oh.

It’s a… woman. Her back is facing the camera, so it’s easy to miss her compared to the larger-than-life Symbol of Peace; next to Midoriya’s size and stature, she hardly takes up any of the picture at all. Whoever she is, she’s small and petite with blonde hair that falls mid-way down her back, and she’s clutching her purse with both hands like she’s nervous as well. All at once, the words on the cover of the magazine process in Shouto’s brain, flooding his senses like a tidal wave.

WEDDING BELLS FOR DEKU?? Who IS the lucky lady? Check inside for an exclusive scoop about the status of the Symbol in Peace’s love life!

A fine-spun spider web of silvery cracks appears on the surface of Shouto’s heart, tinkling musically with the threat of impending breakage.

He can’t breathe. Can’t think.

He can’t—

He can’t.

Carefully, Shouto sets down the squash he’d been deliberating over and steps to the side, murmuring a soft, “Excuse me,” to the woman behind him. She smiles and takes the spot he vacates like he was never there, and the stand owner doesn’t look up from her magazine. Silently, Shouto slips through the small crowd of people, head ducked down to hide his face from prying eyes, fighting down the hairline fractures in his chest that have suddenly and very inconveniently appeared. Every breath sends a stab of pain through his chest, and every step feels like it takes twice the effort it would normally require.

It’s been a year and a half. Of course Midoriya would move on and find someone else. Someone available. Someone capable of returning his love as readily as Midoriya gives it. Shouto’s been expecting this; he’s heard rumors of Midoriya’s flings and romances over the past year and a half, so this is really nothing new.

Except those tales were often debunked overnight and bore no photographic evidence. As soon as
the whispers cropped up, Midoriya had always been there to shut them down and deny it all, saying with a smile, “I’m married to my job!”

This… this is different. Something is different this time.

And Shouto doesn’t like it.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr | Twitter | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist
The Burial of the Dead

Chapter Summary

2021 — three months after Todoroki Shouto discovers the engagement of Midoriya Izuku

Chapter Notes

TODOBRO DISCLAIMER: We don't know if Dabi is the lost brother or not yet, so Ichiro is filling that spot in my story, as many of you have already read. That being said, Ichiro is basically nonexistent in this because I didn't feel like filling him out when it feels like we're going to get that "Dabi is a Todoroki" news any day now. So... creative license, I guess? (2020 update: who fucking cares, Dabi is a Todoroki and I'll die on that hill if I have to even though it's all but confirmed. But still. I wrote this before all that shit really started, so y'all have to deal with Ichiro being in the background.)

SECOND TODOBRO/SIS DISCLAIMER: We know Shouto was sort of kept separate from his siblings growing up, but I imagine he wasn't completely isolated because wow, that would suck. And it would also not make this chapter possible. I fudged canon a little bit to allow for some childhood stories between the siblings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

August 3rd, 2021

Endeavor dies on a damp, gloomy Friday night, and the rest of the world seems to think that it is a rather fitting end for the hero who held the Number One spot for so many years. It's the perfect weather for mourning a legend, people say on websites and news outlets. Like the weather actually makes a goddamn difference.

Shouto is in his apartment when he hears the news. He doesn't receive any phone calls alerting him to his father’s situation, nor does he receive any carefully-worded text messages from his siblings; Shouto has never been fortunate enough to be afforded things such as good timing. No, he learns of his father’s untimely demise from the channel five news when he's aimlessly scrolling past corny game shows in his apartment, sheepskin slippers on his feet and a bowl of soba settled in his lap. It's a typical Friday night for the Number Four hero—save for the fact that nothing will ever be typical again.

The news outlets cover the villain encounter live, much in the same way they covered that night at Kamino Ward all those years ago. Footage from helicopters and drones is played on a loop as an
oil rig near the Ryukyu Trench goes up in white-hot flames; the stray oil in the water catches fire in a planned explosion, tendrils of inky blackness bleeding out for miles in every direction like a gushing wound of thick, stygian poison. The entire ocean is alight with liquid flame and ash, spiting the storm that does its best to extinguish every ember it can find. The metal structure of the rig shudders and sways dangerously as the ocean waters batter it senselessly from all sides, winds howling fiercely as dark clouds collect tithes of thunder and lightning.

The news anchors mention something about a villain with a kinetic energy Quirk who’s been holed up on the oil rig for the past few days, slaughtering engineers senselessly every time heroes get too close for comfort. Apparently, Endeavor had been the one to say “fuck it” and barrel straight in, ignoring repeated warnings from other pros on the scene because he’s Endeavor and he obviously knows best in every villain situation ever. The fool.

Shouto watches the news reel until the sun casts pale grey light through his windows, signaling the unwanted arrival of dawn. His eyes remain glued to the screen despite the heaviness of his eyelids. He chooses to ignore the cold numbness that has spread from the tips of his fingers down to his toes, permeating every twitch and thick swallow with a tingly feeling he doesn’t much care for. His cold soba gets colder as the minutes tick past, and his heart rate rises every time the flames on the rig burn a little brighter.

His phone begins to vibrate just after six in the morning, but Shouto doesn’t answer it. He doesn’t even look to see who’s calling or how many voicemails he has because he knows they’re all from his sister or maybe his brothers, but he’s not entirely sure he’s ready to say anything to anyone yet, even if it’s them. Especially if it’s them.

When the rig explodes and crumbles into the churning black waves of the sea, it’s seven thirty-two in the morning.

When the ocean calms and the flames die down, it’s almost ten.

When the search and rescue teams move in, it’s half past noon and the sun is starting to shine once again.

When the news announces the death of the hero Endeavor, it’s exactly 6:17 in the evening.

Shouto doesn’t know how to feel about any of it.

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The funeral is set for the following Friday morning. It will be a massive, public affair for civilians and heroes to attend and pay their respects to the hellflame hero. It will also be a circus for the media, Shouto realizes bitterly as soon as Fuyumi relays all pertinent information to him over the phone. He isn’t surprised in the least to find the press clamoring for his attention the second he steps foot out of his apartment two days later, and apparently Natsuo and Ichiro can’t get to work either without being bombarded by millions of questions with only lies for answers. Fuyumi is a little safer from the attention since she changed her name after her marriage, but the boys aren’t half as lucky.

Shouto’s agency gives him the week off work to get his affairs in order. His siblings all come and stay at the family estate to work through everything together. They have a will to parse through, assets to liquidate, and their mother to worry about. They discover that Endeavor left almost
everything to Shouto—namely the estate and his life savings—and the discovery has him recoiling in abject horror. The estimated sum of everything is a revolting number with far too many zeroes and commas. Split between his siblings and his mother, however, the total becomes a bit more palatable.

(He’ll never tell her, but Shouto secretly gives a little more to Fuyumi. It’s mainly because she’s three months pregnant and hell-bent on building the finest nursery this side of the planet, but also because she was the primary buffer between Shouto and Endeavor’s wrath for so many years. He owes her more than he’ll ever be able to give her, but this, at least, is a good start.)

After that, all that’s left to deal with is the house.

They unanimously agree to sell the estate as soon as it comes into Shouto’s possession. Too much unhappiness has soaked into the tatami mats beneath their feet and too many screams still echo down the lengths of the hallways for any of them to be comfortable living there. When they tell their mother, she agrees with their decision to sell it to a new family who would build better memories there. Her smile is only a little bit shaky as she says it. Shouto tells her that as soon as they’re able, they’ll use the money from the sale to move her someplace more comfortable—the Kyushu countryside, perhaps, so she can be close to Fuyumi and her grandson.

“Someone has to crochet the kid’s onesies for the rest of his life. And we both know it isn’t gonna be Fuyumi,” Natsuo quips dryly, and Ichiro and Fuyumi both share a small laugh while she rubs a loving hand over her barely-there belly. Even Shouto smiles.

A moment later, their mother’s shoulders begin to tremble, and all of them freeze up in solidarity. The gut-wrenching panic Shouto feels at the sight is enough to make him dizzy—the last thing he wants to do is make his mother cry; he’d die before ever hurting her like his father did—until he realizes that she’s crying from… happiness.

Shouto’s never seen that happen before.

Any tears Todoroki Rei sheds freeze instantly on her face, falling to the ground where they shatter apart and melt seconds later against the cold tile floor. Fuyumi is the first one to hug her, followed quickly by Natsuo and Ichiro, and finally Shouto. They sit like that for a while, none of them moving an inch or saying a word because they know better than to fill the silence with meaningless platitudes. None of them say they love each other because that’s not the Todoroki way, and that will likely never change.

They just hold on a little tighter.

The day of the funeral, Shouto dons his suit and tie like they’re pieces of armor, each one tailored to protect him from the onslaught of media attention and pointed questions that will no doubt be thrown his way from dawn until dusk. He’s expecting arrows and verbal javelins masked as condolences and well-wishes, bunches of flowers that won’t last a week, and the faces of his former classmates sprinkled throughout the amorphous crowd that’s expected to appear to hear his father’s eulogy. He tightens the fastenings on his armor until every chink is invisible and impenetrable.

When he leaves his apartment, Todoroki Shouto is aloof and unknowable, just the way he likes.
Fuyumi and her husband pick him up in their car with soft smiles, both of them dressed in black. Even wearing the dreary colors of mourning, his sister glows like starlight—a bright beacon against the darkness that clings to Shouto like a second shadow. She takes one look at him as soon as he’s buckled in the backseat and smiles in silent understanding. She knows today won’t be easy for any of them.

“How are you feeling?” she asks quietly as the city streets zip past them on both sides.

Shouto finds himself mentally tracing the pattern of rooftops in the distance, wondering which heroes are on duty today. “I’m fine,” he tells her placidly. He glances sidelong at her reflection in the rearview mirror. “What about you?”

“I think we’re going to be okay,” Fuyumi says warmly, dropping a protective hand to her stomach. Her husband smiles reassuringly and reaches across to hold her other hand, squeezing gently, lovingly. She smiles at him, eyes crinkling behind her glasses like he hung the stars.

Shouto suddenly feels like an intruder—a witness to something precious he doesn’t deserve. Clearing his throat, he drops his gaze to his lap. “Is mom meeting us there?”

Fuyumi eyes him in the rearview. “Last I checked, the hospital staff is going to bring her at nine-thirty.” Shouto’s head snaps up, his eyes wide with outrage, but Fuyumi placates him with a look that’s just as effective as it was when he was little. “Ichiro is taking care of everything on mom’s end,” she explains. “Her attendants won’t be dressed like nurses, and they’re taking unmarked cars to the garden. Everything will be fine, Shouto. Stop worrying.”

He swallows back his panic and wills his heartbeat to stop pounding in his ears. “Oh,” he says stiffly, uncurling his clenched fists slowly. “Well, lead with that next time.”

“Sorry,” she says, smiling wryly. “You’re wound extra tight today, aren’t you?”

Shouto thinks of the media entourage that’s no doubt waiting for them at the public garden where the funeral will be held, crowded at the entrances and spewing questions about Shouto’s new position as the Number Three hero. He thinks of the hundreds of professional heroes, sidekicks, and police officers that will show up to shake Shouto’s hand, each of them spouting different iterations of, “I’m so sorry for your loss,” even though every single one of them knows perfectly well what an asshole Endeavor was when he was alive.

“Can you blame me?” he asks softly, and he leaves it at that.

They spend the rest of the commute into the city chatting aimlessly about everything and nothing, conversation serving as a distraction for the great unknown that lies before them. Fuyumi babbles about names they’re considering for the baby and progress on the nursery, and her husband pipes up every once in a while with dry, sensible comments to help rein in her imagination before she starts fantasizing about raising their baby on the moon or something equally ridiculous and wonderful. She begins feeling nauseated halfway to the city, so they pull the car over while she sucks on ice chips and sips water in an attempt to soothe her churning stomach. Shouto massages the pressure point in her hand to keep her from hurling all over the dashboard of the rental car. (It’s something he picked up from Uraraka a few years back that he’s used a few times on civilians after dangerous rescue missions. Fuyumi is pleasantly surprised when it works.)

“You’d give Recovery Girl a run for her money, Shoucchan,” she tells him once they’re back on the road. The color has returned to her cheeks and she looks every bit the beautiful mother she’s going to be in six months’ time. Shouto can’t find it in himself not to smile.
Their arrival at the garden is heralded by flashing cameras and surging crowds of reporters and fans. The police line the gravel road shoulder-to-shoulder to keep them back as Shouto, Fuyumi, and her husband get out of the car and hand their keys to an awestruck valet who can’t seem to stop staring open-mouthed at Shouto’s face. Fuyumi smiles tightly and clings to her husband while Shouto falls in step on her left automatically.

“It’s a zoo,” she mutters, flinching every time a camera flashes too closely. “Goodness. Half these people probably never even met dad.”

“I’d wager more than half,” Shouto mumbles back, keeping his face void of all emotion. His right side feels a lot colder than it did a minute ago, despite the warmth in the air. “And I bet all of them think he was a fine, upstanding citizen, too.”

“Shouto,” Fuyumi warns, but he waves her off and stuffs his hands in his pockets instead.

“I know, I know,” he says tiredly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t sleep well last night.” He pauses, thinking hard. “I also forgot to eat breakfast.”

Fuyumi huffs a laugh and shakes her head, lovingly exasperated. “You’re at our father’s funeral and you’re hangry. What a charming combination.”

“Well, you’re the one who showed up early. I didn’t have a chance to eat my toast.”

“Five minutes hardly constitutes early. And aren’t you the one who was always ready for preschool an hour early ‘just in case?’” she reminds him, raising an eyebrow. Fuyumi’s husband sputters a laugh that he muffles against the meaty palm of his hand.

Shouto feels his cheeks heat unevenly. “You know what? I take it all back. You’re the worst big sister ever.”

She bites her lower lip to contain a laugh because laughing at a funeral is usually not something people do—though most people didn’t have Endeavor for a father, so Shouto thinks it could be construed as acceptable in this case. Still, Fuyumi is nothing if not proper, so instead she smacks him upside the head like every other older sibling in the world.

“Loser,” she says, smiling.

“Mean,” he shoots back.

Shouto’s lips twitch, but he stays silent on the subject because… well, because he doesn’t know how to articulate the warmth in his belly and the lightness in his chest. Words have never been Shouto’s strong suit. He simply walks a little closer to Fuyumi, making sure to glare at any reporters who come too close to his big sister and her family because that’s what he’s good at—protecting people. Fuyumi smiles at him, reading his message loud and clear as she gently takes his hand and laces their frigid fingers together.

The funeral is long and sappy and ninety percent bullshit, but Shouto manages to keep his mouth shut long enough to get through it without straining something. Barely.

He’s seated in the front row of the chairs that fill the courtyard in the gardens, back straight as an
arrow and shoulders twice as tense. He keeps his hand clamped around his mother’s pale, trembling fingers until the gun salute has concluded and the eulogies have all been read, and even then he hangs on for dear life because the hardest part is nearing: actually being forced to talk to these people.

Shouto and his family stand at the front of the courtyard in a line. Shouto is squeezed between Natsuo and his mother, while Fuyumi stands on the other side. Ichiro mingles off to the side, fielding questions from members of the press and giving interviews because he’s the calmest and most collected out of all of them; he’s the least likely to blow his top in a fit of rage because *Endeavor does not deserve this kind of reception, dammit.* Natsuo, at least, appears to understand.

“Man, fuck this,” he mutters just as the chief of the Tokyo police force walks away. Fuyumi is speaking with the mayor’s wife in hushed tones, a soft smile on her face that doesn’t look forced at all. “I don’t think any of these people ever actually met the bastard once in his life. I’ve got half a mind to blow this joint and go, like—I don’t know. Go drinking in town or something.”

“Please take me with you,” Shouto mumbles out of the side of his mouth.

Natsuo eyes him. “As if. You’re the famous one here. No one will notice if I bow out early, but you?” He shakes his head. “They’d call out the heroes in a heartbeat if you disappear for even a minute.”

Shouto sighs and shakes another man’s hand, instantly forgetting his name as soon as he passes. “Lucky me,” he deadpans.

“Hey, you’re the one who wanted to be a hero. You’re not allowed to complain.”

“I’ve saved your sorry prefecture six times in the last two years, Natsu. I think I’m allowed to complain about whatever the hell I want.”

Natsuo snorts, grinning crookedly, and reaches over to ruffle Shouto’s hair. “Always so serious, little brother. You’re like a crotchety old man already, but like… in a tiny body. How old are you now, fifteen? Sixteen?”

Shouto rams his elbow hard into his brother’s side, smirking when he hears Natsuo’s wheeze of barely-suppressed pain. “I’m twenty-two, you ass.”

“Twenty-two?” he repeats. A scoff. “Aw, come on, we both know that’s not even remotely possible. Not with that adorable baby face—“

“God, I hate you,” he breathes. Shouto closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose until it hurts.

Natsuo hums amusedly. “Love you too, Shou-Shou,” he coos, mouth quirking. "You know, I bet the media'd love to hear about your family nickname. Wait here, I'll go find a reporter."

Shouto growls and tries to elbow his brother again before the next mourner comes up, but Natsuo’s ready this time. He dodges, one hand darting forward faster than lightning to flick Shouto’s forehead with his finger. It stings and makes Shouto’s eyes water just the way it used to when they were younger and Natsuo was a foot taller than him. But now that *Shouto* has two inches on his brother and a pro hero license under his belt, there’s no way he’s letting that shit slide. Rubbing his forehead, he glares and bares his teeth at his brother before reaching out with icy fingertips to—

“Boys,” their mother scolds sharply, turning her frosty glare on them both.

They freeze in place, almost as if she’d used her Quirk. Even with shaking hands and watery,
frightened eyes that have seen too much of the world and its horrors, Todoroki Rei is still their mother, and under the right circumstances she is more terrifying than any supervillain. Huffing, Shouto trades a begrudging look with Natsuo that says ‘we’ll finish this later’ and turns back to the mourners who are only now starting to give Shouto and his brother odd looks.

“He started it,” Shouto mutters.

Natsuo has the audacity to look scandalized—because of course he does. “Me?” he asks, pressing a hand against his chest. “You’re the one who hit me first, genius.”

“You messed up my hair.”

“Well you—“

“I don’t care,” their mother hisses sharply, shutting them both up with her whip-crack words. “You’re both acting like children and I won’t stand for it. Not today, not here. Until this funeral is over, you will both be on your best behavior for these people. Have I made myself clear?”

The boys cow instantly, dropping their gazes to the ground and shuffling their feet in silent apology—not that they’ll ever actually apologize to each other because fuck Natsuo and the horse he rode in on, thank you very much. Shouto still hasn’t forgiven him for the infamous ice cream truck debacle of 2006, and he certainly doesn’t plan on making amends now. Or ever, for that matter. (Really, fuck Natsuo.)

Shouto reaches up to adjust his hair once again, grumbling obscenities under his breath. He fiddles with the red and white strands, hoping and praying that he sorts them on the proper sides—not that he’ll be able to tell without looking in a mirror, but he likes to think he has a sense for this sort of thing at this point in his life.

In the end, his mother gestures sharply for him to bend down so she can fix it for him, muttering something about you’re only making it worse and silly, stubborn boys the entire time. When she’s finished, she taps his nose with her index finger and offers him a small smile that reminds Shouto of late nights with jasmine tea and Saturday cartoons spread out on warm tatami mats. He gives her a faint smile in return, even though it feels like the sides of his mouth have weights attached to them.

“Oh, sweetheart,” his mother says warmly, reaching up to brush his hair back from his forehead with tenderness that tugs at Shouto’s heartstrings. Her fingers are cold against the left side of his face. “When on earth did you get so handsome? I feel like I should’ve noticed that before now.”

He puffs a laugh through his nose, one side of his mouth creeping higher than the other. “Thanks, mom, but I think you might be a bit biased.”

She wrinkles her nose at him. “Mm, no. I don’t think I am.”

Shouto begs to differ—as his mom, she’s sort of required to tell him he’s handsome—but soon the crowd surges forward again, drowning each of the Todorokis in shallow condolences that begin to ring rather hollow after the five hundredth utterance. The sun dips lower in the sky as heroes and civilians alike shake Shouto’s hand and crowd his family. It’s annoying and awful in every possible way, but Shouto manages to keep a straight face throughout the event because the public would expect nothing less from the Number Three hero.

But timing, Shouto knows, is a fickle thing. It’s inconvenient and impossible to master, even at its simplest form. It’s also something Shouto has never had great luck with.
“Hey,” Natsuo interrupts at one point in the afternoon, a frown marring his tone. He digs his fingers into Shouto’s side until he twitches, feeling the vestiges of ticklishness rising to the surface, but he’s quick to tamp them down with little more than an eyebrow twitch in response. Natsuo keeps poking him, staring off into the crowd with a crease between his brows and a mysteriously absent smile.

“Dude,” he says distractedly. "Hey, Shouto. Isn’t that the American hero guy? The one you went to school with, I mean. Swear he looks familiar."

It’s a strange sense of displacement that overcomes Shouto in that moment, that heartbeat, the little pocket of time that wraps him up and squeezes until he can’t breathe. He feels his lungs filling with ice crystals, choking him on their knife-like sharpness and threatening to cut him apart from the inside out. Shouto bleeds and gushes, cleaved clean in two by the sudden onslaught of memories that play on repeat in his mind with the saturation turned up to 200%, all sliders maxed out and the sharpness dialed to a million.

Shouto feels soft lips and harsh breaths against his throat. He remembers the shape of Midoriya’s teeth against his tongue. Worst of all, he remembers words—words Shouto hasn’t bothered to think about in two long, empty years. Words that he regrets more than anything in the world.

*Please, no,* he silently prays, and the temperature takes a sharp dive around him. *Not today. Not here, not now. Please please please—*

The world has never been so kind to Shouto.

Midoriya is wearing a suit that hangs off his broad shoulders like it was specifically made for him, textiles bottled up and poured over his lissome frame like a second skin. The jacket highlights his trim waist and long legs that seem to go on forever into infinity, and a green silk tie brushes the top of his belt buckle, the fabric matching his hair almost exactly. His hands are shoved deep in the pockets of his tailored trousers. From here, Shouto can tell that he’s clenching his fists, knuckles sculpting a topographic map of hills and deep valleys where his knuckles strain against the fabric.

Midoriya comes to a stop a few feet away from Shouto. He’s biting his lower lip and glancing hesitantly between Shouto and the pale cobblestones beneath his feet.

Shouto's always had control of his ice, but he’s never truly felt frozen until now.

“Hey, Todoroki,” Midoriya says after a time. He laughs nervously, raking his fingers through his hair. He finally looks up, meeting Shouto’s gaze with hesitance etched into his polished emerald irises. “Been a while."

“What are you doing here?”

The words are out before Shouto can think twice about them. He sees his mother spasm in surprise and feels Fuyumi’s glare burning a hole in the back of his head. Natsuo seems more amused than anything, but his silence betrays his interest in the situation at hand.

Shouto ignores them all. He only has eyes for Midoriya.

Midoriya blinks at him, surprised. “I’m… I’m sorry?”

A flash of hurt flickers across his expression. “Is it really so hard to believe that I’d come to your father’s funeral?”

Yes. Yes, because *Deku* doesn’t leave American soil unless he’s receiving a medal or three. Yes, because *Deku* has a girlfriend in Queens and a dog and friends and a *life* that doesn’t involve Shouto in the slightest. Yes, because Midoriya hasn’t so much as sent a perfunctory ‘happy birthday’ text message since 2019, and Shouto’s gotten quite comfortable with the silence since then; he’s not sure what he’d do if that were to suddenly change.

Shouto’s silence goes on too long, apparently. All at once, Midoriya’s eyes grow weary and sad, and he slumps his shoulders as he exhales slowly through his nose in pained defeat. Shouto doesn’t think he’s ever seen the Symbol of Peace look so small before.

The frigid press of a hand against his side alerts Shouto to his mother’s presence. “What Shouto is *trying* to say,” she says sweetly, “is that we’re surprised to see you come all this way for my husband’s funeral. We certainly weren’t expecting the Symbol of Peace on this side of the ocean, were we dear?”

She pinches Shouto’s side painfully and he barely holds back an eye twitch.

Natsuo drops a hand on Shouto’s shoulder. ‘*Hang back, I’ve got this,*’ he seems to say as his fingers squeeze reassuringly. (It’s the exact opposite of reassuring.) “Yeah, we’re pretty honored to see someone like you make an appearance. Shoucchan’s told us so much about you, man.”

“Really?”

Natsuo's smile is infectious. “Nope.”

Midoriya deflates. “Oh.”

Natsuo grins deviously. Shouto starts planning his murder right then and there. “Hey, don’t get me wrong,” Natsuo tells him. “The little punk doesn’t tell us anything about *anyone*, even when we ask. I’m just being super passive-aggressive. Don’t mind me.”

Midoriya looks crestfallen and confused—an odd combination if ever there was one. “Um,” he stammers. “Okay then. I guess.”

“Natsu,” Fuyumi scolds sharply. Her face is pinched and fierce, and it reminds Shouto of the ‘*don’t-test-me-or-face-my-wrath*’ expression she gives her kindergartners. “Quit being an ass for five seconds, would you?”

He waves her off. “The point I’m trying to make is that it’s cool to see you, dude. Like, in the flesh. I follow you on Instagram. The way you took down that earthquake villain last week was *sick.*”

Midoriya is looking between all four of the available Todorokis with something akin to bewildered, horrified shock. Like he never imagined Shouto’s relatives being this talkative or obnoxious. (Shouto contemplates kicking Natsuo into the fucking sun because honestly, fanboying over Midoriya at a *funeral*? Have some class—even if it is a funeral for an asshole like Endeavor.)

Shouto brushes Natsuo’s hand off his shoulder and sighs heavily, rubbing his temples. “Midoriya, this is my sister Fuyumi,” he says, gesturing down the line toward his sister, who smiles and bows with pale hands placed strategically over her stomach. “And this is my mother, Rei.”

She reaches forward to clap Midoriya’s hand warmly, smiling her sweetest like she hadn’t been about to ice her own sons two hours ago. Like she’s never thought about selling them both to the
highest bidder or contemplated anything even remotely mean in her life. Never let it be said that the Todorokis aren’t good actors.

“It’s an honor to finally meet you, Deku-sama,” she says reverently, bowing deeply.

Midoriya’s tense, confused expression melts from his face and he smiles, gently setting his other hand over hers where they’re joined. “Ma’am, the honor is all mine, believe me. And please, call me Midoriya. I much prefer my name when I’m off-duty.”

His mother smiles brightly, suddenly perking up as if touching Midoriya’s hand was all she needed or wanted in life. She turns to Shouto. “Oh, sweetie, I like him.”

Yes, that’s exactly what Shouto needs—his family pre-emptively adopting Midoriya Izuku in the middle of a funeral. Because it’s not like anything else was going right in Shouto’s life. Not at all.

There’s a restless energy behind Shouto as Natsuo scowls and steps past his shoulder. “What, I don’t get an introduction?” he accuses, glaring at Shouto. Turning back to Midoriya, a smile breaks out across his face and he sticks a welcoming hand in his direction. When Shouto still doesn’t say anything, he earns an elbow in the ribs for good measure.

Shouto hisses and rubs his side, glaring at his brother. “Oh my god, fine. Midoriya, this is my older brother Natsuo. He’s an asshole and you don’t have to shake his hand if you don’t want to.”

Midoriya is already reaching for Natsuo’s hand with a congenial look on his face carved from placid politeness, but as soon as Shouto says his name, he stops short a few inches. He looks at Shouto incredulously. “Natsuo?” he repeats, eyebrows lifting. "As in, Natsuo from the great ice cream truck debacle of 2006? That Natsuo?"

Shouto nods gravely. “The very same.”

Midoriya retracts his hand and frowns sharply. “Wow, okay then.” He narrows his eyes at Natsuo accusingly. “How dare you?”

Natsuo’s eyes widen and he sputters wordlessly, earning a chuckle from both Fuyumi and his mother. He drops his hand, turning to jab a finger at Shouto with an outraged look on his face. “You told him about that?”

Shouto shrugs. “It may have come up once or twice.”

“Once or twice?”

Midoriya hums, frowning and cocking his head to one side as he looks him up and down. “Man,” he says, almost in wonder. “I feel like I should be arresting you on principle.”

“He’s out on probation,” Shouto says dryly. “Under close watch.”

“Oh, good. I was worried there for a second.”

Natsuo growls something under his breath before he lunges and locks an arm around Shouto’s neck in a tight hug—except that Natsuo doesn’t give hugs, especially to his little brother. To the untrained eye, of course, it looks like a wholesome moment of love between two brothers, but to Shouto, it feels like an annoying vice that’s slowly but surely siphoning the air out of his lungs. A simple twist, pull, and a slap on the wrist would break him out of the uncomfortable position, but he’d rather not shatter his brother’s wrist right in front of their mother. He values his life, thank you very much.
Shouto looks up from his squashed position near Natsuo’s armpit and gives Midoriya a deadpan look that has the Symbol of Peace biting back a smile and a laugh; instead, he coughs into his hand to smother it. The pink tinge on his cheeks gives him away but only to Shouto, who knows him the best and would be able to recognize such a blatant tell.

*Knew* him, his mind supplies bitterly.

His mother says something in a strained voice that’s hard to hear past Natsuo’s colorful cursing and mild threats that no one else seems to hear except Shouto, but he makes out a few words when Fuyumi swats at Natsuo’s shoulder in a poor attempt to get him to stop. They’re talking about Ichiro, and Midoriya is giving the formal condolences everyone else has spewed at them today; his are warmer and more sincere, though that isn’t surprising since it’s *Midoriya* who's saying them. Shouto sees him smile widely enough to bring out his dimples in full force, and he hears his mother laugh softly at… something. (Whatever they’re saying, it’s probably at Shouto’s expense. Because that’s what his life is all about now, apparently.)

Natsuo finally releases Shouto from the makeshift headlock with a grumble, pouting like a toddler because Shouto messed up his chances of impressing the Number One hero. (Like he ever stood a chance in the first place—that *loser*. ) Shouto keeps his face blank as he adjusts his tie and straightens his collar, keeping his gaze lowered so he doesn’t accidentally catch Midoriya’s eyes again.

“*Well,*” Midoriya says, rubbing the back of his neck and smiling sheepishly. “*I think I’m holding up the line, so I guess I’ll get going now. It was very nice to finally meet you all.*” Natsuo *practically preens* at the praise, and even Fuyumi looks a bit bashful. Midoriya stuffs his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels, biting his lower lip. He glances up at Shouto through his lashes.

“I’ll see you around, Sh— Todoroki.” The slip is minor, but it strangles Shouto nonetheless. Midoriya coughs, smiling tightly. “*Don’t be a stranger, all right?”*

Glass in his throat, fire in his veins. He feels his mother watching him curiously, but doesn’t meet her gaze because he fears what she might see if he does. Instead, he nods stiffly and sticks out a hand robotically, willing his palm to be warmer than the subzero temperature it’s been since Midoriya arrived.

Midoriya reaches out and takes it, shaking Shouto’s hand. He smiles. Shouto tries to pretend it doesn’t break his heart. Instead, he focuses on the rough pads of Midoriya’s fingers and the scars on his knuckles that hadn’t been there two years ago and the way the tendons in his wrist stand out beneath his skin. It’s a nice, solid, friendly handshake. Perfectly neutral in every way.

And it feels…

Wrong.
Midoriya gets married on a warm Saturday in April, and Shouto tries not to feel his heart rending as he watches it happen in full-blown Technicolor.

He only hears snippets of the vows from his spot in the back row of the congregation, scattered words and shaky promises of eternity sprinkled here and there between every deafening heartbeat that pounds in Shouto’s ears. He’s unequivocally grateful that he’s in the back; he’s not sure what he’d do if he could hear every single watery word of love that Midoriya’s been spouting for the last few minutes in the vague direction of his blushing bride, but Shouto’s sure it wouldn’t be dignified or even remotely sane.

He doesn’t know who she is outside her profession and her stupidly perfect-looking face—a nurse, Midoriya had said in an interview a few weeks back; apparently she’d chastised him for a good ten minutes straight after he broke his arm during a fight in Midtown. The irony that comes along with Izuku marrying a medical professional is not lost on Shouto, either. All things considered, their match is almost too perfect. One for the storybooks, the tabloids keep saying.

The art gallery where the ceremony takes place is all white walls and polished wooden floors, clean windows and the amber light of dusk. The sun is warm and perfect above the horizon, almost like Midoriya had personally called up the universe to request one perfect day for me and the love of my life, please and thank you. Everything about the setup is beautiful and lavish—the burgeoning bouquets of flowers that line the aisle on both sides, the lilac ribbons tied to each chair in perfect bows, and the strings of lights that hang from the ceiling like suspended, frozen fireflies.

It’s ten different kinds of Too Much, and Shouto hates every bit of it.

Over the heads of the hundreds of people in attendance, only a few have actually spotted Shouto and tried to flag him down for conversation, but he’s nothing if not strategic. He was clever going into things, choosing to arrive with only minutes to spare before the ceremony started because holy
shit he doesn’t want to be here and he’d rather not even acknowledge the fact that this is happening in real life.

(To have and to hold.)

It shouldn’t feel this raw, Shouto thinks to himself as Midoriya slides the ring on Lucy Albright’s long, elegant finger. After three years of virtual silence, it shouldn’t feel this… tender. Like a wound left to fester, the flesh inflamed deep crimson and ready to burn away to ash at the slightest provocation, Shouto feels his resolve rotting with every strung-out second and every joyous snuffle from the congregation. He sees Uraraka tearing up in the third row, and even Asui looks a little misty-eyed at the spectacle. He wants to reach forward and shake them by the shoulders, scream at them that this is wrong, so wrong, why is no one else seeing this except me?

It shouldn’t feel like there’s a knife slipping between his ribs as Midoriya recites his vows with that spectacular fucking smile on his face. Shouto’s mouth shouldn’t taste like vinegar when the bride stutters over her vows and almost drops the ring, earning a warm chuckle from the crowd because she’s so sickeningly likable. It shouldn’t feel like anything at all, really. It’s been three years. Shouto has no claim to Midoriya and he never did.

And yet.

Shouto turns away when the bride and groom seal their love with a chaste kiss. Applause ripples out across the congregation, and Shouto hears a few whoops and hollers from the section where Kaminari, Kirishima, and Sero all sit together, huddled around their phones as they simultaneously livetweet everything they experience. All Might is outright sobbing into Midoriya Inko’s shoulder in the front row, blowing his nose into a tissue like a foghorn. Shouto spots Bakugou sulking nearby, glaring up at Midoriya like he’s the criminal of the century, but the explosive hero also isn’t trying to actively murder anyone, so Shouto figures he’s actually not as pissed as he looks. Aizawa-sensei is—

Actually, Aizawa might be asleep. It’s hard to tell from here.

Shouto sucks in a deep breath and manages to put his hands together a few times in a pathetic facsimile of applause as Midoriya and his new wife retreat down the aisle hand-in-hand, bright smiles stretched across their faces and rings glinting on their fingers. They make a perfect picture, the two of them together.

Shouto tries not to be bitter. He tries not to vomit. He tries not to do a lot of things and fails spectacularly at most of them.

The reception, Shouto discovers shortly thereafter, is even worse than the ceremony. He gets cornered by Uraraka, Iida, and Asui who all interrogate him about his life until he’s blue in the mouth. (“Yes, being the Number Three hero is a lot of work and no, I didn’t know you and Asui were getting married next spring, yes, of course I’ll come…”) Kirishima snaps him and challenges him to a drinking game shortly thereafter—an offer that is swiftly turned down, no matter how tempting it may be to get plastered and forget all his problems like a college frat boy at his first mixer. Instead, Shouto deposits his perfunctory ‘congrats on getting hitched!’ card in the little box near the back of the room and slips into his assigned seat for dinner because he doesn’t know what else to do.

After that, things get… blurry. Edges grow indistinct and colors bleed, watercolor images muddying as Shouto suffers through the remainder of the reception. He recalls eating dinner, not tasting any of it, and listening to the painfully sappy toasts from members of the bridal party. He also remembers champagne—a lot of champagne.
It tastes bitter on the back of his throat and goes down with a sweet burn that makes his left side feel much warmer than it should. Before Shouto knows it, the guests are dancing and he’s perched on a seat near the open bar, taking in the festivities with a forced air of disinterest.

He sees Midoriya out on the dance floor, twirling his bride as she giggles and blushes; she's perfectly happy as her skirts swirl around her ankles, and the flowers in her hair wilt one by one in the stifling heat of the reception hall. Her hair is yellow and her lips are pink and full and sweet as they stretch into a blissful smile, revealing pearlescent teeth and a dimple that matches Midoriya’s almost exactly. Shouto supposes that it makes sense for the man with the supernova smile to marry the girl with sunbeams in her hair and apples in her cheeks.

Too perfect, he thinks. Their children will have the entire planet wrapped around their fingers the second they’re brought into this world. Their perfect, beautiful children.

(In sickness and in health.)

Shouto sets his glass down a little harder than necessary on the bar and quietly excuses himself to the gardens outside. He has to get out of here. He can’t stay any longer, can’t watch this unfold before his eyes like a horrifying tableau in four dimensions, can't do any of this—he doesn’t know why he ever thought he could.

Shouto plunges into a neatly-trimmed hedge maze like a man on a mission, not thinking about where he’s really going because he doesn’t care. The stars are cold where they twinkle in the sky like shards of ice in a pitch-black sea, and Shouto keeps his eyes skyward as his feet carry him forward, hoping and praying that the stars will steal him away from the madness of the reception, or that they’ll suck him up into space and let him suffocate. He doesn’t want to think about giggling toddlers with pudgy bellies and mops of green-gold hair that can stop the world with a single smile. He doesn’t want to think about Midoriya having a family and a white picket fence even though he deserves all that and more. He doesn’t want to think about any of it, but Shouto’s so tired and his limbs are heavy and he doesn’t feel like he’s going anywhere, why isn’t he going anywhere—?

Shouto stops short. He’s breathing hard, and the air tastes like bitter frost in his mouth, but he can still hear the murmur of celebration over the tops of the hedges. His senses are still on fire, amplified enough for him to feel like he’s drowning.

But none of it changes the fact that Midoriya—Izuku, Shouto corrects himself recklessly—is married to the wrong fucking person.

And Shouto... stood by and let it happen.

Like it was nothing. Like what they had in New York was nothing.

Like Shouto never loved him at all.

There’s a tightness in Shouto’s chest that rips the air from his lungs in a single rush. He claps a hand over his mouth as a gasping sob threatens to slip past his fingers, choking him, strangling him until he can’t breathe. His heart tears, rips, shatters apart into a thousand pieces he knows he’ll never be able to put back together again in this lifetime. He’s tumbling head over heels, twisting and scrabbling for a handhold as he drops down, down, down into the abyssal void in his chest he never knew was there until now.

Is this what it feels like to free-fall without a chute? To tumble headfirst into something incorporeal and complex, knowing full well you’ll never see the light of day again? Is this what it’s
like to be in love with someone as impossible and perfectly ridiculous as Midoriya Izuku?

Or maybe this is something else entirely—something pure and absolute and infinite, stretching out into the distance like an evening shadow with fuzzy, indistinct edges that have been pressed into the shape of something vaguely familiar.

*Something like death,* his mind whispers.

Shouto blinks back the hot tears that crowd his vision, whetting the edges of the garden into something more lethal. He’s tempted to lean into one of the lilac bushes just to see if they’ll cut him. He can’t decide if he would deserve it or not.

Shakily, Shouto reaches out to touch the nearest lilac bush, teeth clenched and face covered with fractals of frost he can’t feel. His fingers tremble, twitching with latent muscle spasms as he nears the pale purple clusters millimeter by painstaking millimeter. The countless tiny blossoms are razor-sharp in the moonlight, lavender petals cast in molten steel and resplendent in their sharpness.

*Just do it,* he tells himself angrily when he hesitates. *See if you still bleed like the rest of them.*

Shouto reaches forward to close the gap, fingers stretching, joints straining—

“Shouto!”

He stops short, fingers barely brushing the cluster of flowers closest to his hand. His eyes drift shut. The prayer he mutters is short and sweet and pleading, but he’s never received an answer before. There’s no reason to expect one now.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he tells Izuku wearily, not daring to turn around and make it all real. He drops his hand back to his side, skin suddenly ten degrees colder.

The crunch of gravel beneath shiny shoes. Air thick enough to swallow. Shouto tries not to choke.

“I saw you leave the reception,” Izuku says softly from somewhere behind him, and Shouto feels himself die a little with every syllable. “You looked…”

He doesn’t bother to finish the sentence because there’s no point. Shouto knows how he must’ve looked when he fled the reception—pried apart at the seams, wide enough for anyone to crawl right in and ruin themselves on the jagged edges of his heart. He should’ve known Izuku would see his exit for what it was.

(You’re not supposed to be here. The words echo in his brain, striking a sour chord somewhere deep and unexplored.)

He feels a hand on his shoulder, but it has no weight to it, nor warmth. It’s a gentle brush, an invisible *something* that feels like a barely-there breeze. Blink, and you miss it. Shouto keeps his eyes wide open.

Shouto turns to face him, bracing for the worst. He’s wearing his dress slacks and a button-up with the sleeves rolled up around his sinuous forearms. Shouto can’t make out the freckles he knows should be there, dotting the valleys and peaks of Izuku's arms like speckles of cinnamon that he's always wanted to taste.

God. Everything just seems so blurry.

“Izuku,” Shouto breathes, not trusting his own voice. Izuku's hand is still on his left shoulder,
holding him at arm’s length. “You shouldn’t be out here. Your guests will miss you.”

“You’re missing me, aren’t you? And you’re a guest. So, technically, I’m not breaking any rules,” Izuku points out. He goes quiet for a moment, shuffling his feet nervously. “I know it’s been a while since we’ve… um, talked.” A hesitant smile splits his face—it’s little more than a hollow attempt at reassurance.

It’s not _Shouto’s_ smile—the one Izuku only ever digs out on late nights with popcorn and tacky soap operas and infomercials that always play just long enough to be quotable. No, _this_ smile is fake and see-through like cellophane. Shouto wants to rip it apart and put it back together the right way. He wants to take that stupid phony grin and turn it inside out, fluffing it at the corners until it glows in the dark just as brightly as it used to.

Shouto is punch-drunk, intoxicated in the cloying cloud of his own agony. He can’t stop the words from spilling past his mouth even though he tries.

“I’d say three years is more than a _while_.” His words are slow and syrupy, pulling on each other until they stretch. He looks up at Izuku through his lashes. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

A crack. It appears in their tentative peace, splitting the silence like a bottomless canyon. It’s an imperfection on the verge of being utterly irreparable, spider-webbed fissures spread out across everything and anything Shouto dares to think about.

Izuku’s face crumples slightly into something two-dimensional and plastic meant for the masses—not for someone like Shouto. He drops his hand to his side limply, fingers curling in on themselves. “Don’t,” he says softly, his voice pained and so, so broken. He winces. “Don’t do this. Please. Not tonight.”

_You’re not supposed to be here_, his brain whispers traitorously, but he doesn’t know what to do with those sticky, sour words. Shouto bites his tongue, clenching his fists to fight the pull of gravity. “That’s not fair. You’re the one that came out here. I didn’t make you follow me.”

“No,” Izuku snaps. He takes half a step closer. “You didn’t call me either. What was I supposed to think?”

The sound of his name sends a shard of ice through the center of Shouto’s heart, piercing ventricles and veins until he’s sure he’s bleeding out. He exhales a laugh that doesn’t feel like a laugh at all, shaking his head. “You—you can’t say something like that and then call me by my first name. It’s one or the other, Izuku. You can’t have both.”

Izuku's mouth thins out into a tight line. “You say that like I actually have a choice between the two.”

“You do have a choice.”

“You made my choice for me when you left without saying goodbye.” He shakes his head, frowning. “It’s not about one or the other—the problem is that I can’t have _either_."

His jaw cements itself together. “I left because I had to. You know that.”

“No,” Izuku snaps. He takes half a step closer. “You left because you were scared. You stayed away because you were scared, and you stopped talking to me because you were scared.” His eyes narrow in sour skepticism and faint disgust. “Go ahead and lie to yourself about whatever you want, Shouto, but don’t you _dare_ lie to me about that. I won’t let you.”

“You didn’t call me either. What was I supposed to think?”
Izuku throws his hands up in the air. “I don't know, literally anything other than what you actually ended up thinking, maybe? That would’ve been a good fucking start right there.”

He scoffs. “Yes, because you would’ve let me waltz back into your life after what happened. Play by your own rules, Izuku; if I can’t lie to myself, neither can you. You know it wouldn’t have been that easy.”

“Oh, of course it wouldn’t have,” he argues hotly. “That’s not the point.”

“Then what is the point?”

You’re not supposed to be here.

“The point—” Izuku’s eyes glisten and his face pales into something grey and unfamiliar, edges indistinct under the cover of deep shadows. He swipes hastily at his eyes and shakes his head. “The point doesn’t matter. What matters is that you didn’t reach out any more than I did, okay? I gave you every opportunity, Shouto. Three years of opportunities. I gave you all the space you could ever want or need, but you never even tried reaching out until now.”

Shouto's eyes sting dangerously, but he blinks back the tears because he’ll be damned if he cries in front of Izuku. “I couldn’t say no to your wedding invitation.”

He scoffs, the sound harsh against his senses. “Of course you could have. Lots of people said no.”

“Most people aren’t the Number Three Hero. The press would’ve noticed.”

“You expect me to believe this is about the press?” he asks incredulously. He shakes his head. “No, I don’t buy that. You said yes to the invitation when you could’ve said no just as easily as anybody else.”

You’re not supposed to be here.

But Shouto doesn’t know why he’s here. He can’t answer Izuku's question and he can’t answer his own—not now, not ever. He wants to escape, but his legs feel like they’ve been glued to the ground, trapping him here in this moment as the seconds stretch apart and wilt like those pastel flowers in Lucy Albright's hair.

Shouto wants to run away and never look back. He wants to bring Izuku with him and stumble through life, laughing and loving him the way he did that night in Central Park. He wants to find a hero with a time manipulation Quirk and redo every single decision he’s ever made since high school, starting with the day he bit back his confession on graduation day in favor of wishing Midoriya a nice, comfortable summer.

Shouto wants what he can’t have. What he can never have.

It's all too much, emotions pressing down on Shouto from all angles and ready to crush him into nothingness. His breathing picks up, unbidden. Izuku is inches away from Shouto’s face and his eyes are so fucking green even though everything else around them is grey and dull and boring, each leaf sapped of its color and drained of every drop of life. Shouto's hands are shaking and ice crawls up his forearm beneath his jacket, but screw it, he doesn’t care.

He kisses Izuku and hates himself for it. He hates himself more than he’s ever hated anything.

This kiss is small and chaste, close-mouthed and lingering, almost like a promise. Shouto can’t trace the topography of Midoriya’s teeth or taste the champagne on his lips with his tongue, nor
can he re-learn the roof of his mouth or the noises he once made when Shouto would tug on his lower lip. He can’t really feel anything at all, actually. There’s a gentle pressure against his mouth that’s tingly and imaginary, and the freezing sensation of the layer of ice that covers his left side to keep him from blazing white-hot beneath his clothes.

You’re not supposed to be here.

You’re not supposed to be here.

Where am I supposed to be, then?

Shouto pulls back with a gasp, stumbling away with wide eyes and a hand covering his mouth. Horror crests sharp and fast in his stomach as he realizes what he’s done.

Midoriya hasn’t moved an inch. His mouth is red and glistening, the soft flesh turned iridescent in the dim starlight. He’s staring at Shouto with wide eyes, lashes casting long shadows across the planes of his face as he stands there, stunned and utterly fucking ruined on his wedding night. Kaleidoscope emotions play across his features, flickering too fast for Shouto to track.

“I’m sorry,” Shouto manages to gasp out. He can see Midoriya pulling away inch by precious inch; each one might as well be a mile. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry—I’m sorry—“

He plummets into darkness.

(For as long as we both shall live.)

With a gasp, Shouto jerks awake and shoots upright in bed, chest heaving and breath sublimating into pale vapor that collects on his bitten, chapped lips like the first frost of winter. The air is cold against his bare chest, collecting in frozen droplets on his right shoulder and pectoral muscle like dewdrop gemstones that glimmer lifelessly in the moonlit darkness. He looks around his apartment wildly, at first not fully realizing where or even when he is before it all comes rushing back to him in a tidal wave.

not real not real not real

He’s not at the wedding anymore. He’s not even in America anymore, for fuck’s sake. Shouto is in Japan, legs tangled in the sheets of his own bed as the images from his nightmare fade away into murky shades of grey.

The wedding was six weeks ago almost to the day. Shouto remembers drinking champagne and listening to Uraraka’s melodious laugh and Iida’s exuberant well-wishes for hours and hours. He remembers avoiding the piercing stare of Amelia who kept sending him worried glances across the reception hall like she was trying to crawl inside his skin and sift through his memories one by one.

He remembers walking through the gardens late that night, hands stuffed in his pants pockets while
he worked on keeping his face devoid of all emotion because he’s a good friend, dammit. He remembers shaking Midoriya’s hand in the receiving line and lying through his teeth.

“Congratulations,” Shouto had told him placidly, carefully. “I’m so happy for you.”

Shouto shivers involuntarily and swallows down the knots in his throat, taking deep breaths in an attempt to slow his racing heartbeat. The air of his apartment has gone positively frigid, sending waves of goosebumps rippling down his spine. He leans into the sensation.

Not real, he reminds himself. Not real.

(Except that it is real and Midoriya’s been married for six weeks. Married to the wrong person. The perfect, beautiful, wrong person.)

Movement next to him. A shuffle, then a groan.

“Nngh,” grumbles the man curled under the sheets next to Shouto. His dark hair is mashed on one side and the edge of a tattoo peeks out from where the sheets twist around his waist, ink curling up the left side of his torso like a swirling maelstrom of clean black lines that doesn't look half as appealing as it did last night. Shouto doesn’t remember his name.

“What’s wrong?” the man mumbles roughly into his pillow. Eyes still shut, he shivers and curls up into a ball, pressing himself closer against Shouto’s left side as if he can leech the warmth from him directly.

Shouto feels sick.

No, he feels too much.

(He doesn’t feel anything at all.)

“Nothing,” he says quietly after a moment, sinking back down between his too-soft bedsheets. “Everything is fine.”

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr | Twitter | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist
Chapter Summary

2023 — one year and three months after Midoriya Izuku's wedding to Lucy Albright

Shouto: 24 years old

Izuku: 25 years old

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Throughout his entire life, Shouto has never understood the hype surrounding babies. As far as he’s concerned, they’re pink and wrinkly and far too delicate for someone like him to even consider touching, so he does his best to steer clear of them whenever the opportunity presents itself.

He’s heard stories about the multitudinous wonders of parenthood and the way newborn children seem to alter the worlds of the people they touch with their soft, tiny fingers. Everyone’s heard those stories, but to Shouto, the youngest in his family, the stories are just that—stories. Urban legends and fairytales meant for people who haven’t seen the world from his dark, dangerous vantage point. He’s never had a younger brother to pick on, nor a baby sister to take care of the same way Fuyumi took care of him back when he was small and the world was still large enough to be scary. He’s never even done those ridiculous elementary school tours like the other pro heroes. No, when it really comes down to it, Shouto knows next to nothing about kids. He’s perfectly content to keep it that way, thank you very much.

But then Fuyumi has her baby. Everything’s a little different after that.

Akiyama Mizuki is born on February 18th, 2023 at the ungodly time of 3:37 AM in Fukuoka Regional Hospital. She’s small and screaming and ear-splittingly loud, and honestly, Shouto doesn’t know what to do with her when Fuyumi first sets her in the stiff cradle of his arms at the hospital. He’s absolutely terrified—plunge-the-room-to-freezing-temperatures-in-a-heartbeat terrified—of dropping her, so Shouto locks his joints together and holds his breath, fearful what one sharp inhale could do to his paper-thin grasp on peacefulness. He fully expects Mizuki to squirm and shriek in distress and flail her arms blindly—which is apparently all she’s done since she took that first lungful of air. Shouto waits and waits for her to scream, to demand her mother back, but there’s just…

Nothing.

Nothing.

There are no whimpers, no squalls, no hiccupping sobs or flushed cheeks. The only sound in the room is the pleased hum of Fuyumi from her hospital bed and the sigh of relief from her frazzled-yet-joyous husband, who likely hasn’t had a moment of peace since Fuyumi went into labor. Mizuki shuffles in her swaddling and gropes blindly up at nothing, almost like she’s reaching for the stars or the ends of Shouto’s hair where it hangs in front of his face, her petal-soft fingers
curling clumsily around nothing but air.

She opens her mouth. Shouto flinches back, bracing himself for the worst because *there’s too much of my father in me, I shouldn’t be touching her. Why did Fuyumi trust me like this?* He knows he’s done something wrong, he’s hurt her by accident somehow, she’s going to scream—

But she doesn’t. There is no piercing shriek, nor a cry for her mother’s familiar arms. Mizuki merely yawns, exposing a mouthful of soft, pink gums, and sinks down into the cradle of Shouto’s arms like it’s the safest place she’s ever been. She promptly falls asleep.

*Oh.*

Shouto stares. He stares and stares and *stares* and doesn’t stop because all of a sudden, in the middle of a tiny hospital room in Fukuoka with scuffed floors and water-stained ceiling tiles, Shouto’s world has narrowed down to one thing and one thing only. Colors don’t seem as important as they did before, and the sun might as well have fallen out of the sky for all the attention Shouto has to spare at the moment. With a shudder and a heartbeat and the even breaths of his sleeping niece, everything has shrunk down to something almost *manageable*—something small enough for Shouto to cover with a thumbprint and roll between his fingers like a precious marble.

In his peripherals, Shouto knows his mother is covering her gaping mouth with her hand, stunned and teary-eyed. Fuyumi’s husband has his eyebrows raised in shock, Ichiro is smiling into his cup of coffee, and Natsuo is grinning like an idiot because he *is* an idiot and it’s pretty much his resting facial expression at this point. Fuyumi, however, merely has a warm smile on her face, almost like she expected this to happen.

Shouto doesn’t know what sort of emotions are flickering across his own expression. He’s frightened to even guess.

“Oh, Shouto,” Fuyumi murmurs softly, eyes misty. “She *loves* you. I knew she would.”

And suddenly, the hype surrounding babies makes a lot more sense.

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*July 19th, 2023*

Friday evening finds Shouto sitting in Fuyumi’s living room with Mizuki on his lap, smiling down at her wide, curious eyes and carefully contemplating how easy it would be to kidnap her for a weekend—or maybe an entire month. Shouto’s not picky. He’s toying with her toes because it makes her smile and giggle, the rough pads of his thumbs pressing into the soles of her soft-as-velvet feet.

He’s gone. He’s so *gone* for his niece it’s verging on ridiculous. Part of him thinks he should be worried about how much he adores her—the other part of him doesn’t give a single shit.

Shouto is still wearing his hero costume from his morning patrol in in the city; he hadn’t bothered to change before warping here via one of his agency’s sidekicks. There are a few faded bloodstains on his boots from a villain he’d caught in the midst of a hostage situation a few hours ago and ice
underneath his fingernails that hasn’t yet melted. Shouto should probably care that he’s battered and singed and sitting on Fuyumi’s clean sofa, but the second his sister saw him at her door, she’d shoved Mizuki in his arms with a, “Oh, thank god you’re here, she hasn’t stopped crying for four hours please help me,” and ushered him in without a second thought.

Mizuki reaches up with pudgy hands to grip Shouto’s index finger with surprising strength, her colorless eyes crinkling at the edges as she grins toothlessly. He smiles back at her.

Six months ago if someone had told Shouto he’d be buying onesies for his niece “because I saw it in a window and it made me think of her,” he would’ve laughed and refuted the claim for hours until he ran out of words worth spewing. Now he can’t go two weeks without warping down to Kyushu to come and see her, hold her, make her giggle.

He doesn’t know how he ever lived without her.

“If I knew that having a kid would get you to come visit us more, Shoucchan, I would’ve done it a long time ago,” says Fuyumi from the doorway. She has a basket of laundry braced against her hip and a smile on her face as she takes in the scene before her, hair tied back in a messy bun at the base of her neck.

Shouto snorts softly, not taking his eyes off Mizuki’s smiling face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, you don’t? Well then, allow me to remind you of the fact that I didn’t see you outside of national holidays for two years after you graduated high school.” She’s deadpan, one eyebrow raised. “Now you show up at my door twice a month like clockwork to see Mizu. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’d been hit with a body-swapping Quirk when nobody was looking.”

“Hey, I called sometimes,” he protests mildly. “Visited mom. Sent letters.”

She scoffs. “That doesn’t count and you know it.”

“How does sending letters not count?”

“No one sends letters anymore, you antique loser,” she says teasingly. She hikes the laundry basket up a little higher and moves to sit down next to him on the sofa, where she begins folding towels neatly. “You know, I’m starting to think Natsu’s not far off when he calls you a senile old man wearing Millennial skin. Tell me—how many cable-knit sweaters do you own at this point?”

He blinks, almost offended. “Sweaters are practical in cold weather, Fuyumi. I don’t see how—“

“I’m going to assume you own at least ten.”

He doesn’t give her the satisfaction of knowing how close she is to being correct. Instead, he glares at her half-heartedly, letting Mizuki suck on one of his cold fingers. “It’s like you don’t want me to visit or something.”

Fuyumi laughs and shakes her head. “Oh, no. Actually, Aane and I were wondering how many kids we have to have in order to get you to move in with us and be our live-in nanny. You’re the only one who can get Mizuki to stop crying once she gets going, you know.”

Shouto tries and fails not to feel a swell of unadulterated pride at her words. He bites his lip to keep from grinning too widely; his face is not meant for such ardent displays of emotion. “I dunno. At least two more kids, maybe,” he tells her, only partly joking. “Then I’d think about it.”
Fuyumi hums. “What, I don’t get special privileges even though I’m your favorite sister? Have a care, Shouto.”

“You’re my only sist—“ but he stops because her tone suggests some level of significance that’s at odds with the slight curve of her mouth. Shouto looks up sharply, eyebrows raised. “Wait. Are you really going to have another? You’re not joking?”

She shrugs, grinning a little wider now. “We want to space them apart another year, but… yeah. We’re seriously thinking about it. We’re planning on three total, if we can.”

Warmth unfurls in Shouto’s chest at the thought of having three nieces and nephews running around the house, freezing things and short-circuiting electronics every other second. He smiles softly. “Three sounds perfect. I’m happy for you.”

“You sap, don’t give me that,” she says, bumping his shoulder good-naturedly. “You just want more nieces and nephews you can spoil. Don’t lie.”

“I thought spoiling them was my job.”

“No, that’s mom’s job. Your job,” she says, poking him in the center of his chest, “is to be the cool uncle that takes them on adventures when I’m not looking. You’re also supposed to bring them souvenirs and other weird stuff when you come to visit, like snow globes and stuffed animals or whatever. Tell them stories about being a super-famous professional hero. Put dangerous ideas into their heads that I’ll yell at you for later.”

“I’m not that famous.”

“You’re Number Two right now, aren’t you? That’s pretty famous.”

“Bakugou will take it back next week. He always does.” He glances down at Mizuki, who is still sucking on his index finger with endearing determination. She looks up at him with wide, guileless eyes and coos around the digit. “I suppose gift-giving is something I can handle. Adventures, too. But…” He hesitates. “I don’t want to give her dangerous ideas, Fuyumi. There’s nothing glamorous about my life.”

She gives him an incredulous look and snorts. “’My life’s not glamorous!’ says the man with a center-page spread in Heroes Weekly and a fan club with more members than the population of Japan. Don’t kid yourself, squirt.”

“That fan club isn’t official,” he reminds her sourly.

“Doesn’t matter,” she says, waving him off. “You still have a fan club. That’s more than a lot of people can say. Whether you like it or not, you’re famous, and Mizuki’s going to grow up knowing that. Might as well start owning it.”

Shouto stays quiet, choosing instead to focus on the way Mizuki kicks her feet around like she’s trying to swim through the air—like she’s trying to get somewhere that isn’t here, fly away and never be seen again. Shouto smiles down at her and removes his finger from her mouth to catch one of her wayward fists, rubbing the palm of her pudgy hand between his thumb and forefinger. She blinks up at him curiously; Shouto wonders if it’d be possible to tip forward into the clear pools of her eyes and stay there forever, hidden from the rest of the world with only his niece to keep him occupied.

“You could have one of your own, you know.”
And all at once, those warm feelings in his chest are extinguished like the flickering flame of a candle. Shouto glances up at her with a flat, unimpressed stare. “That’s not funny.”

“Good. It wasn’t supposed to be.” Fuyumi finishes folding the towels and stacks them back in the laundry basket before leaning back on the couch to watch her daughter’s joyous, unguarded face. “You’re a natural with her, Shouto. Don’t pretend like you’re not. Having one of your own—”

“Isn’t possible,” he finishes, turning back to Mizuki. He smooths down the silver tufts of hair that are finally starting to spout on top of her head, finespun filaments the color of moonbeams. “You know why I can’t do that.”

“What, because you’re gay?” She rolls her eyes. “Come on, you’ve got options—”

“It’s not that,” he says quietly, hating the words before they even come out of his mouth. “It’s because I’m a hero.”

Fuyumi doesn’t say anything to that. The words are small, packed full to bursting with things not fit for innocent ears, but deep down, she knows he’s right. She knows, yet she says nothing. Perhaps because there’s nothing to say. Perhaps because she doesn’t know what to say.

Heroes shouldn’t have children. It’s a widely-accepted fact of life that when children get involved with the life of a hero, weaknesses crop up and are exploited in short order. Villains target schools, families get torn apart, time management becomes a problem—how can you raise a child when you’re out fighting crime at all hours of the day and night? When you never know if you’ll make it out a situation alive?

The answer is: you can’t. Not without collateral damage, at least. Shouto and his siblings are living, breathing proof of that; he’d die before he ever harmed one of his own family members the way his “hero” father did once upon a time.

Shouto hears his sister sigh softly through her nose and sees her shoulders drop half an inch out of the corner of his eye, almost in defeat. “Shouto,” she starts hesitantly. He hears her swallow, and she begins fiddling with her wedding ring nervously, twisting it back and forth around her finger. “Please don’t bite my head off when I ask this, but… are you happy?”

Happy is a very subjective term, and not one he likes to think about often. He shrugs. “Happy enough, I suppose.”

“Are you happy with Kazuo?”

Shouto stiffens at the sound of his ex-boyfriend’s name. The last he remembers, Kazuo had been taking a box of his things out of Shouto’s apartment with a shattered expression on his face and bitter words on his tongue. “Um,” he murmurs, biting his lip. “We, uh. We broke up, actually. Two weeks ago.”

Fuyumi gives him a pitying expression that looks frighteningly like their mother’s. “Oh, honey—”

“It’s fine,” he says hurriedly. “It’s… fine. We’re fine. It was a mutual thing.” Except that it wasn’t, and Shouto is a dirty liar whose pants couldn’t ignite even if he wanted them to.

Fuyumi doesn’t look convinced. “I know how much you liked him. And you were together a long time, weren’t you?”

Shouto huffs, trying to ignore the sudden sourness in his mouth. “Four months isn’t a long time.”
“For you it is.”

“You make me sound so shallow.”

“Not shallow,” she says pityingly, shaking her head. “Unlucky, maybe, but definitely not shallow.”

Unlucky doesn’t even begin to cover it, Shouto thinks to himself, recalling glittering skyscrapers and pulsing blue lights, morning patrols and shitty crosswords, and Central Park at midnight with the boy of his dreams mouthing secrets into the soft skin of Shouto’s neck like nothing else in the world mattered.

Shouto is the definition of unlucky.

He closes his fingers around Mizuki’s tiny hands and squeezes, wishing he could hold on forever and not let go like some kind of leech or barnacle. Mizuki is looking up at him with a slight frown, puzzled like she can’t quite figure out why Uncle Shoucchan isn’t smiling anymore. He almost wants to tell her the truth, just to see what it would feel like to admit to someone that he fucked up his life at age twenty and now feels adrift in his own reality, unable to settle down or see past those memories of cloverleaf irises and brilliant smiles to give his heart away to anyone worthwhile—if he even still has a heart, that is. At this point, Shouto’s not so sure.

Mizuki would keep his secret, he thinks. She’s trustworthy. Safe. Hell, he’d probably trust her with nuclear launch codes if he had them.

Fuyumi shifts on the sofa, sighing heavily. She stands and gathers up the laundry basket full of folded towels, perching it on her hip as she prepares to leave the room. “You should make it snow for her again, Shouto,” she says quietly, smiling down at both of them. “You know she loves it.”

It’s a way out of the deep hole he’s trapped himself in, half-buried by his own thoughts. A get-out-of-jail-free card. Temporary, but useful nonetheless.

Shouto puffs air through his nose, leaning up slightly so the ends of his hair don’t get snagged by Mizuki’s grasping, curious fingers. “You don’t mind?”

“How could I? It makes her laugh.”

“I’ll get your sofa wet.”

“It’s just water,” she says, ruffling his hair and ignoring his grunt of protest. “And we both know that if I tried it, I’d just end up icing the whole living room. You’re the only one of us who has enough control to make snowflakes.” She shrugs and heads toward the hallway, waving her free hand over her shoulder dismissively. “I’m gonna go change the laundry really quick. Have fun, you two. Try not to flood the living room.”

Shouto watches her leave, ignoring the way Mizuki pulls on the sleeves of his suit and kicks one of the vials on his belt with her clumsy, wild feet. Fuyumi cuts a petite figure in the doorframe, small and unsuspecting—but her true power lies below the surface, like a beast hidden beneath the glasslike surface of a tranquil lake. Anyone else would’ve pried, would’ve asked questions and tried to solve the root problem because that’s what people do. They’re helpful by nature, and they always think there’s something to fix, even when there isn’t.

Fuyumi never pries. She never tries to fix him, never asks him questions he doesn’t want to answer. She just listens, and she lets go when Shouto needs her to.

Once she’s around the corner and out of sight, Shouto turns back to his darling niece and bounces
his knees slightly, eking out a pleased gurgle and toothless smile for his trouble. He sees Fuyumi in her nose and soft cheeks, the paleness of her hair and the ivory tone of her skin. Her mirror image in more ways than one.

“Hey there, snowflake,” he murmurs, bending low so he can press a kiss to one of her chubby cheeks. She shrieks with joy and grabs at the collar of his suit as she giggles, fumbling as she babbles nonsense that Shouto wishes he could understand. He slips off his right glove and hands it to her, smiling faintly when she immediately puts the end of it in her mouth just like he expected.

Flexing his right hand, Shouto spreads his fingers and concentrates, furrowing his eyebrows as he calls on his ice with exaggerated slowness, careful to articulate exactly what he wants from his Quirk. He visualizes making the ice crystals microscopic, frost fanning out like flowers across his fingertips as he forms individual snowflakes one by one, dozens upon dozens of unbroken, unique flakes of ice.

Mizuki stares wide-eyed at his hand, mouth slack around the fingers of his glove. Carefully, Shouto turns his hand over and lets the snowflakes descend, lighter than feathers, where they land on Mizuki’s eyelashes and cheeks, melting instantly. She flings the glove to the floor with a squeal, suddenly uninterested in the item of clothing, and reaches up to grab at the snowflakes as they fall from Shouto’s hand one by one.

* I love you, Shouto thinks as he pours his power out for her. *And I’ll always be your hero, no matter what.*

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*New York City, New York*

Izuku stumbles through the door to his apartment, covered in blood and soot and drenched in sour seawater that makes his sinuses burn with every breath he takes. He’s in… bad shape, objectively speaking, but it’s not the worst shape he’s ever been in after a mission like that one. His joints hurt, the burn on his right shoulder blade will certainly be a bitch to patch up, and he’s pretty sure the villain melted the soles of his shoes in the middle of the fight and Izuku’s only noticing it now.

He rips off his shoes and unclasps his mask, hanging it from the hook next to the door before he lumbers down the hallway into the living room, favoring his right side ever so slightly. Are his ribs cracked? He touches them gently with gloved fingers, pressing right below his—*shit.* He hisses and jerks his hand away, grimacing at the fiery bloom of pain that radiates up and down his side. Yes, they’re cracked. Really, really cracked.

Patrols have been getting wicked lately, so coming home with injuries like this isn’t, by any means, what Izuku would call abnormal. In fact, with the number of pros and sidekicks that end up in the infirmary at the end of every workday, he’d almost consider this to be the new normal. A horrible, painful kind of normal, but normal nonetheless.

The agency suspects terrorist organizations to be the cause, or maybe a resurgence in the League of Villains that’s small enough to go unnoticed for the time being. Izuku doesn’t know who’s behind these weird, random villain attacks that have been cropping up more and more frequently of late, but quite frankly, he doesn’t care. He just wants them—*whatever they are*—to cut it out and let him
get back to his life. Because goddamn. He’s just… so tired. So unbelievably tired.

Izuku pushes into the bathroom with a grunt and begins his nightly ritual of peeling off his suit and patching up any burns, bruises, and contusions he might have earned through the day. Looking in the mirror is never pretty—he knows the scars on his torso and arms are nothing new, but the last few years have not been kind to him by any means. His body looks more like an abstract painting of pinks, reds, whites, and purples in every shape and size imaginable.

Sometimes he wonders how much longer he’ll last in the hero game at this rate; how long before his body gives out, crushed beneath the indomitable heel of One for All? But other times he thinks he’d welcome the time off, no matter how short. Surely the world would be able to survive a few days without him, right? The continents wouldn’t crumble into the ocean and the moon wouldn’t fall out of the sky. Humanity is resilient. Life would go on.

Right?

There’s a knock on the door that makes Izuku nearly jump out of his skin, scaring him just enough to dump some hydrogen peroxide all over the vanity with a carbonated sizzle.

“Babe?” Lucy calls through the door, voice muffled by the two inches of wood separating them. “Izuku, are you okay in there?”

He curses slightly and mops up the astringent antiseptic from the vanity with the tattered remains of his sleeve. “Uh, yeah!” he calls back, purposely not looking at his black-and-blue reflection in the mirror. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Oh. All right, then,” she says, sounding slightly more subdued. Her shadow doesn’t move from beneath the door, and Izuku braces himself for another question. Sure enough, she follows up with, “Um. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Oh course!” he wheezes. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, there’s blood on the carpet.” A pause, and Izuku freezes. “Again.”

An excuse. He needs an excuse, dammit. Something that won’t make Lucy worry, a white lie that won’t result with her breaking down the door in a righteous fury to lecture him about being safe in the field for the millionth time. He needs something, anything. He racks his brain.

“Um,” he manages eloquently, rubbing a hand over his face—wait. His gaze zooms in on his raw, bloody fingertips that he’d scraped open on the top of the Chrysler Building on his way home from the fight. “My fingers!” he cries out, sounding only slightly hysterical. He swallows down his bouncing nerves. “It’s, uh, my fingers. They’re bleeding a bit. Sorry, Luce. I’ll clean it up before I come to bed, I promise.”

He can hear the frown in her voice, the doubtful tug on her lower lip. He squeezes his eyes shut, hoping and praying that she’ll buy it. Please, please, please…

Izuku hears a muffled sigh, and he tries not to let out one of his own in relief. “All right, I guess,” she finally says. “I’ll be in bed when you’re done, if you want to join me.”

“Sounds good, sweetheart. You’re the best!” Izuku frantically unfurls bandages and rips gauze with his teeth, wrapping his forearm and cinching it tightly around the wound he’d sustained from being thrown through a window earlier today. Lucy’s shadow underneath the door shifts, and Izuku nearly sags in relief. Patching himself up and staying quiet about it has never been his strong suit—
She stops at the last second, and Izuku has to bite back another frustrated curse. “I recorded Hero Hour for you if you want to watch it together,” she adds as an afterthought. “It’s about Japan this week. Has some of your friends in it, I think.”

Izuku tries not to swear aloud as he pulls glass out of his raw, bloodied knees with a ragged pair of tweezers. “Really? That sounds awesome. I’ll be there soon so we can watch it.” Go away, go away...

He holds his breath. Counts to ten. No, twenty. There’s still glass in his body and scarlet blood dripping onto the white marble vanity, pooling into unidentifiable shapes that Izuku can’t help but stare at.

Finally, the sound of retreating footsteps can be heard on the other side of the door. Lucy is gone.

Izuku sags against the vanity and lets out a heavy sigh of relief in an attempt to slow his racing heart. Crisis averted. Then, with a soft sigh, he finishes bandaging his wounds and rubbing salve into his mauve bruises, being careful not to turn too sharply or strain his cracked ribs. He misses Lucy’s gentle, expert touch, but for a night like tonight where the canvas of his skin is more bruised than not, he figures it’s best not to let her see it. She’d only worry.

Half an hour passes before he emerges from the bathroom, clad in a long-sleeved t-shirt and boxer briefs that he’d stashed in the back of linen closet specifically for nights like these. He dumps his hero costume in a pile on the hardwood in the foyer, making a mental note to have it repaired first thing in the morning, and quickly cleans up the trail of blood he left from the front door to the bathroom. Then he heads for his room, bracing himself for… something. He doesn’t know what, exactly.

When he arrives, Lucy is already in bed, propped up against the headboard with a magazine in her hand and glasses perched on her nose. Her long, flaxen locks hang loosely around her shoulders, framing her face in such an angelic way that Izuku’s heart hiccups painfully in his chest.

“Hey,” he says softly from the doorway, hesitant to disturb the tableau any more than strictly necessary. “You look pretty tonight.”

She glances up over the rim of her glasses, lowering her magazine—Heroes Weekly—so she can get a good look at him. Her bottle-green gaze is soft at first, sweet and flattered at the praise. Her gaze then immediately drops to the bandages peeking out from the collar of his shirt, and her face twists into a frown faster than he can track it. “Izuku,” she scolds, horrified, "what did you do?"

So much for that. He laughs nervously and shrugs, rubbing the back of his neck and barely holding back a wince of pain. “Oh, you know,” he tells her blithely, "the usual. Bad guys, organized crime, a search-and-rescue mission, etcetera. Did you miss the part where I said you look pretty?"

“‘You say that every day.”

“Well, I really mean it this time.”

Her lips twitch, but she maintains her no-nonsense expression. She lifts an eyebrow. “You look like you were hit by a truck.”

“It was a train actually, but close enough.”

Lucy gives him a sad, frightened look that ages her face ten years in an instant. He sees the bags
under her eyes from all the night she’s stayed up waiting to see if he’ll come home, the shadows in
her eyes that weren’t there when they got married last year. He feels his heart wilt a little bit at the
edges, knowing that he’s probably the one who did this to her—his wife, his other half. His
everything.

I don’t deserve you.

(He doesn’t say that because he knows she won’t accept it. She never has before, and there’s no
reason to think she will now.)

Instead, Izuku gives her the most reassuring smile he can muster and crawls into bed alongside her,
slipping his arms around her waist like she’s the only thing anchoring him to this world—which
she is, when he really thinks about it. He rests his head against her soft midsection and lets out a
sigh when he feels her heartbeat pulse rhythmically against his hands and face, reminding him that
she’s alive and breathing and his. Even if he doesn’t deserve her.

He feels one of her hands drop to his head where she proceeds to scrape her nails against his scalp
and run her fingers through his hair. He sighs into the sensation, letting his eyes drift shut.
Suddenly, his wounds don’t hurt as much anymore.

A few minutes pass before Lucy speaks again. “How bad is it this time, really?” she asks, voice
barely above a whisper.

Izuku doesn’t open his eyes, fearful of what he might find in her expression. Worry, definitely.
Some fear. Perhaps even some disappointment or anger. He doesn’t risk looking. Instead, he
squeezes her a little tighter and presses his mouth against her flat stomach, murmuring into her soft
cotton nightshirt, “Not that bad. A few burns, some bruises. Nothing major.”

“Are you lying?”

Yes. “No.”

Izuku counts her heartbeats. Two. Six. Seventeen.

She lets out a breath. “Okay. As long as you’re not hurt.”

Every single one of his bones ache. His muscles spasm with phantom pain. (He’s gotten good at
this whole lying thing, hasn’t he? Izuku wonders if he should be worried about that.) “You’d be the
first to know if I was. I’m being extra careful for us,” he says, smiling against her abdomen. “All of
us.”

Izuku allows himself to sink into the surge of warmth radiating from his chest at the mere thought
of the tiny, impossible heart that’s beating a few inches below his ear. They haven’t announced it
yet. Izuku hasn’t even told his mother or All Might or even Uraraka. But god if he doesn’t want to
tell the entire fucking world, scream it from the rooftops just because he can. He’s so stupidly
happy he can hardly stand it; the dizzying thrill of standing on a precipice, the edge of something
great and unknowable and ours, all ours.

Izuku opens his mouth—to ask about possible names or something ridiculous and hopeful like that,
he doesn’t know—but he stops short when he feels Lucy stiffen in his arms, going rigid like a
board.

At first, it doesn’t process. Then, all at once, the implication hits him. His thoughts go into
overdrive.
His mind fills his blind panic. Her fingers have stilled in his hair. She isn’t breathing. Is the baby okay? Did she see one of his bandages? Is he bleeding through his shirt again? Did I say something wrong? He lifts his head to ask, suddenly more scared than he’s been all day fighting giant monsters, but her grip tightens in his hair, keeping him in place.

“I went to the doctor today,” is what she says, her voice strained. She releases a shuddering breath that sounds almost like a sob, or perhaps a broken sigh. “I’m not pregnant.”

Izuku’s blood goes cold all at once like the Hudson in January or the winter snowstorms in Hokkaido. Frigid.

Ignoring the pressure against his scalp, he sits up and pins her with a disbelieving stare, not even feeling it when her hands drop from his hair, limp and lifeless. “You—“ he shakes his head. “What?”

“I’m not pregnant.” Lucy says emotionlessly, being careful to avoid his eyes. Her mouth is tight and her hands are wringing together over and over in her lap, whitening her knuckles until they’re bloodless.

Izuku shakes his head. “But the tests—“

“False positives,” she tells him, smiling sadly. A weak shrug moves her shoulders like they’re controlled by wires, lifted by an unseen puppeteer. “Third time’s the charm, I suppose.”

It’s a lot like watching a vase get pushed off a table, or seeing a picture frame drop from its place on the wall. Izuku watches it shatter into a thousand pieces in slow-motion, reliving the moment over and over again until he can play it backwards in his mind. Irreparable.

No. Not good enough.

“We’ll keep trying,” he swears, taking her hands. He squeezes them tightly, pressing his lips to her knuckles and squeezing his eyes shut against the rest of the world. He takes a deep breath. “We’ll keep trying, all right? Next month, we’ll try again, and the month after that, and the month after that, and every month afterward if we have to. It’ll happen, Luce. I promise.”

“That’s not something you can promise.” Her lips quiver.

He gives her a sad smile, fighting to fill the hollow disappointment in his chest with something else. Anything else. “Hey, who do you think you’re talking to right now?” he asks lightly, grinning crookedly in the way she loves. “I’m the Symbol of Peace. If I make you a promise, then that means it’ll happen. Everybody knows that.”

She chokes out a laugh, sniffling. Her smile is strained, but her gaze is loving and so, so beautiful. “You dork,” she says softly, swiping at her eyes. Another sniff. “God. You’ve always been such a dork.”

Izuku grins. “Yeah, but I’m your dork, so it’s okay.”

She smiles, eyes still watering, and reaches up to push the hair out of Izuku’s eyes. Her fingertips linger over a purple-black bruise that’s flowering around his eye and stretches past his hairline. A deep shadow of something awful and long-gone.

“So stupid,” she murmurs, smiling sadly up at him, almost like it’s a secret, or a language no one else can know except them. Quickly, she leans up and deposits a quick kiss on his lips that only feels slightly weighed down by thoughts of hopeless futures and empty nurseries. He leans into her
mouth and tries to breathe that hope back into her lungs because he’s the Symbol of Peace and he should be good at that sort of thing by now. Shouldn’t he?

“I love you,” he tells her when he pulls away. He brushes a thumb over her cheek, reading the temperature of her blush with a touch.

“I love you, too.” The shadows in her eyes aren’t as dark anymore now, brightened however temporarily. Izuku wonders silently if he’ll ever truly get those shadows to leave. He wonders if he’ll be the one to banish them forever and return that spark to her eyes, the one that captured him so completely the first time they saw each other across the emergency room.

He wonders if he’s the one that put those shadows there in the first place.

Chapter End Notes

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They say some people dream in black and white instead of color. Shouto doesn’t know how true that statement actually is, but he’s willing to bet that nobody dreams in both—not the way he does, at least.

Sometimes he feels like his nightmares swim between his senses in shades of swirling grey. They drown him in oily shadows and half-formed memories of places he’s been, civilians he’s saved, friends he’s lost along the way. Those dreams always echo sourly when he relives them, almost like his voice can’t quite decide whether or not it wants to travel the way it’s supposed to through the fluid spaces around him—those pockets of time and energy that mold to his fears like putty and leave him wanting.

The majority of his dreams are vibrant and loud, deafening in more ways than one, and twice as overwhelming as any villain fight. When he has them, he exists in a world of malleable crimsons and ostentatious oranges, endless blues and yellows bright enough to blind him. Smells and sights from adventures past, failed missions, the faces of every single person he’s failed to save—why weren’t you fast enough, Hero Shouto, you should’ve been faster—the colors scream at his senses and leave him gasping, sweat-stuck to his sheets and head spinning uncontrollably as he counts the blades of his ceiling fan over and over again until he can breathe easily once again. He hates those dreams the most. He’d gladly bleed black and white any day if it meant he’d never have to see those vibrant hues painted on the backs of his eyelids ever again.

Except there are nights—rare, inescapable nights—when his medication doesn’t knock him out as much as it’s supposed to. He dreams in combination on these nights, reliving experiences both good and bad. He chokes on splashes of bright color and submits to the crushing greys of his memories because he has no other choice. Trapped in his circadian rhythms like a man cursed, he’s forced to relive failed rescue missions and precious moments with Mizuki simultaneously like his mind can’t decide which memoir to show him first.

Sometimes he’ll revisit the halls of U.A. and see them from a different angle now that he’s four
inches taller than his fifteen year-old self, and he knows the sins of the world better than he knows anything. He finds Mizuki drawing things in purple Sharpie on the colorless walls of Aizawa’s classroom while she giggles, coughs, and retches, choking on the smoke that fills the room like a thick haze of slate-grey death. He’ll catch Kaminari sticking a fork into an electrical outlet for his regular morning pick-me-up right before the skin peels from his face in crimson sheets and his blood pools like black ink beneath his feet. Sometimes Shouto will catch Uraraka and Asui sucking face in the third floor broom closet again, but this time they’re shuddering and gasping in each other’s arms because they’re burning, being consumed by roaring, titian flames that melt his ice every time he gets close enough to try and save them.

Shouto has suffered in scarlet, drowned in cobalt, languished in lavender, and ached in every shade of ivory imaginable. Greys fill the rest of his nightmares like cotton stuffing, softening the corners of things less distinct—things that don’t fucking matter to the demons that run rampant in his mind every time he closes his eyes and dares to drift away. He’s died in oranges and blacks and blues and whites and passed on into infinite, empty nothingness a thousand times over.

He dreams in rainbows and dappled silver. Tintype photographs of unspeakable horror.

But he never, ever dreams in green.

October 5th, 2024

The morning of October fifth is a lovely one, painted in the butter yellows and dusky red-browns typical of the height of autumn in central Japan. It is also, coincidentally, the day that everything in Shouto’s life goes horribly wrong.

He’s at the farmer’s market near his apartment with his sister and Mizuki, who is strapped securely into her stroller and babbling nonsensically at every pigeon she sees in the near vicinity. She’s bundled up in layers of crocheted sweaters and hats and rainbow-colored booties because Todoroki Rei has turned “being a grandmother” into an extreme sport worthy of the next Olympics; Shouto wouldn’t put it past her to crochet things for her granddaughter until the day Mizu enrolls in university, or the day she gets her first—

Her first boyfriend.

Oh, god.

Shouto’s never thought about it before. Even though Mizuki’s only a year and a half old, she’s going to start liking boys eventually, right? Or maybe girls? Regardless of her preferences, the thought of someone—anyone—holding Mizuki’s heart in any capacity outside of a familial sense is fucking terrifying. Shouto’ll have to do background checks on all of her crushes when she starts having them, or maybe he’ll—

“Your face is going to get stuck if you keep scowling like that, you know.”

He blinks, flinching back from the hand waving directly in front of his face. Fuyumi is frowning up at him, brows creased in amused concern. She’s wearing a fuzzy sweater and earmuffs, hair falling around her soft cheeks as she watches him, looking straight through him like he’s glass.
“Sorry,” he tells her, still scowling because oh my god Mizuki will start liking people eventually and I don’t know how to feel about that. “Lost in thought.”

Fuyumi snorts. “Well, you look like you’re plotting a murder. Cut it out, you’re going to scare the little kids.” She holds up two different heads of green cabbage, eyebrows raised. “Which one do you think?”

He pauses, considering. Then points. “That one. And I wasn’t plotting a murder.” Can’t murder someone you don’t know, anyway. “I was thinking about work, that’s all.”

Fuyumi rolls her eyes and blows a few strands of hair out of her eyes. “Do you ever think about anything else? Honestly, Shouto, there are other things in this world besides your job.”

“My job is keeping people safe. It warrants thinking about.” He frowns at a basket of figs near Fuyumi’s end of the table, noting their rich color and plump shape. He gestures toward them vaguely. “Hey, grab me a few of those, if you would. Please.”

She stares down at the figs, then gives him an incredulous look. “These?”

“Yeah. Three should be fine.”

“You hate figs.”

He shrugs. “Great source of magnesium and vitamin K. Just because I don’t like them doesn’t mean they aren’t good for me.”

“What do you even use them for?”

“Quinoa bowls, mostly. And they’re good for meeting my daily fiber quotas.”

He might as well have told her about his secret desire to join a Riverdance troupe and study under Michael Flatley for the rest of his days. Her face is positively horrified. “Oh my god,” she breathes almost reverently. “You are such a nerd.”

He rolls his eyes and turns back to the bags of dried lentils piled high on the table in front of him. He doesn’t know why she’s making such a fuss—he’s always been the nerd of the family, so this really shouldn’t be news, by any means. “Just grab them, okay? I don’t judge you for your dietary choices.”

“Yes, you do,” she scoffs, grabbing the figs carefully like they’re diseased. She drops them in the wicker basket over her arm and shakes her head. “It’s all you do whenever you come for dinner. You’re always ‘fiber this’ and ‘protein that’ and I want to kill you every single time. Just give me my carbohydrates and let me die in peace.”

He eyes the gentle swell of her belly beneath her sweater and overcoat. “I only do it because I care. You’re two months along. You need to balance your—“

She whirls on him in the middle of the narrow aisle between the produce stands, her glacial eyes narrowed into slits, hands clutching a wrapped sesame loaf to her chest like it’s the most precious thing in the world; her glare could slice a lesser man to ribbons and freeze his soul solid. She is, objectively speaking, the most terrifying thing Shouto’s ever seen in his life—and he’s faced down the Yakuza, for fuck’s sake.

“Finish that sentence, Shouto,” she squeezes between her teeth, voice low and dangerous. Everyone around them is either pretending not to notice the black, fiery rage that’s emanating from Fuyumi’s
every pore, or they all figure that Shouto is deserving of everything that’s coming to him. “I dare you. See what happens.”

He blinks, holding up his hands in surrender and takes a careful step backward until he runs into the edge of a table covered in baskets of plums. “Nope. I, uh, wasn’t going to say a thing.” He winces. “Please put the bread down, Fuyumi.”

“No.” She’s stalwart, resolute. She brandishes the loaf like a weapon. “I am going to buy this, and I am going to eat it tonight. In, like, one sitting. And I’m going to do it on my couch while I watch reruns of Gossip Girl because that is a good show.”

It isn’t. It really isn’t. In fact, it’s probably the worst television show ever conceived by mankind, but Shouto’ll be damned if he tells his very hangry, very pregnant older sister that. Especially when she looks two heartbeats away from manslaughter charges.

Her gaze hardens inexplicably at his silence, and she takes another step closer, tapping the center of his chest with one end of the loaf. “I’m going to eat these carbs and you won’t be able to do a damn thing about it. Do you hear me? Not a damn thing.”

Terror runs rife in his veins. He manages a thick swallow that only tastes slightly of fear and tries not to let it show—he’s pretty sure he fails miserably. “Um… yes. Okay then.”

He holds his breath and waits for her to throw the bread at his face or burst into tears because that’s just the sort of thing she’s been doing lately—but she doesn’t. Instead, she releases a sharp breath and relaxes her shoulders, pulling her face back into some semblance of calm that is even more frightening than her pregnancy-induced rage.

“Good talk, little brother,” she says before turning on her heel and walking toward a market stand selling different kinds of homemade cheeses. The sesame loaf is still tucked under her arm, safe and secure and reeking of delicious carbohydrates.

Shouto trades a look with Mizuki, who watched the entire ordeal from her stroller with wide, curious eyes and not nearly enough fear, considering what just happened. (Although he supposes living with Fuyumi would desensitize just about anyone after a few weeks of non-stop horror—even one-and-a-half year-olds like Mizuki, who don’t really understand much Japanese yet.)

“You’re mother is a scary lady,” he whispers to Mizuki over the din of voices around them, almost like he’s sharing a secret he knows Mizuki would never tell because she wouldn’t—she never has, and never will. She’s too perfect to do something like that. She babbles and shrieks, waving her arms in circles as she bounces in her seat restlessly. Shouto drops a swift kiss on her soft cheek and warms her hands gently before pushing her stroller further along, slipping back into his domestic rhythms like he hasn’t been threatened with a loaf of sesame bread and seen his entire life flash before his eyes.

Shouto, Fuyumi, and Mizuki wile away the remainder of the morning in between wooden stands of jams and jellies and blanket-covered pickup truck beds full of the finest produce this side of the river. They chat aimlessly about their lives: Mizuki has started attempting words when she thinks nobody’s around to hear her, and she’s particularly fond of that fluffy stuffed lamb Shouto had purchased for her on one of his trips to Edinburgh a few weeks ago; Fuyumi’s pregnancy is progressing nicely, although this time her morning sickness is ten times worse than when she was pregnant with Mizuki. (Her husband has to follow her around the house everywhere with a trash can just in case she tries to hurl all over the carpet again.)

Shouto, in turn, gives them the safe-for-innocent-ears version of his last few rescue missions
abroad and tries to make it sound like he’s actually attempting to stay safe every time he charges into a burning, half-collapsed building to rescue kittens for young children. He doesn’t tell them about the missions he’s failed, the number of people he’s lost to villains since falling into the Number Two spot permanently, or the latest guy he dated because it didn’t work out past dinner anyway.

He doesn’t tell her about his polychrome nightmares, either. Those secrets are best kept stored in boxes, taped shut and hidden away from everyone else. She’d only worry.

(The thing about nightmares, though, is that they’re never contained just to the inside of your skull. For someone like Shouto, nightmares are just another reality, and sometimes those realities rub a little too close together for his liking.)

They’re standing in front of a stall, looking at homemade soaps and humming contentedly at the scents they find when it happens. Shouto and Fuyumi hide their grimaces beneath polite words and well-wishes to the lady who makes them, perusing the available scents—some of which are nice, and others which are… not so nice. It’s frivolous and not at all what they came to the farmer’s market for, but whatever. It’s Tuesday. Shouto can afford to have a little fun on Tuesdays.

Mizuki is propped up on his hip, reaching for every brightly-colored block of soap she sees. She has one hand tangled in the collar of his jacket as she leans precariously toward some blue-and-green soaps, fingers scrabbling for purchase, but Shouto steps back to keep her from touching things she shouldn’t. She whimpers in complaint.

“Oh, of course now she wants some soap,” Fuyumi mutters. “Figures.”

Shouto bounces Mizu on his hip and warms his left side a little more to fend off the chill as she snuggles into his neck. “Still not a fan of baths, are we?” he asks her. Mizu babbles senselessly in response. He takes that as a no.

Fuyumi looks exasperated as she sorts through some apricot-scented soaps. “She fights me every time, I swear. The only time she doesn’t is when you’re there—which, by the way, have I told you how much I hate you?”

Shouto shrugs and presses his smirk against the top of Mizu’s soft, silver hair. “Can’t help it if she likes me more than you.”

Fuyumi glares with no small amount of vitriol. “She only likes you because you spoil her. That’s cheating.”

“It’s not cheating if I—“

A sharp ring cuts him off.

In an instant, the smile drops off Shouto’s face and a vice clamps around his heart. That ring isn’t his personal one—work must be calling him.

Fuyumi knows the look on his face. Wordlessly, she holds out her arms and takes Mizu from him so he can slip his cell phone out of the pocket of his jeans. Sure enough, the caller ID says it’s his agency. He answers it immediately, soap and vegetables and soft Tuesday mornings completely forgotten.

“Shouto speaking.”

“We’ve got a situation,” Yaoyorozu says immediately, not bothering with pleasantries. “How far
Shouto bites the inside of his cheek, thinking hard. Fuyumi and Mizuki are watching him carefully, no doubt feeling the tension that’s bleeding out of every orifice of his body. “Twenty minutes, give or take a few. Ten if I use my Quirk. What’s going on?”

“Use your Quirk. The faster you get there, the better.” Her voice is impossibly grim. “I can’t say anything else over the phone right now, otherwise I would. Just… head to the nearest airfield and ping me your location when you get a chance. We’ll arrange to have a Mach jet waiting for you. You’ll be briefed on the situation when you get there.”

Dread settles in his stomach, cold and heavy. “Where exactly will I be going?”

“Geneva.”

Three and a half hours later, the sun is starting to set over the Swiss Alps and Shouto is very confused about what time it’s supposed to be. His body clock is beyond messed up and his mind even more so, but he’s got his hero costume on and he’s ready to ice some villains the second he’s pointed in the right direction, so that has to count for something, right?

The information Shouto’d been able to gather on the plane ride over had been sparse, to say the least, but at least it had been something. He is now fully aware of some kind of threat (unknown, but he’s assuming villains because it’s always villains) at the European Laboratory for Particle Physics that’s threatening the universe as everyone knows it (specifics redacted) and that the EU has called in quite a few big-name heroes to deal with the fallout. The laboratory and local law enforcement are both choosing to keep things hush-hush for now until they know who’s infiltrated the lab and what they want, but the predictions aren’t pretty—mainly because the laboratory specializes in creating black holes.

Wonderful.

The countryside zips past him on either side as the self-driving car takes him through the Swiss countryside at less-than-legal speeds, over hills and around bends clustered with fire-red and burnt orange trees that have only just begun to lose their leaves to the inexorable pull of autumn. He can see the lake in the distance in between valleys when he passes them, but the city of Geneva is little more than a glowing blip on the inky horizon by the time the car alerts him to his approaching destination.

CERN, as it turns out, isn’t nearly as impressive-looking as he thought it’d be—not that Shouto ever thought anything about the place because theoretical particle physics aren’t exactly his cup of tea. The building is all sharp edges and clean lines, large panes of crystal-clear glass and smooth stone. It’s placed out in the middle of an open plot of manicured land, situated between gravel walkways that connect to other buildings that all look completely different from one another, almost like the architects had thrown some toys into a sandbox and left them wherever they landed.

There are black, unmarked cars parked around the entrance of the building in neat lines. The windows of the building are dark—no lights, no emergency signals, nothing. Not a sign of human life anywhere. Shouto grips the handle of the car door, already on high alert. The sky is a deep purple color and the stars are just now beginning to twinkle. This place should be closed by now.
He slinks carefully up the front steps toward the overly-large glass doors, calling upon his ice just in case he needs it. Frost spreads out between his fingers and up the insides of his wrist, tiny ice crystals hardening into sharp points over the tops of his knuckles. He reaches for the brass door handle and pulls it open gently, on the lookout for any tripped sensors or silent alarms. So far, nothing. It’s almost like the building is still open for visitors, despite the late hour.

He tiptoes inside. The front entryway is cavernous, all polished marble and impossibly high ceilings with glass staircases on either side of the hall. The reception desk is empty and dark and there are green plants situated in the windows and alcoves that line the walls, but there’s still soft music playing from somewhere—some kind of jazz that Shouto instantly hates. He sees doors upon doors on the far side of the room and a large fountain that trickles softly down a slate-grey wall of stone carved with minimalist designs—

He also sees Kirishima Eijirou sticking his fingers in the fountain with a look of unabashed wonder on his face and his red hair spiked up to the heavens.

Shouto blinks. When the briefing report had mentioned big-name heroes, he hadn’t realized Red Riot would be on the guest list. Of all people, Kirishima is the last one Shouto would’ve ever expected to find in a laboratory dedicated to theoretical particle physics. Still, Shouto supposes he’s not exactly in a position to be picky right now. At least he’s working with someone he knows.

Shouto straightens up, releasing the hold he has on his ice to let his fingers thaw out and drip dry. He clears his throat. “Kirishima,” he calls out, voice echoing across the large lobby.

Red Riot spins on his heel and hardens instinctively, arms raised in a defensive position and eyes narrowed into rock-hard slits. His pointed teeth are bared in a feral grimace. “Who the hell—” But he stops short, freezing in place like a statue. His eyes go wide.

“…Todoroki?” he asks, voice tiny and faintly confused.

Shouto raises an eyebrow and gestures to himself. “In the flesh.”

Kirishima’s skin softens immediately and he grins, eyes crinkling as he throws his arms out wide. “Bro! They didn’t tell me you were gonna show up.”

The Number Six hero jogs across the massive room to stand in front of Shouto with his hands braced against his hips. Kirishima looks Shouto up and down carefully with a blinding smile on his face, taking all of him in like it’s been years since they’ve seen each other—which, admittedly, is slightly true.

Kirishima jabs a finger in Shouto’s direction, smile sly. “Dude, if I may say—you look fine as hell. What’s your workout routine like?” Before Shouto can open his mouth, Kirishima’s face screws up and he shakes his head back and forth. “Wait, actually—don’t tell me. I wanna guess. Is it the Bane Workout? I did that one for a while, but it didn’t agree with my work schedule so I had to stop a few weeks in. Ooh, or maybe you’re doing interval insanity? That one is all over the internet right now, I swear, dude. I thought about trying that myself, actually, but—“

“Kirishima.”

“—Katsuki might actually try to kill me if I switch up our routines again, so I’m not sure—“

“Kirishima.”

His mouth closes sharply, teeth clacking together. “Right. We can compare routines later.” His grin comes back with blinding force and he claps Shouto on the shoulder hard enough to make him
stagger. “So how’ve you been, dude? It’s been, like, a million years since we worked together. Tell me everything.”

“Two.”

Kirishima blinks owlishly. “Huh?”

“Two,” Shouto clarifies. “It’s been two years since Budapest.”

Kirishima frowns and scratches his head. His mouth twists as he thinks. “Are you sure? Feels like longer than that.”

“I’m sure.” He’s deadpan.

Kirishima hums lowly, brows furrowing as he thinks. Then his face clears like the sun peeping out from behind fluffy clouds. He grins, sharp teeth flashing lethally, and throws his arms around Shouto’s stiff shoulders to squeeze him tightly. “Hey, whatever. Two years or a million—it’s still way too long to go without having you at my back. Dude, Katsuki’s gonna be thrilled when he hears.”

Unbidden, the muscles in Shouto’s face twitch, threatening to turn into a grimace of pure, unadulterated displeasure. Shouto would argue that Bakugou would be hard-pressed to be thrilled about anything, much less the presence of the “half-and-half bastard” on a sensitive mission in the middle of Switzerland. The Number Three hero is not exactly known for his sentimentality.

“Right,” Shouto hums, keeping his face as neutral as possible. He pats Kirishima on the back once, twice, the action perfunctory. “So, Bakugou’s here?”

Kirishima releases him from the bone-crushing hug and stands back, crossing his arms over his chest—which is littered with various mottled mauve burn scars that hadn’t been there during their stint in Budapest two years ago. “Nah, he’s back in London dealing with some stuff—classified stuff. Wants me to keep him updated on what’s going on here though, since he can’t be here to help out. You know how he is.”

Volatile. Violent. Angry. Yeah, Shouto knows how Bakugou is. Still, he’s almost disappointed that the explosion hero isn’t here to yell about things and glare a lot at absolutely nothing for no reason at all. He’s mellowed out over the years—not much, admittedly, but enough. Enough for Shouto to warrant a very angrily-written Christmas card from the Kirishima-Bakugou household every year, at least.

Shouto nods stiffly, noting the flexible black band on Kirishima’s fourth finger. “I’m sorry I couldn’t make it to your wedding.”

Kirishima waves him off. “Hey, don’t worry about it. We’re all busy people. Maybe sometime soon you can come to London and visit us for a few days, crash in the guest room. We could do some kickboxing, see the sights, eat meat pies—’cause dude, London has the best meat pies ever. Like, no joke.” He places a hand over his heart and looks directly into Shouto’s eyes like he’s swearing eternity. “Like, I’m pledged to protect the UK under contract for my agency, but even if I wasn’t I’m pretty sure I’d still protect it just for those pies. They’re like heaven in your mouth.”

Shouto doesn’t know how he went from worrying about potential black hole manufacturing to talking about meat pies in the span of an hour, but he supposes he’s had stranger conversations. “I’ll see what I can do,” he says, smiling tightly. “Sounds fun.”

“Hell yeah, it sounds fun!” Kirishima claps him on the shoulder hard enough to make Shouto stagger.
wince. “How’s Japan?”

“How’s Japan?”

“Still standing, last I checked.”

“All thanks to you, right? You’re doing a great job over there, from what I hear.”

Shouto shrugs. “I do my part.”

Kirishima snorts, shoving him playfully. “Come on, dude, modesty has never been your thing. You’re the lead hero in East Asia. That’s gotta be awesome.”

“I imagine it feels pretty similar to being the lead hero in Western Europe.”

“One of the lead heroes,” Kirishima corrects. He shrugs. “I just follow Katsuki to keep him from blowing up historical landmarks and scaring children.”

Shouto’s mouth quirks. “Glad to hear he hasn’t changed much.”

Kirishima grins and holds out a fist for a fist bump, and Shouto lightly taps their knuckles together because nobody can say no to a fist bump from Red Riot. “Wanna get going?” he asks, jerking a thumb over his shoulder toward a darkened hallway behind the reception desk. “They’re probably down there waiting for us.”

Shouto nods. “I’m with you. Let’s go.”

Just like old times.

Just like Budapest.

(God, Shouto hopes this mission doesn’t end like Budapest.)

They walk side by side, Kirishima’s skin hardened at the edges just in case they round a corner and find something less than pleasant, and Shouto’s right foot leaves feathers of frost on the tiles beneath his feet with every silent step he takes. They turn off their Quirks when they finally—finally—locate some scared-looking kid in cargo shorts and glasses playing with scientific instruments in a dim lab on the first sublevel of the building. If the bags under his eyes are any indication, he’s been working for far too long and needs to go home for the night, but he perks up and starts babbling senselessly in French when he realizes that he’s in the presence of two Top Ten heroes in full regalia.

Kirishima manages to calm the kid down with a reassuring hand on the shoulder and asks in stilted French (when did he learn French?) where the entrance to sublevel three is. The boy waves his ID badge around frantically and trips over his own feet to take them to a very secure-looking elevator with a 25-digit pin pad and a retinal scanner. Kirishima thanks the boy with a sharp-toothed smile and salutes him as the doors close behind them both, sealing them in and plunging them to sublevel three of the laboratory.

“You speak French?” Shouto asks quietly as they plummet, swallowing as his ears pop.

Kirishima glances at him sidelong and shrugs. “Katsuki speaks it pretty fluently. I figured it’d be nice to learn.”

Well, then.

Sublevel three of CERN, as it turns out, is not nearly as pretty as the minimalist building on the
surface. The floors are polished concrete and multicolored pipes of all different sizes trace the roof of every hallway for miles. He sees workstations with cups of abandoned cold coffee leaving rings on top of sheaves of gibberish-filled paper, hydraulic pressure valves that hiss and steam as they delve deeper into the hallways and tunnels, and hints of an even larger tunnel off to their left that’s home to a large blue-and-silver tube that screams ‘I’m important.’

“What is this thing?” Kirishima asks at one point, peering down at one of the informational readouts on the tube that seems to stretch for miles in either direction down the length of the curving tunnel. “It’s all just numbers and symbols. I can’t make anything out.”

Shouto sifts through some papers at somebody’s workstation and shrugs, not seeing anything written in Japanese or English he could bother translating. “I’d wager it’s something we shouldn’t touch.”

Kirishima backs away from the tube and nods. “Fair point, dude. Let’s keep going.”

They return to the smaller hallways, making their way toward the conference room where they’re expected to report. Shouto finds other labs and workstations hidden behind secure doors and panes of three inch-thick glass that reveal even more lab equipment and data readouts, and Kirishima translates signs and wall plaques whenever they stumble upon them. By the time they reach the conference room, Shouto feels as though they’re walked for miles.

“You’re sure this is it?” he asks, looking at the unsuspecting metal door at the end of the hallway they’re in. “Doesn’t look like much.”

Kirishima squints down at his phone, then back up at the sign. “Pretty sure. Like, a solid 80%.”

Shouto eyes him. “And if we fall into that 20% chance of being wrong?”

“Then we’re really fucking lost and we’re probably gonna die down here.”

Shouto nods. “Awesome.”

“Hey, not my fault this place is built like a maze.” Kirishima rubs his hands together and bounces on his toes anxiously. “All right, all right, let’s do this. All this science-y stuff is making me antsy.”

Shouto is careful to school his features into something placid right before Kirishima pushes the door open, releasing a deluge of buzzing conversations and half-hushed murmurs of anxiousness that float on the damp air of the concrete room. People mill about everywhere, bent heads talking in low voices, suit-clad NATO agents standing sentinel against the back wall. Scientists in white lab coats and multicolored pajamas pants pace holes in the drab, grey floor while they mutter over their clipboards and cell phones. There’s a large table in the center that’s piled with tablets and loose leaf papers covered in red ink, and several screens are set up on the far walls, playing security camera footage of that large tunnel Shouto and Kirishima had just come from.

The second the door hits the wall with a low thunk, however, all the murmurs stop dead like someone accidentally hit the mute button for the entire world. Shouto’s ears ring hollowly in deficiency, straining for something, anything to hear.

And then he sees the only spot of color in the drab, grey briefing room, and all at once, the entirety of Shouto’s body just goes… numb.

Completely and utterly numb.
Midoriya Izuku stands amongst a small group of scientists on the far side of the room, his hair a beacon of brightness in the dim, depressing bunker of heather greys and hard edges that surround them. He is wearing his hero costume—a darker viridian shade than the iterations before it, this time with a cream-colored cape batted to his shoulders that looks practically brand new, spotless and crisp in every single fold. His red shoes are still oversized and ridiculously ostentatious, and his jawline is sharp enough to cut.

Izuku’s eyes are wide, face pale beneath his freckles like snow. He’s staring at Shouto like he’s seeing a ghost or a shimmering mirage on the horizon he can’t quite believe in.

Shouto wants to scream and start the next Ice Age with a single breath.

He wants to trace every one of Izuku’s teeth.

He wants too much.

“Dude, you’re blocking the door.”

Instantly, the illusion shatters into a thousand pieces. Shouto bites down on his lip and drops his gaze to the floor like it’s the most interesting thing in the fucking world, shuffling to one side so Kirishima can slip through and close the door behind both of them. The rest of the world filters back in, piece by piece, until the murmuring crowd has returned to its original volume and the sense of danger in the air is just as taut as it was when they came in.


“Midoriya!” Kirishima calls out, startling a few of the scientists nearby. His voice is just as joyful as it was when he greeted Shouto out in the lobby. Kirishima begins waving frantically. “Dude, this is insane. The Symbol of Peace and the Number Two hero under one roof? How is this place not on fire yet?”

Don’t tempt fate. Shouto works to control his breathing and his heartrate and his temperature but, oh, he’s not sure he can handle all three at once and he might be going into cardiac arrest and he needs to get the hell out of this building before I legitimately burn it down, goddammit Kirishima.

Shouto hears Midoriya’s nervous laughter. “Yeah, it’s pretty crazy how things work out. Small world, I guess.”

“The smallest, bro. Good to see you alive and kicking.”

“You too, Kirishima.”

There’s a pause in the conversation. Shouto knows Midoriya is watching him, can feel it in his bones like lead weights. Shouto braces himself for the cardboard pleasantries he knows are coming his way like whistling atom bombs falling from the sky.

Sure enough, Midoriya clears his throat awkwardly. “Hey, Todoroki,” he says softly. His voice cuts through the din of voices around them like a knife; it lodges somewhere unseen in Shouto’s chest. “Long time no see, huh?”

It’s stupid. It’s stupid, but Shouto does it anyway. Maybe if he looks, he won’t like what he sees and find his own validation staring back at him. Shouto can take solace in the fact that he made the right decision all those years ago in that New York City apartment.

He glances up at Midoriya through his lashes for one millisecond, two. Just long enough for
Shouto to pinpoint the specific shade of emerald in his eyes. Just long enough for him to taste the
memories he shouldn’t care about.

Midoriya’s face is indecipherable as it stares back at him, closed-off and unreadable. It’s an odd
expression on the face of the boy who used to love too much and live too brightly, handing out his
smiles by the bucketful like he had the spirit to spare.

There’s a new scar bisecting the arch of his left eyebrow, Shouto notices, the slash of ruined skin
shining paler than the stars.

Are you drunk?

No. But I feel like I should be.

Shouto tries not to dwell on it. He can’t. It’s been too long. He doesn’t feel anything, and he is fine.
He’s Todoroki Shouto, dammit. He’s always been fucking fine.

Taking a deep breath, Shouto channels his ice and remembers what it feels like to freeze. He
pictures his joints locking together and his skin turning blue, cheeks paling and solidifying into
something unbreakable. He feels his armor locking into place, the layers of chains beneath his
plate mail of placidity and aloofness.

He’s numb, and he’s okay with that. He makes eye contact and feels very little—just a gentle
tingling, a phantom pain of something forgotten.

“It has been a while,” Shouto says without inflection.

And Midoriya’s face crumples, almost like Shouto had reached out and slapped him. Shouto feels a
needle pinprick of pain behind his sternum. A bee sting. Midoriya opens his mouth and takes a
step forward—

“Heroes Shouto, Deku, Red Riot!” someone calls out, tearing Shouto’s attention away. Kirishima
and Midoriya both start, swiveling their heads to whoever’s calling after them.

The woman is tall and wiry and wearing a pinstripe pantsuit—obviously the woman in charge of
the goings-on in this makeshift base of operations. Her eyes are lined with age and her mouth is
pinched, coarse hair pulled back in a severe ballerina bun that only serves to sharpen her features
even more. Her voice sounds like twisted metal that’s been left out to rust in the rain for too long.
Impatiently, she beckons them over to her end of the table.

Kirishima leads and Shouto slips in behind him like his shadow, channeling every available bit of
energy into controlling the invisible wires of his facial expression. He loosens the proper pulleys
and yanks on the correct levers until he’s wearing his unknowable hero face once again—the
expression that’s splattered on all his merchandise and shows up in all the photos of him from
interviews and news reports. It’s not much in the way of armor, but it’ll have to do for now.

Shouto and Kirishima come to stop on the woman’s left at the head of the table. Midoriya is on her
right a crease between his dark brows as he stares down at the papers and tablets scattered across
the table in front of them. To not see him smiling is… odd.

Shouto feels that pinprick again, right where his heart should be.

“I am Léonie Altherr, lead investigator for the Swiss branch of NATO,” she says sharply. Up
close, her grey eyes remind Shouto of cold steel. “You will all report to me for the duration of this
mission, and you will address me as Agent Altherr. Is that clear?”
Shouto nods. Kirishima grins and gives a thumbs up, which doesn’t seem to amuse Agent Altherr very much. On the other side of her, Midoriya clenches his jaw and says a quiet, “Yes, ma’am.”

Agent Altherr nods and claps her hands behind her back, spine ramrod straight. “Good. Now, I will speak plainly because time is of the essence: we have reason to believe that there is a small band of villains tampering with the Large Hadron Collider as we speak.”

Chapter End Notes

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Gentle reminder: the garden scene at the wedding in chapter eleven was all a part of Shouto's nightmare. Also, Izuku is still married to Lucy and living in New York with her. Specifics will be discussed later. There will also be no infidelity in this story. I've noticed a lot of people hoping for some kind of extramarital affair between Shouto and Izuku or something like that. Won't happen. Sorry. Izuku is a faithful guy, even if it hurts him. That's just who he is as a character.

Thank you. This has been a PSA.

Sometimes Izuku likes to imagine delving into the depths of his own ribcage and carving his heart open just to see what he’d find down there. He’d slice between layers of frayed muscle fiber and blue-black viscera turned scarlet in the unwanted company of crisp oxygen, and his lips would remain clamped shut against the pain as he sifted through the hollow spaces in his chest like a miner panning for gold in a bottomless river.

He’d find Lucy among the carnage, for sure. Perhaps he’d find the child they never had, floating somewhere near the surface of everything like a specter of unrealistic dreams. A remnant of idealism, rusted and left to rot. Izuku has a lot of those bits of ancient history lining the ventricles of his heart, each one covered in a thick layer of dust, cluttering up the space he can’t afford to waste anymore. Perhaps if he cuts a little further, he’ll find All Might, his mother, the father he’s never met.

He bets he’d find Todoroki Shouto buried somewhere down there, too.

Izuku, whether he likes it or not, still has those watercolor memories of Central Park at midnight and silvery starlight, soft mouths against sharp teeth and wanting, so much wanting. They’re all wedged someplace deep and impossible, like a splinter sunk too far into flesh. Izuku’s tried to dig them out, but the harder he pushes, the deeper they go.

Permanent.

It’s only fitting, he supposes. Todoroki has always had an air of permanence about him, even back before Izuku really knew him. With that unreadable face of chiseled marble and the sheer power of his presence alone, he’s always been a staple in the lives of everyone he’s ever met. There was never any doubt in Izuku’s mind that Todoroki would rise through the ranks of professional heroism after graduation and secure his spot in the hearts of every man, woman, and child in Japan —no, in the world.

In every way, Todoroki Shouto is the ideal hero—calm in the face of adversity and dedicated to his craft, he’s the gold standard for many and a nightmare for few. The son of Endeavor, a champion of the just in unjust times; too powerful for his own good and twice as pretty. Todoroki Shouto is permanent in a thousand stupid different ways Izuku doesn’t dare to think about.

Irreplaceable, right up until he wasn’t.
But Todoroki is also the man with too many cable-knit sweaters and a love-hate relationship with crosswords and certain types of Greek yogurt. (Chobani is his favorite, Fage is passable in a pinch, but Stonyfield is basically its own unforgivable sin and will never again cross the threshold of his home “or so help me, Midoriya.”) He’s the stoic hero with a traditional, uncomfortable apartment and a hidden drawer of slipper socks for Tuesday movie nights, bookshelves full of battle tactics, and collections of vibrant post-it note drawings of Aizawa-sensei from high school that he keeps in his desk drawer because they still make him laugh.

Todoroki Shouto is the man who works until he bleeds and kisses like he means it. The man Izuku almost had, once upon a time.

The man he doesn’t know anymore.

“So you’re not certain that the villains are actually here?” Todoroki asks, mouth turned down at the corners in displeasure. His arms are crossed over his chest and all his weight has shifted to his right leg as he watches Agent Altherr with those two-toned eyes that always seem to notice everything. The line of his part is mussed, red bleeding into white, and Izuku notices he’s wearing his hair a little longer than he has in the past. His costume has also been streamlined, updated, made new. Changed, just like everything else.

He looks… nice.

Izuku might be losing his mind just a little bit.

“Correct,” Agent Altherr tells him crisply, and without inflection. She clasps her hands together and lifts her chin, and the movement is sharp enough to jar Izuku from his reveries. He hopes his face isn’t half as red as it feels. “For all we know, this might very well be a false alarm. I, for one, certainly hope that’s all it is.”

Todoroki doesn’t seem pleased with this answer, and quite frankly, neither is Izuku. Todoroki’s eyebrow twitches, almost unnoticeable. “You wouldn’t call in three of the Top Ten heroes in the world for simple trespassing,” he says. “Or a false alarm.”

“Yeah, my dude’s got a point,” Kirishima agrees, frowning faintly. He scratches his head, fingers sinking into the stiff crimson strands of his hair. “I mean, I’m flattered that you guys called me, but somethin’ else has to be going on here, right? Something pretty massive?”

Agent Altherr nods gravely. “Something massive, indeed. While we have no direct leads on the villains’ goal—”

“If there are villains at all,” Kirishima reminds her.

Her face sours, suddenly reminding Izuku of this cranky old librarian he used to see all the time back in Musutafu during the summer—if that librarian had a sidearm tucked inside her suit jacket, that is. And a glare that could probably murder small animals. “Yes,” she says shortly, pursing her lips in displeasure in Kirishima’s general direction. “If there are villains hiding somewhere in the tunnels, I’m afraid we must assume the worst. At least until we know more.”

“What do we know?” Todoroki asks flatly.

Agent Altherr crosses her arms, glaring down at the stack of papers in front of her. “You gentlemen know what this place is, yes? What sort of things they research here?”

That’s easy. “Theoretical particle physics,” Izuku says automatically. He’s known about CERN’s research projects since high school, and even a little bit before that, if he’s being honest. The
science of it all had always fascinated him to some degree.

It’s only when he’s finished speaking that he realizes Todoroki had spoken at the same time, echoing his words exactly.

Izuku looks over with wide eyes and hoarfrost in his stomach to see Todoroki staring right back at him, his face completely indecipherable. Izuku feels his heart in his throat.

Right. They took physics class together, didn’t they? Saturday mornings. Ten AM. Izuku remembers now.

(He is seventeen and taking notes in the back row of their classroom, postulating theorems and reciting formulas for Hawking Radiation, whispering about the proposed density of quark-gluon plasma to absolutely nobody at all. There’s a test tomorrow, and he doesn’t feel ready. Across the room, Todoroki throws a wad of paper at Izuku’s head to get him to stop muttering so incessantly, shooting him a small smile over the heads of Tokoyami and Sero that says quit stressing, you’ll pass just like you always do. Izuku throws the paper wad right back, but this time with a little doodle of Shouto with angry eyebrows and left shoulder ablaze with righteous fury.)

There’s an echo in Izuku’s head. Todoroki’s laugh, low and private. Something reserved only for him.

Simpler times.

Awkwardness settles in his bones. Dead weight, thick and unbearably heavy. His tongue feels thick in his mouth. Feeling suddenly very warm, Izuku clears his throat and drops his gaze to the most interesting sheaf of papers on the desk in front of him, gesturing vaguely for Agent Altherr to continue her explanation. The papers are all written in French, so he doesn’t understand a word of it—but that’s okay. He’s mostly just looking at it so he has something to stare at that isn’t Todoroki Shouto and his mismatched, stupidly beautiful eyes.

Focus.

“It seems you both did your homework,” Altherr says, voice tinged with mild approval. She inclines her head. “Yes, this is indeed a particle physics research facility. Home to the Large Hadron Collider, the scientists and physicists here study the results of high-speed collisions between hydrogen ions and rarer, heavier particles found in gold and lead. Currently, they are trying to recreate what happened when the universe came into existence. The Big Bang, if you will.”

On the other side of the table, Kirishima stares at Agent Altherr blankly. He blinks. “Yeah, you lost me at ‘particle.’”

A petite brunette scientist wearing Ground Zero-themed pajama pants scoffs sharply and kicks back in her chair, propping her feet up on the edge of the table. Her ID badge says Aerin. “Look, mate,” she rasps in a thick English accent, “we smash really tiny shit together to make even tinier shit, and then we write it down. Got it?”

Kirishima’s face clears with sudden understanding. He shoots the girl a thumbs up. “Oh, sick! Yeah, that makes way more sense.” He turns to Agent Altherr. “Why didn’t you just say that?”

“She did,” Todoroki mutters. He exhales, raking a hand through his hair until all the strands are messy and disorganized, and Izuku tries not to watch. He remembers how soft that hair is. “We’re wasting time. What would villains want with the LHC?”
Here, Aerin trades worried glances with another scientist—this one with blonde, frizzy hair and muddy brown eyes. A silent conversation of some kind passes between the two, told through eyebrow raises and bitten lips. Then, they look at Agent Altherr. Their stoic expressions immediately put Izuku on high alert, skin itching and Quirk aching in his blood.

“Can we tell them?” the blonde asks quietly. Several other scientists nearby begin to twitch.

Agent Altherr presses her mouth into a pencil-thin line. One moment. Two. Then, she nods. “Do it. But make it quick, we’re losing time.”

Aerin drops her feet from the table and leans forward in her seat, bracing her elbows against the tabletop. Gone is her raspy sarcasm, replaced with a seriousness that ages her at least ten years. The lines around her eyes are deeper than they should be, Izuku thinks. “All right, the short version of shit: a few decades back, we managed to make the first black hole with the accelerator.”

“That’s public knowledge already,” Todoroki says immediately. “Even if you could make one large enough, it would dissipate in—”

She shoots him a look. “Hey, asshole. You don’t see me interrupting your bedtime stories, do you?” Aerin rolls her eyes. “Anyway. Look, I’m not going to get into the specifics of things because we don’t have the fucking time, but in a nutshell, all the black holes we’ve ever created here have been tiny. They burn out too quickly to cause any real damage or amount to anything at all. It’s the only reason this place wasn’t shut down years ago.” Here, she grimaces. “That being said…”

“We made a stable black hole six weeks ago,” the frizzy-haired blonde blurts out, face pale. Her hands are trembling. “A-And we figured out how to do it consistently.”

Izuku feels the blood leave his face. Aerin’s expression twists in fury. “What the hell, Lauryn? That was my discovery.”

“You were taking too long!” she squeaks. “What if the villains are already manufacturing—”

“We don’t even know if they’re here, much less if they’re really after this—”

“What else would they be after?”

“Gee fuckin’ whiz, I dunno. How about literally anything else in this joint? We’re not exactly short on cool shit to steal.”

The half-squawked arguments turn over and over, echoing and repeating, but Izuku doesn’t hear any of them—even when Agent Altherr gets between the shrieking girls to keep them from gouging each other’s eyes out via tablet stylus. All Izuku hears is the rush of blood in his own head and the thudthudthudding of his heartbeat as his pulse begins to jackrabbit.

Why would anybody willingly make a stable black hole? What purpose would that even serve in society? Couldn’t that destroy the world, if calculated incorrectly? How large would it have to be to consume everything—?

“The one we made was only the size of a quarter,” Aerin comments dryly. She’s looking directly at Izuku. He must look confused, because she sighs. “Sorry. You mumble just like my little brother back home.”

He feels his cheeks heat uncomfortably. “Oh. I’m sorry, I didn’t—“
“No, you have a point,” Todoroki suddenly says. His voice is a lot closer than before, but Izuku doesn’t dare to turn around and look at precisely how close he actually is. “Assuming the villains are going after this research, how large would a black hole have to be to consume the planet?”

“Enormous,” Aerin answers. She’s all business once again, brows set low above her eyes. “Like, fucking huge. It’ll still decay over time, but at a slower rate than Hawking proposed. And you’d need a shit ton of energy going through the LHC to even have a shot at creating one. I mean, this is the largest collider in the fucking world, but it still might not even be big enough to make anything substantial enough to be a threat. It’s probably blow the damn thing apart before the particles could even get through the ATLAS and CMS detectors.”

Lauryn steps forward once again, toying with the hem of her cotton t-shirt. “Still, even a black hole the size of a beach ball— I mean, properly contained for a few days or something, it could be…” She gulps. “Devastating. Catastrophic.”

Aerin looks grim. “Yeah. What she said.”

Silence. Izuku’s mind races, showing him flashes of half-destroyed cities and the fabric of society shredded to ribbons in an instant, crushed in the impossible density of a black hole. He sees cities leveled to the ground, sucked away like they never existed. He sees New York in ashes.

Green sparks arc between his fingertips as One for All tries to activate out of habit, but Izuku clenches his fists and takes deep breaths. Somewhere behind his left shoulder, Todoroki is breathing in and out through his nose just like before, but the temperature of the room has dropped a few degrees—he feels it, too.

Kirishima, on the other hand, simply looks horrified. “Well,” he says slowly as the silence stretches on. A sigh cuts through the weighted silence, and he begins playing with the stretchy ends of his sleeves. “Shit.”

Agent Altherr, for once, actually manages to look slightly sympathetic. “Now you understand our urgency. Even if this is a false alarm, we must be cautious. If there are villains hiding somewhere in this facility, we must assume they already have the power of stable black holes behind them and act accordingly. If they leave CERN—”

“They won’t,” Izuku says sharply. He feels his expression harden and his jaw clench of its own accord. He looks at Agent Altherr, Aerin, Lauryn, the gaggle of jittery scientists who keep casting glances his way like they can’t believe Izuku’s real. “We’ll take care of it. Just tell us what you need us to do, Agent Altherr. We’re at your service.”

Black holes, fate of the world, a time limit thrown into the mix for good measure. Add a few mutated henchmen and it’ll be a regular Tuesday for the Symbol of Peace, he supposes.

God. Why do Tuesdays always suck?

All at once, the tension snaps, shatters. Purpose takes its place, covering them all in a thick blanket of timid positivity. The scientists relax infinitesimally, shoulders slumping beneath starched lab coats, and even the frightening NATO agents by the door seem a little more at ease than they did before. Aerin is giving him an approving look, and Lauryn looks so damn hopeful it pulls at Izuku’s heartstrings.

Agent Altherr nods at him, a faint smile curling her thin mouth that still somehow manages to look frightening. She glances between the three of them and exhales sharply. “Very well, heroes. Pay close attention.”
She turns on her heel and waves toward the bank of screens on the wall nearby, all of which depict sections of the Large Hadron Collider in crisp black and white. Feeds blink in an out faster than Izuku can keep track of them. The tunnel is cramped and slightly curved on one side—no, both sides. Maybe? It’s hard to tell. Izuku blinks hard and shakes his head to clear his vision.

“As you can see,” Agent Altherr is saying, “the Large Hadron Collider is laid out in a perfect circle right over the Swiss-French border. The emergency tunnels are straightforward enough to allow for easy searching, but too small for us to send full squadrons through. It’ll be your job to clear the sectors one by one so we can come in behind you and secure them officially. Earphone Jack has already been dispatched to the tunnels to search for any sign of tampering or possible trespassing—”

“Jirou’s here?” Kirishima asks suddenly, cocking his head. At Agent Altherr’s nod, he grins widely, sharp teeth shining dangerously bright. “Well, I’ll be damned. We’re getting the band back together.” He reaches over and punches Izuku’s shoulder good-naturedly.

Todoroki is watching the camera feeds with narrowed eyes. “Has she turned anything up yet, or is she just doing a preliminary sweep?”

Up on the screens, the lower leftmost monitor flickers. Izuku spots Jirou for a millisecond in sector ZA34, wherever that is. She’s bent over some scary-looking machinery, plugged into the system and listening closely, eyes shut in concentration. Then, the monitor blinks, and she disappears.

“She’s done a prelim sweep of the southwest part of the tunnel. So far, she’s found nothing,” Agent Altherr says, frowning severely. Her grey eyes glint sharply in the fluorescents above their heads. “That’s where you three come in. These tunnels are too vast for her to cover by herself, even with her Quirk at full capacity. The collider measures twenty-seven kilometers all the way around. On foot, it would take—”

“About seven hours to get from one end to the other,” Aerin calls out, feet propped up on the table again.

Izuku feels his mouth drop open of its own accord. Even Kirishima looks mildly stunned. Todoroki’s face doesn’t change, but that’s not really surprising; the guy has never exactly been an open book.

“Seven hours?” Izuku repeats, doing the math in his head. He balks, shaking his head back and forth frantically. “Even if we rush, that’s too much time to search every inch by ourselves, and even then we might not—”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Agent Altherr says, waving her hands to cut him off. She smiles politely, eyeing each of them individually. Suddenly, Izuku feels like he’s about to be served up on a platter, and he takes a half-step away because he’s really not a fan of—

“You’ll be in teams.”

Some days, it really feels like the universe has it out for Midoriya Izuku. Sure, he’s the Symbol of Peace and the Number One hero for the last five years running, but come on. Can’t the cosmos throw him a bone every once in a while? Give him a break, let him rest for five solid seconds without a satellite crashing to Earth or a building toppling over in a highly-populated metropolitan
area. Would it truly be so terrible for him to have everything go his way, just once in his life?

The answer to that question comes in the form of one Todoroki Shouto and twenty-seven kilometers of damp, dingy tunnels that they’re supposed to search—together.

Fuck.

They’re fifteen minutes into their three-hour sojourn, and so far neither hero has said a word. The only sounds between them are their echoing footfalls and the low thrum emanating from the collider tube that sits constantly on their right as they proceed further and further into the dark nothingness ahead of them. The silence is heavy between them, charged with electricity that reminds Izuku of that one time he tapped Kaminari on the shoulder during gym class when he wasn’t expecting it back in first year.

Izuku should say something, shouldn’t he? Except he’s not sure what there is to say to the guy that you almost slept with and subsequently never called. Is there protocol for this? Some kind of expected… thing that Izuku needs to do? He’s never been good with social cues, but he likes to think he’s not completely hopeless. He’s married, after all; he must’ve done something right along the way to make that happen.

Perhaps he could comment on the lowness of the concrete ceiling and how it’s barely brushing the tops of their heads, or the blue-white LED lights that flicker on the walls like dying fireflies, barely providing them enough light for them to see by. Perhaps he could mention the damp chill that pervades the air and how utterly fantastic it would be for Todoroki to use his left side to warm the space around them just a teensy bit—

Please be my space heater.

The memory comes sharply, all brittle edges and crackling New York winters. He feels the cold air on his skin, the solidity of his apartment balcony, and too-warm, too-familiar fingers toying with the hem of his t-shirt.

He crams the memory back in its box.

“You’re muttering again,” Todoroki murmurs, suddenly shattering the delicate hold on placidity Izuku’s barely been maintaining since entering the tunnels.

Izuku’s heart lodges in his throat and his brain short-circuits, startling a half-choked noise out of him, and suddenly the tunnel they’re in feels ten times smaller than it did a second ago. He waves his hands frantically. “Sorry,” he blurts. “I didn’t mean—"

“It’s fine.”

“I was just thinking—“

“Midoriya,” Todoroki says firmly. "I said it’s fine.”

But it’s not, he wants to say. Nothing about this situation is fine. Not the horrific time of night nor the black hole-wielding villains that may or may not be trying to end the world somewhere in these tunnels. This entire night has been the definition of not fucking fine, and Izuku suddenly feels like he’s about to burst into a thousand pieces from the sheer pressure of it all.

Todoroki’s face is blank, his tone devoid of all emotion or inflection of any kind. It’s the mask he wears for strangers on the street and reporters who ask too much about his love life or his family. Izuku feels his stomach tie itself into knots, looping and churning and squeezing because Todoroki
hasn’t used that voice on him since the Sports Festival thirteen years ago—and before Izuku knows what’s happening, he’s vomiting up words faster than he can process them.

“It’s not though!” he blurts. “I could’ve given our position away, or maybe given up our plan—“ there’s glass in his heart, ice in his veins, what is he doing? “—not that we have a plan right now aside from walking, which isn’t a bad plan by any means! But if we did have a plan, I mean, I totally could’ve—“

Izuku stops dead in his tracks and presses a hand over his racing heart, leaning heavily against the cold concrete wall on his left. He’s wheezing and oh my god, is this what dying feels like? He bites his lip hard and half-hopes he’ll break skin and bleed out before he says anything else. Words press against the inside of his teeth; he chokes them back and relishes the bitter taste.

Todoroki has stopped alongside Izuku to watch him have his mini-meltdown. There’s a crease etched between his brows; the urge to reach up and smooth it out is strong. Izuku considers the cost-benefit ratio of chopping off his own arms right then and there.

Todoroki opens his mouth, then hesitates. “Are you—?”

“How are you so calm right now?” Izuku feels the words seep through his teeth more than he hears them. “You’re always so calm and I... I just don’t get it.”

Todoroki looks abjectly perplexed, face pinched into a frown worthy of the worst type of Greek yogurt, or perhaps a tricky crossword puzzle. Seeing that expression on his face—or any expression, for that matter—shouldn’t be nearly as satisfying as it is. He glances down the tunnel sidelong, eyeing the expanse of cramped subterranean tunnels they’ve been assigned to search. It all feels like too much. Not enough.

“Midoriya...” he begins hesitantly. He swallows and shoves his hands in his pockets, fists clenched. A harsh sigh. “This is weird.”

“Really weird,” Izuku agrees, pressing his head back against the rough concrete until it hurts. He’d melt into a puddle if he could. “The weirdest.”

Todoroki bites the inside of his cheek and glances down the tunnel they just came from. His left eye catches one of the firefly lights and flickers iridescent blue for the briefest moment. “I feel like you’re expecting me to say something, but I don’t know what it is.”

“I don’t know either,” Izuku says truthfully. His voice feels too large for his mouth, vying for space to share with his tongue. “Something. I don’t care.”

Todoroki spears him with a look that clamps Izuku’s heart in a vice. “Yes, you do.”

“Well, I care considerably less than I’ve ever cared before, so.” He waves vaguely. “I don’t know. Make something up.”

He arches an eyebrow. “What, anything?”

“Yeah. Talk about the weather. Politics. Whatever.” Izuku rubs a hand over his face and closes his eyes for three precious seconds. “Just... something. Please, Todoroki.”

The quiet that follows is viscous and syrup-sticky. Izuku wonders if he opens his mouth, he’ll suffocate, if he’ll drown in the damp, cloying air that reeks of earth and metal and something unspeakably bitter. He wishes he could sew the two halves of his heart back together again.
“You know I’m not…” Todoroki trails, then runs a frustrated hand through his hair. He grimaces. “Not very good at this sort of thing.”

“You used to be.” Central park at midnight. Shitty crosswords and stolen pens. Sparring until they spent each other, sweat-slick and laughing. Izuku swallows. “We both were.”

Back when the world was more colorful, Todoroki Shouto and Midoriya Izuku were good at all sorts of things. They were good at fighting crime and fucking up the processing paperwork afterward, punching things until they bled and patching up wounds for each other in between curses and sharp sucks of air between teeth. They were phenomenal at impulse-buying useless things from cheesy infomercials and keeping track of worthless American soap operas that never ceased to be ridiculous and wonderful. They were pros at picking the worst places for weeknight takeout that somehow always gave them food poisoning.

They were good at a lot of things. Communication was never one of them.

Todoroki exhales through his teeth and glares into the darkness of the tunnel. For several terrible seconds, Izuku thinks he’ll turn around without a word and leave him in the shadows—but then he jerks his chin forward, keeping his eyes lowered. Beneath the clean lines of his suit, his shoulders are slumped in resignation.

“We’re going to be late to the rendezvous point,” he mutters. He turns and walks away, footsteps echoing softly. “Let’s go, Midoriya.”

Izuku’s heart crumples in his chest, pressed into an ill-defined shape that shouldn’t hurt as much as it does. “You… But I thought—“

A soft, weary sigh echoes down the length of the tunnel. The sound shivers in his veins.

“I don’t know about you,” Todoroki says softly, glancing over his shoulder at Izuku, “but I, for one, can multitask.” He gestures toward the empty spot next to him.

“You coming?”

Chapter End Notes
As stated previously, *there will be no infidelity in this fic*, but that doesn't mean latent feelings won't be there, rippling beneath the surface a little bit. Izuku loves his wife just as much as he did when he married her. Shouto cares for Izuku, but five years of separation has dulled their shine quite a bit. Keep this in mind as you read.

Hope, Izuku knows, is a fickle thing.

It flutters and wilts at the slightest provocation, the softest word or the sweetest encouragement. It can blossom into something vast and uncontrollable even when it’s totally unfounded in every way. As the Symbol of Peace, Izuku knows better than anyone just how delicate those silken petals of hope can be—and, more importantly, how dangerous.

Izuku scrambles upright from his spot against the wall and practically trips over himself to take his usual place on Todoroki’s left, not bothering to hide the dazed, hopeful look that’s no doubt painted over every one of his features. He should be cautious, he knows. Wary of what’s to come. He can’t read Todoroki’s face in the blue-black light of the tunnel, but he can practically hear the half-cold-half-hot hero’s thoughts just as well as his own. The reverberating echoes are… less than pleasant.

*I used to know you. I really, really did.*

*Once.*

*Not anymore.*

The sound bounces off the concrete walls, ricocheting like a bullet Izuku is too slow to avoid. It burrows somewhere deep inside him—the bramble-briar thorn on the stem of hope, long and wickedly sharp. Everybody always forgets about those thorns, right up until they prick their fingers and bleed bright blue.

*I could leave, if you’d prefer.*

He is paper-thin and translucent, one water droplet away from wilting.

*Don’t you dare.*

He thinks of vigilance, and how nice it would be to have some right about now.

Izuku can feel those wicked, sharp thorns, tugging and pulling at the ridges and whorls in his fingerprints as they attempt to catch hold and sink deep. He feels the velvet soft petals and lush leaves, luring him in with the promise of something sweet and temporary.

He keeps his touch light. Better safe than sorry—at least until he knows more.

With great difficulty, he schools his expression and falls in step beside Todoroki. They have a
mission, don’t they? Something important?

It doesn’t feel very important.

The tunnel feels long and endless now, deep enough to swallow them whole. They search nooks and crannies, breaker rooms and broom closets, storage spaces and science labs. For a while, neither of them talk. What is there to say? Sorry for not calling for five years? My wife and I really appreciated the toaster you got us for our wedding?

No. The words are insufficient. They’re always insufficient, especially when it comes to someone like Todoroki Shouto.

And yet, a small part of Izuku almost wishes the tunnel would just keep going forever. That the darkness would bind them both in buttery-soft wire and wool yarn and let them have everything to themselves for just a little while longer. Maybe, just maybe, they could exist on the other side of time, all pliant and full of butterfly-winged hope for the first time since high school—high school, when the world was large enough to feel impossible, the villains were still scary, and their teachers always knew best. High school, when they loved each other and were too terrified to say anything about it.

(Forever seventeen and stupid with no one but each other and the stars to bear witness to it all. They’ve always had the stars—but there are no stars down here.)

In the end, it’s Todoroki who breaks the silence. Izuku can’t decide if he’s grateful.

“So,” he says tentatively after half an hour of fruitless searching. He articulates his words carefully, turning each one over in his mouth like a lozenge. “How have you been?”

Pleasantries. Izuku can handle pleasantries.

“Tired,” Izuku immediately answers. Knee-jerk, but no less than the truth. He glances sidelong. “You?”

There’s a flickering shadow near Todoroki’s mouth that Izuku can’t quite make out from this angle—a smirk, perhaps. “Tired as well. My agency keeps me busy.”

He lets loose a low chuckle. It feels loud against his teeth. “Yeah, I know how that feels.” Play the game, Izuku. “How’s your family?”

Todoroki takes a deep breath and shrugs, stepping around a thick orange pipe that juts out from the collider tube. “They’re good. We moved my mother to a new facility in Kyushu after my father died. She’s comfortable there.”

Izuku nods understandingly as they stroll deeper and deeper into the darkness. “That’s great.” He remembers the impossible sadness he saw in Todoroki Rei’s eyes at that funeral two years ago and feels his heart clench. “Is she… happier? I mean, Kyushu’s a long way from where you operate. You must not get to see her as often.”

“The south suits her. I visit whenever I can,” Todoroki says, shrugging. Then, a puff of air that could almost be called a laugh escapes his nose. “It helps that her grandchildren are nearby. Keeps her occupied.”

A switch flips somewhere in Izuku’s brain. Abruptly, he chokes and stumbles half a step, knees jiggling like jelly. He looks at Todoroki with eyes wide as dinner plates. “You—what? You have kids? Since when?”
For a moment, Todoroki stares at him, confused. Did Izuku say that in English? Or maybe Spanish? *Japanese*? God, at this point, he doesn’t know; maybe it was a combination. But then Todoroki’s eyes widen with belated understanding and his cheeks gather a slight dusting of pink on the ridges of his cheekbones.

“Oh, no, they aren’t mine,” he explains, sounding as flustered as Todoroki Shouto is capable of sounding—that is, to say, hardly at all. He clears his throat. “I’m talking about my sister’s kids. Fuyumi—you remember her, right? She has a daughter who’ll be two this year. And a nephew on the way, I think. They, uh.” He swallows, eyes flickering away briefly. “They haven’t announced it yet. So.”

The relief that comes with this discovery has Izuku practically wilting where he stands. Then the embarrassment comes, and Izuku feels his face blister with heat. “Oh.” He rubs the back of his neck and averts his gaze, staring at one of the pipes on the ceiling with indomitable focus. “Um. Right. Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

Silence hangs heavily, like a velvet curtain. They continue their walk, eyes downcast, fingers twitching, reaching for something they can’t see. He feels the thorns dig a little deeper, threatening to break skin.

They’re passing an alcove of multicolored piping when Todoroki speaks again, his voice low and thoughtful.

“Glad to hear about my mom,” Todoroki asks quietly, and Izuku can hear his frown, “or glad to hear that I don’t have kids?”

*Both. Definitely both.*

Izuku laughs a little too loudly for his liking. *Lie, dammit. Lie through your teeth.* “Your mom, obviously! And your sister’s family. It must be cool to be an uncle, right?” The collider tube hums beside them; his ears buzz, throbbing in time with his pounding heartbeat. Izuku hopes Todoroki can’t hear it, forcing a smile instead. “I bet you spoil them rotten, you sap.”

Todoroki is looking at him with a peculiar expression on his half-shadowed face. Eyes tight, crease between his brow, lips thin and bloodless in the ghostly incandescence of the tunnel.

*Lie.*

“Hey,” Izuku says, smiling faintly. He reaches out and lightly punches Todoroki’s too-warm shoulder. “I’m happy for you, man. Really.”

It’s not a lie. Not really. A half-truth, perhaps, but definitely not a lie because despite everything, Izuku is happy for him. It’s a hollow sort of happiness that feels rather misplaced for some reason, but it’s still *happiness*, and that has to count for something.

It’s not that the thought of Todoroki having kids makes Izuku uncomfortable. Not at all. In fact, Izuku would bet cash money that Todoroki would be a great father, under the right circumstances. In a perfect world, perhaps; a world with no villains or Quirks or international crises. In that world, Izuku can see the Saturday morning breakfasts with a newspaper on the table and a child balanced on Todoroki’s lap while they puzzle over the comics and the crossword (which is and always will be far superior to Sudoku).

He tries to picture Lucy doing the same thing, a book in hand with the spine broken over and baby with green-gold hair curled up close by on the sofa.
The image used to be a lot clearer, once upon a time. Now everything is… fuzzy. Indistinct.

Izuku swallows his heart and soldiers on.

Lielielie

Todoroki is still watching him closely, two-toned eyes narrowed in silent scrutiny. At first, Izuku is worried that he’ll press, peel apart Izuku’s life like a soft tangerine and pick out all the inedible seeds because he’s always been frighteningly good at that sort of thing—even back in high school when he had all the outward empathy of a decorative garden stone. Todoroki has, and always will be, perceptive to a fault—he just wishes that weren’t the case now.

Izuku’s skin crawls with apprehension. Don’t ask, don’t ask, please…

Sharply, Todoroki exhales through his nose and turns back around, beckoning Izuku forward without a word. Twenty-five kilometers to go. Too much ground to cover and not enough time in which to cover it. Izuku follows in grateful silence.

“Do you have pictures?” Izuku tries after a few hundred meters of empty, echoing tunnels. He bends down low to peer through a metal grate in the floor that’s big enough to fit a person or two in a pinch. When he doesn’t see any movement or disturbed bolts and screws, he calls out, “Clear.”

Todoroki points to the metal door on their left. “Check through there, I’ll take the right. Pictures of what?”

Try humor, his mind supplies. It’s not the worst idea he’s ever had.

“Well, metal doors, obviously.” Midoriya stands back with his hands on his hips to appraise the door in front of him. He gestures toward it, grin made of plastic and hands splayed out in his best Vanna White impression. “Steel, aluminum, carbide. Handles are a must for me, but I can be swayed with automatic sensors if they’re not too flashy.”

He prays the joke lands. He prays and prays and prays and thinks of PowerPoint jokes and colorful bar graphs and wow, we used to have fun together, didn’t we? This was a real thing? I didn’t dream it? He bites his lower lip until he worries his teeth will meet through flesh.

Todoroki straightens up from where he’s crouched over the collider, checking the trough of tubes and piping that runs beneath it all the way down. He braces his elbows on his knees and gives Izuku a funny look, rocking back on his heels.

His hair glows in the dark, like iridescent starlight. Izuku wants to pull on every strand and see if it feels as frigid as it looks.

Stupid. Lie.

Todoroki opens his mouth, likely to ask Izuku what the hell is wrong with him or what he’s been smoking, but Izuku cuts him off before he can get a word out; he’s not sure he’d have an answer for Todoroki anyway.

“Sorry, bad time for sarcasm,” Izuku blurts out. He laughs awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. “I, um, was talking about your niece. Pictures. Of, um. Her. Whatever her name is.”

“Mizuki,” Todoroki deadpans.

Izuku nods. “Mizuki. Right. Lovely name. Lovely, lovely.” Stop talking, Izuku, for the love of god
Todoroki’s expression clears suddenly, going soft around the edges despite the sharp shadows that traverse up and down his cheekbones and the straight bridge of his nose. His lips curve up, almost in a smile, and he nods slightly. “I have a few, yes. Fuyumi sends me pictures when she can.”

Izuku yanks open the door and runs his fingers over the threshold, feeling for tripped sensors or dented metal that would indicate breaking and entering. When he finds nothing, he closes it. “Clear,” he announces. Timidity surges. “Can I see them? I mean, if it’s not too much to—”

“Maybe later.” Todoroki stands back up and dusts his hands off on the pants of his suit. “We’ve still got a lot of ground to cover.”

It’s not an outright no. Izuku will take what he can get at this point. He tries to resist fist-pumping in victory and just barely manages to rein it in. Instead, he nods and smiles, and they move along without another word.

They continue to walk, strides long and even as meters turn to kilometers and minutes stretch out into hours. Time turns fluid around them, bending, shaping, molding itself to their stiff shoulders and twitching fingers. He counts his heartbeats in groups of five.

“I bet she’s cute,” Izuku says suddenly and without warning several minutes later. He cocks his head to one side, trying to picture a baby girl with white hair and grey eyes. Adorable. No doubt about it.

“She is,” Todoroki says with no hesitation, his voice flat and factual. He pauses, then adds, “Although I may be a bit biased, I suppose.”

“A bit?”

Todoroki visibly hesitates. “All right, a lot.”

Izuku chuckles and trails his fingers along the rough concrete wall to his left as they walk, gloved fingers fading in and out of sight with each passing halogen that glows blue, painting them both in insipid shades of mercury. “Never thought I’d live to see you go soft. So much for that whole ‘cold-as-ice’ public image thing you’ve been working on. Your PR person is going to be crushed.”

Todoroki’s face pinches. “Oh, shut up,” he mutters. “I’m not going soft.”

Izuku clucks his tongue. “Mm, sounds to me like you are. You’re all melty now.” Like soft serve in the height of summer. He shrugs. “You wear it well, if it’s any consolation. Domestic life suits you.”

Todoroki hums noncommittally. “Oh, yeah? And what about you?”

Izuku peers down a narrow hallway—no, not a hallway; an alcove—to his left, frowning. He sees a breaker box at the end and a row of thin, utilitarian lockers on the far wall. “What about me?” He crosses toward the lockers, opening them up one by one. He finds a few spare lab coats crumpled in a heap, a tablet with 2% battery, and a mug of coffee that looks like it’s been growing mold since —

“How’s married life?”

Izuku’s hand freezes somewhere in between the dented door of the last locker and his heart.
Lie, his brain hisses. *Lie, lie, lie.*

Lie about all the nights he hasn’t spent at home, trading warm smiles and family dinner night for car chases up 42nd street and bands of rogue villains with Uzis. Lie about the overnight trips to Dallas and Los Angeles and Cancun that always seem to go longer than he anticipates, and the bruises that always litter his body when he returns home, too tired to even make it past the living room couch. Lie about the fact that he and Lucy haven’t tried for a baby in three months because she’s too stressed about her dissertation and Izuku’s never fucking *home.*

Lying.

Sometimes it feels like it’s only thing Izuku’s good at.

He swallows, then reaches for the locker once again with an unsteady hand. He tries his hardest not to rip it off its hinges.

“Things are great,” Izuku lies smoothly, keeping his face tilted in the safety of the shadows. He forces his voice light, ignoring the ribbons knotting and unknotting in his stomach. “Really great. Couldn’t be better.”

Izuku doesn’t find anything in the final locker. A tin of salted peanuts, mostly empty. A pack of cinnamon gum that’s hardly been touched. (Unsurprising. Cinnamon is the worst.) There are no hidden panels in the back of the locker, nor any weapons of mass destruction. As a whole, this hallway is one giant dead end. He doesn’t know why he came back here at all.

Behind him, Todoroki is deathly silent. The only reason Izuku knows he’s still standing nearby at all is because there is a slight warmth touching the back of his exposed neck, right above the strap of his unworn facemask. Soft and gentle, like the golden fingers of sunset against skin. *Comforting.*

Izuku closes the locker quietly. He’s fine. He can *do* this. He’s done this before, after all. With a soft breath, he turns, making sure to keep his chin level with the floor because the Symbol of Peace should never be anything less than the picture of poise and confidence, right? He looks up—

*Ice-blue. Slate-grey.* Chillingly endless. Todoroki Shouto watches him from where he’s leaned against the concrete wall, sinuous arms crossed over his chest and a look on his face like he wants nothing more than to peel back the colorless façade of Izuku’s words and rifle through the contents of his heart like a grave digger in a dusty tomb. Crack him open, upend him, and pour out his contents all over the floor in a deluge of blue-black regret. Ruin him, and rebuild.

*I used to be able to read your mind.*

*I used to know you.*

*Didn’t I?*

“You’re overthinking.”

Todoroki’s voice is soft, but loud enough to break Izuku from his reveries. He blinks, shaking his head slightly. “Oh, sorry. Was I muttering again?”

“No. You had this…” He mimes pinching his brow and frowning. “I don’t know. You just always look like that when you’re overthinking things.”

Izuku reaches up to feel the deep crease between his own brows. He smooths it out with his thumb as best he can. “Sorry. I was just… wondering, I guess.”
Todoroki doesn’t ask, and Izuku doesn’t offer. The words are right there on the tip of his tongue, tilting back and forth precariously on the edge of his teeth. It’s stupid, he thinks. Stupid to even wonder about. Even stupider to acknowledge aloud.

But Todoroki stands there, watching him with those piercing eyes of his and that expression that reminds Izuku of early morning crossword puzzles, and all at once he feels his willpower crumble.

“Do you ever wish you could go back?” Izuku asks. His voice is cottony and indistinct to his own ears. “Start over, do things differently, see the butterfly effect in real-time—all that stuff.” He swallows, spearing Todoroki with a look that feels halfway desperate. “You know what I mean?”

Todoroki doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t move. His left eyebrow twitches infinitesimally, barely even a muscle spasm, barely even there. Should have lied, Izuku.

The silence stretches out, drawn taut like a bowstring; Izuku almost wishes it would snap, just to see what would happen.

Todoroki’s gaze doesn’t leave Izuku’s face. He doesn’t even blink.

“No,” is what he says finally, voice quiet. “No, I wouldn’t.”

Somehow, Izuku isn’t surprised. He should be. He knows he should be. But he just… isn’t. This is Todoroki Shouto, after all—he’s the man stuffed with rational decisions and logical life choices. There’s never been very much room for anything else.

“Right,” Izuku murmurs, dropping his gaze down to his shoes. There’s a tug in his chest. His skin itches and stings. “I— sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s fine.”

A mirthless chuckle bubbles up. “You say that a lot. Have you noticed?”

Todoroki is looking at him curiously, mouth pulled into a thoughtful line. “I say it because I mean it.”

“Every time?”

He hesitates. Bites his lip. “Most of the time,” he amends.

Izuku rakes a hand through his hair, ignoring the tangles, embracing the pain. He shakes his head and sucks in a breath he knows won’t help the sting in his lungs. “Well, I would definitely go back and try to save this. Us. Whatever we are… were. Not that I can, I mean, but, uh— you get the idea. I’d do it. In a heartbeat.”

Todoroki says nothing, but his brow pinches a bit. Heartbeats keep the time. Then, he sighs softly, wisps of pale frost curling past his lips—he must be frustrated. Or worried. Izuku used to be able to tell which.

“Midoriya—“

“Do you really not miss me at all?” he asks, not bothering to hide the pain in his voice. He clutches at the fabric above his heart and breathes deeply, evenly. “We used to be so close, and now we’re… like this.” He clenches his fists. “I hate it. I hate it. How can you not hate this?”

“I’m a realist,” Todoroki murmurs, as if this is an excuse. “Dwelling on the past never does
“Fuck the past.” There’s fire in Izuku’s blood, ice in his lungs. “Fuck the past, and fuck New York. It’s just you and me right now.”

His expression is stunned, and faintly pained. He blinks rapidly. “What—?”

“Tell me you don’t have regrets about what happened,” he demands. Izuku steps closer; close enough to feel the blistering warmth emanating from Shouto’s left side. “Or— or how it happened, at least. What we became, after everything. If you can look me in the eye right now and tell me that and mean it, then I’ll drop the subject and never bother you again, but I need you to tell me, Shouto. Tell me.”

The words echo down the tunnel. Silence, thick and twisted like thorny brambles, falls over them in a deluge. Shouto’s eyes are wide; glow-in-the-dark blue and steel grey surrounded by silver-white sclera, and his lashes long and wicked in the shadows. His expression is strained, skin stretched taut over his bones and ripe to split at the seams. He’s not breathing.

God. He looks so stupidly beautiful and pained and panicked, but Izuku can’t bring himself to step away, to relinquish the grasp he has on the situation. He wants to know. Needs to know.

The hallway feels hot. Sweat trickles down the valley of his spine, slipping southward into his waistband, and his heart is thunderous in his ears. Seconds tick past.

“I—” Shouto says, lips forming words he doesn’t voice. White teeth sink into the soft flesh of his lower lip, tugging mercilessly. “I don’t…” He shakes his head and squeezes his eyes shut. “Izuku —”

“Please.” His voice breaks on the word. His fingers curl, nails biting into his palms. “Please, just… tell me the truth.”

There’s dejection etched into the lines around Shouto’s eyes, the slump of his shoulders, the bloodlessness of his lips. His fists tremble where he holds them at his sides, and his breathing is shallow and uneven. He’s a time bomb, tickticktick ticking away until he bursts, and Izuku is well within the blast radius.

Tell me the truth.

I used to know you.

I know I did.

Shouto takes a deep breath, opens his mouth—

They both freeze.

Footsteps. Faint, but there nonetheless. Uneven and numerous, perhaps belonging to two or three people; they’re shuffling along and speaking in low, unfamiliar voices. It’s coming from the tunnel, the sound echoing and rolling over one another and getting pretty fucking close.

“Hide,” Todoroki hisses, and suddenly they’re moving.

Izuku stumbles back into the dead-end hallway they just searched, automatically making a beeline for the lockers where they stand against the leftmost wall. They’re made of heavy steel and stick outwards a good ten inches; it’s not ideal, but if both of them squeeze tightly, the shadows in the
corner should do the trick of keeping them hidden long enough for them to figure out who they’re dealing with—assuming there are shadows to work with, that is. Which there aren’t.

“The light,” Izuku whispers sharply. There’s a lone blue-white light flickering in the center of the ceiling. It’s faint, but not faint enough, and the footsteps are too close—if they don’t take out that light, they’ll be spotted for sure.

“Midoriya!” Todoroki protests sharply from where he’s hiding pressed up against the wall, but it’s too late. Izuku darts across the hallway to stand on his tiptoes, fingers straining to reach the light. He just barely manages to get the bulb in between his thumb and forefinger, feeling the heat sear all the way through his glove in a flash of white-hot pain. Gritting his teeth, he squeezes as hard as he can.

The bulb cracks like an egg and winks out, plunging the alcove into complete darkness. There’s glass in his hand. There’s glass tinkling as it hits the floor in tiny shards. He’s bleeding, he thinks. He can’t see any of it to know for sure.

And then there’s an icy hand clamping over his mouth and a warm arm around his waist, hauling Izuku deeper into the safety of the shadows.

Shouto’s voice at his ear, nearly inaudible. “Don’t breathe,” he says, hot air ghosting over the curve of his cheek.

Gulping, Izuku does as he’s told, not daring to breathe or even think as the footsteps grow ever closer. Thinking right now is… bad. Very bad. Thinking would involve acknowledging the fact that his back is currently pressed up against something firm and warm and cold and it’s very fucking confusing and weird, oh my god, pull it together. Inside his glove, Izuku's fingers are stinging and sticky with blood. He focuses on that instead.

The footsteps are close. Shouto is closer, the rise and fall of his chest making it hard for Izuku to think.

Then, voices.

“…ou hear that, James?”

The footsteps stop suddenly. Shouto stiffens behind Izuku, the temperature of his arm rising steadily where it’s wrapped around Izuku's midsection.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” comes a mutter. “Hear what?” Izuku can’t see either of them yet, so they must be just around the corner out of sight. Too close. “If you keep stallin’ every time you see a goddamn light flicker or hear your own voice, we’ll never make it to ATLAS. Jesus fucking Christ, Enzo. Let’s go.”

“No, I’m serious this time!” protests Enzo. Higher-pitched, nasally—Jersey accent, maybe? Hard to tell. “I swear I heard somethin’.”

“It’s the sound of me plotting your murder. Let’s. Go.”

“It sounded like something broke.”

“I’m gonna break something of yours if you don’t cut this shit out right now.”

“But what if it’s those heroes?”
James groans in frustration. A pause, almost like he’s counting to ten in his head. Finally, he says, “Enzo. Are we being attacked right now?”

There’s a brief silence. Then, “Um. No?”

“Mm, right. Now, don’t you think that if those heroes were somewhere nearby, they’d be punching us? Trying to do their stupid fucking jobs?”

“I…” A nervous swallow, loud against the quiet of the endless tunnel. “I-I guess?”

“Right,” says James, voice all sugary-sweet and saccharine. His voice hardens suddenly. “Obviously, we’re not being attacked. Those idiots are somewhere up ahead where they’re supposed to be, ergo—“

An amused snort. “You don’t know what that word means.”

“What the—“ James sputters. “Shut up, yes I do!”

“Oh, really? What’s it mean, then?” Enzo asks, sounding suddenly smug.

There’s a pause, suffocating in its silence. Izuku can feel himself getting lightheaded the longer he holds his breath. Shouto’s hand is frigid against his face; Izuku can’t feel his lips anymore.

A low growl, some unintelligible muttering. “Just… whatever,” James snaps. “We’re wasting time as per fuckin’ usual. Let’s go before the boss kills us. He won’t start until we get there.”

“But—“

“Move, moron!”

Izuku’s knees are starting to shake. He leans heavily against Shouto’s chest, fighting the urge to twitch and spasm as his lungs scream for air. Just a little while longer, he tells himself as he focuses on the coldness of Shouto’s hand against his mouth; he isolates the sensation until it burns. If I breathe, they might hear me, we don’t know how sensitive their Quirks are, can’t give our position away…

Footsteps, and a shadow passes over the far end of the hallway. There’s a heavy sigh as Enzo follows—albeit reluctantly—and then the footsteps gradually begin to fade away, accompanied by half-muttered arguments and barbed insults.

Then silence fills the pitch-black void around them, heavy and aching. The villains are gone.

Todoroki releases Izuku with no warning. He stumbles forward and gasps instinctively, sucking in lungful after lungful of precious, musty air because dear god, that was very poorly planned. His chest heaves and he braces his hands against his knees as he tries to rid himself of the purple-and-green stars that seem to have gathered at the edges of his vision.

“Jesus… Christ… dude,” he wheezes, massaging the hollow at the base of his throat. He winces; it feels like he’s swallowed a hot coal. “Little warning… would be good… next time.”

Todoroki hums under his breath and crosses to the entrance of the hallway, peeking around the corner in the direction the villains went. “Sorry,” he says, not sounding very sorry at all. “You’re a loud breather.”

Izuku musters enough energy to shoot him an incredulous look. “I am not!”
“You are,” he counters smoothly, not bothering to turn around. “We almost failed Aizawa’s midterm because of it. Second year, remember?”

“That was—“ But Izuku stops short as the memories come flooding back to him in searing scarlets and shades of grey. He bites his lip. “Okay, fine, but the important thing is that we didn’t fail. You almost killed me just now.”

“Would you have rather been caught?” Todoroki asks coolly, glancing over his shoulder with a raised eyebrow. He’s as expressionless as he’s ever been, and Izuku feels laid bare beneath his scrutiny.

Tell me the truth.

Izuku huffs and crosses his arms, averting his eyes. “At least give me a little warning next time.”

He shrugs. “Don’t go charging off without telling me your plan next time.” Todoroki’s gaze darts low for a second, honing in on the red stain that’s long since flowered over Izuku’s white glove. He frowns, then holds out a hand. “Let me see.”

For a moment, Izuku only stares. “Huh?”

“You’re bleeding,” he explains, still holding out a hand expectantly. “Come here. I can patch you up before we follow them.”

“Todoroki, they’ll get away. We don't have time for this.”

Shouto gives him a flat look. “They specifically said they were heading for ATLAS, and this tunnel is basically a giant circle. Call me crazy, but I think we’ll be able to find them without any problems.” He gestures impatiently. “Are you going to let me see it or not? I don’t want it to get infected.”

Izuku flexes his hand, wincing when the glass digs a little deeper than before. His mother always taught him to pick his battles, after all. In the end, Izuku sighs heavily and rolls his eyes toward the dark ceiling, peeling off his glove. “How are you still the mom friend after all these years? Figure you would’ve changed by now, gotten a little more reckless. But no. You’re, like, stuck in time or something.”

“Haven’t you heard? I’m immortal,” he deadpans, taking Izuku’s hand carefully and turning it palm-up. He reaches for some sterile tweezers in his belt and begins picking out the larger chunks of glass from the wounds scattered across his thumb and forefinger like bright red constellations. A curtain of hair has fallen in front of his face, but he doesn’t seem to notice it—or perhaps he doesn’t care because Todoroki Shouto has never cared about these sorts of things. The strands have mixed together over the course of the evening—spider silk and scarlet blurring together, long enough to brush the bridge of his regal nose and the clean edge of his scar where it meets the steep arch of his cheekbone. Even when he’s sleep-deprived and jet-lagged, he looks handsome. Ethereal. Glowing in the dark.

Like royalty, Izuku thinks.

“Your hair’s longer than you usually wear it,” Izuku remarks quietly once all the glass has been plucked from his hand.

Todoroki unwinds a tiny roll of gauze he’s seemingly produced out of thin air, slicing through it with a razor-sharp sheet of ice in order to trim it down to size. “It is,” he says simply. “I’ve been
meaning to get it cut for a few weeks now. Keep forgetting.”

“Don’t.”

Todoroki’s long, expert fingers pause in their ministrations, ivory skin stark against sterile white weave. Todoroki looks up, a crease between his brows. Izuku feels his cheeks heat with mortification. He opens his mouth to take it all back, apologize until his teeth ache.

But then Todoroki shrugs and returns to his task. “Okay,” he says. “I won’t.”

Izuku feels himself smile, despite himself. It’s dumb, but they’re both sort of dumb right now anyway, so he figures it’s okay—just as long as they’re the only ones who know about it. The echoes of their argument (can it even be called an argument?) still ring in Izuku’s head like church bells, earth-shaking and larger than life. He doesn’t know if he wants to ring them again; the reverberations are more than loud enough.

Perhaps it’s something they’ll never talk about. Maybe they’ll move on with their lives after this mission and go back to pretending they never knew the inside of each other’s mouths, nor the familiar rasp of fingertips against skin.

Or maybe this is a truce. A silent ceasefire.

A second chance.

Todoroki’s touch is light and warm as he winds the gauze around the crease between Izuku’s thumb and index finger, but he stops short just as he’s about to cover Izuku’s knuckles. He huffs exasperatedly. “Oh, for the love of—why is it always this hand?”

His tone is so gruff. Izuku can’t help it—he snorts. “Dunno. Must be the curse, coming back to haunt me.”

“Haunt me, you mean,” Todoroki mutters under his breath. Shaking his head, he continues to wrap Izuku’s hand; not too tight, not too loose. When he ties the bandage off, Izuku flexes his fingers and makes a tentative fist. Sure enough, the gauze doesn’t restrict his movement at all.

“You remember how I like my hands wrapped,” he marvels quietly.

Something shifts between them—something small enough to matter but not large enough to ask about. Izuku’s breath hitches in his chest, lodges behind his heart, and squeezes.

And somewhere in the dark, Todoroki Shouto’s lips curve sweetly.

“It’s a hard thing to forget.”

Chapter End Notes

[Tumblr] [Twitter] [Roots Fan-Picked Playlist]
We have art courtesy of yourquirk on Tumblr! It's a sketch of the scene last chapter where Izuku demands some answers from dear Shouto, and I love it. All kudos to yourquirk, ladies and gentlemen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September 1, 2017

“Midoriya, where are we going?”

The slope is steep and slippery, covered with sharp pieces of gravel that prod the bottom of Shouto’s sneakers as he hauls himself up the hillside. The razor-thin crescent moon paints his pathway in shades of silver, illuminating the coarse rocks just well enough to keep him from losing his footing and slipping back down to where he started—which, admittedly, is frighteningly far down. Swallowing, he hugs the rolled up fleece blanket a little closer to his chest and soldiers on.

Up ahead, Midoriya clambers up the slope and dusts his hands off on the front of his trousers. “Come on, just a little further.”

“You said that five minutes ago,” Shouto mumbles. “And that doesn’t answer my question. I asked specifically where we’re going.”

“It’s a surprise,” he replies. His smile is radiant, even in the dark.

“I hate surprises.”

“No, you don’t. You’re just a grumpy old man who doesn’t know how to have fun.” He holds out a hand for Shouto to take. “Come on, suffer with me a little longer. We’re almost there.”

The scars on his knuckles look silver in the moonlight, almost otherworldly. With a disgruntled huff, Shouto reaches and grabs hold of Midoriya’s outstretched hand, stalwartly ignoring the way his heart stutters slightly in his chest when Midoriya’s warm, strong fingers close around his wrist. He manages to pull Shouto the rest of the way up the steep slope without so much as a grunt of effort or even a grimace.

Maddening.

“Thanks,” Shouto mutters, averting his eyes. He glances around the clearing they’re come to, noting the steep and sudden drop little more than three meters away that almost—almost—gives Shouto a minor heart attack because oh my god, how far did we actually climb? They’re on top of a sheer cliff side of mottled grey flagstone that’s covered in all manner of half-sprouted trees, thick emerald moss, and small piles of shale stones that all look like they were mined up and tossed aside.
a very long time ago. The cliff overlooks—

“A rock quarry,” Midoriya explains, catching Shouto’s confused gaze as he stares out at the glassy surface of the lake that sits a hundred meters below them, miles wide and big enough to swallow the sun. Midoriya smiles sheepishly. “At least, it used to be a quarry. Flooded about fifteen years ago. Now it’s just a really deep lake.”

Shouto nods numbly, trying to find the words to describe just how devastatingly beautiful the quarry is from this vantage point—and how dangerous. One wrong step and they’d tumble to their deaths in an instant. There’s more than enough room for both of them to fit up here comfortably, but still. Best not to tempt fate. Shouto shifts away from the edge just a little further.

“It’s gorgeous,” Shouto says honestly. “I didn’t even know this was here.”

“Most people don’t. It’s dangerous, so it’s condemned.” Midoriya pauses suddenly, frowning. He taps his chin. “We, uh… also might technically be breaking the law a little bit by being here. B-but not very much!” he rushes to add. “Like, hardly even a misdemeanor. Really.”

Shouto gives him a flat look. “Midoriya,” he says slowly. “Are we trespassing right now?”

He laughs. “Oh, we are so trespassing.”

“Fantastic.”

“Hey,” he protests, smiling crookedly, “I bet all the greatest heroes have trespassed at least once in their lives.” Then he punches Shouto’s shoulder lightly and gestures to the flattest part of the clearing. “C’mon, let’s do this. We shouldn’t stay out too late this time.”

With a soft huff of laughter, Shouto unfurls the blanket over the center of the clearing, smoothing out the wrinkles and straightening the corners. A soon as the blanket’s ready, Midoriya tosses Shouto a frozen water bottle, already half-melted from when Shouto froze them solid back at the dorms; condensation weeps between his fingers, startlingly refreshing against his heated skin.

Midoriya sprawls out on the blanket with his fingers laced behind his head, but Shouto opts for a more traditional stargazing position—hands at his sides, stiff as a board, eyes aimed upward at the endless inky nothingness that they’ve both become so attached to over the last several months. The ground isn’t half as comfortable as Midoriya makes it look, but it’s not the worst they’ve been on; that parking garage downtown had been brutal.

Several minutes pass them by, slow and stringy like half-dried glue. The final vestiges of summer seep through their clothes from the still-sun-warmed earth, comforting them just enough before the cool autumnal breeze comes to steal it all away. Cicadas sing in the trees by the thousands. Arguments in the air all around them, conflicts in the cosmos as the seasons shift and clash against one another. A beautiful sort of dance Shouto’s never really cared about until now.

“I used to come here all the time as a kid,” Midoriya murmurs several minutes later. “Drove my mom up a wall. She threatened to leash me to the legs of our kitchen table if I didn’t quit sneaking out.”

The mental image is more than a little amusing. “How old were you?”

“Hmm?” Midoriya raises his eyebrows, glancing sidelong. “Oh. Um. Well, I never really stopped coming, really. But the leash thing happened when I was…” He screws up his face as he thinks. “Six, maybe? Seven?”
“So young,” he murmurs. “I don’t blame your mom for being scared.”

Midoriya snorts. “Tell me about it. I didn’t let that stop me though. I thought I could take on the universe and win.”

“You still think that, Midoriya.”

“Well, yeah, but now it’s true.”

Shouto spares a smile for the stars. He can almost picture it—small, green-haired Midoriya with freckles stippling the bridge of his nose and cheeks and a smile much too large for his youthful face stretched widely over crooked teeth. Scraped knees, shoes full of pebbles, excuses flying from his mouth and apologies hanging on their coattails. Enough determination to stop traffic. Enough joy to stop the world.

Shouto tries to imagine a bundle of knock-kneed green energy standing next to a younger version of himself—stuck between two colors, torn in half and burned for good measure. Damaged.

We never would’ve been friends.

The thought makes him sad.

“Todoroki?”

Shouto startles out of his reveries, turning his head to look over at Midoriya, who is watching him curiously. Only then does it register that their faces are mere inches apart, breaths mingling together in the scant space between their mouths. Too close, too close, not close enough. Shouto’s heart pounds in his chest. He knows he should turn away because they’re supposed to be stargazing on a school night and acting like best friends, not having fucking feelings—

Shouto finds himself mapping the constellations of Midoriya’s freckles one by one, painting those cinnamon spots into the backs of his eyelids so he can save them for a rainy day. The stars will always be there, situated in the night sky like cold specks of diamond dust, but this?

This is… special. Shouto has to make it count.

“Mm?” is all he manages in response, his gaze trapped on one freckle in particular that’s close to the corner of Midoriya’s mouth. It’s the one that disappears into his dimple when he smiles.

Midoriya isn’t smiling now. His eyes are wide and blanched pale jade under the silver scrutiny of the moonlight, flushed cheeks turned shell-pink and soft. He wets his lips with the tip of his tongue before speaking. “What are you thinking about?”

An excellent question. If only Shouto had a decent answer that wouldn’t destroy their friendship.

I think I’m in love with you? (No, too direct. Might scare him off—assuming Midoriya is even capable of getting scared off at this point. Which he probably isn’t. Still, it’s too bold, and Shouto isn’t one for taking stupid risks.)

We’re graduating in ten months and I’m terrified I’ll never see you again? (Too fatalistic. Too depressing. Too… true.)

You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me? (Pretty sure Midoriya already knows that one. Shouto hasn’t exactly tried to hide it. Telling him out loud would just be redundant at this point.)
Shouto turns back to the stars with a soft sigh, feeling the moment slip through his fingers like loose sand. Maybe it isn’t the right time to crack his heart open and pour out its contents. Maybe… someday. He’s not sure when or where, or even what kind of people they’ll be when it happens—but it will happen, and that’s the important thing.

Just… not now. Definitely not now.

“I was thinking about us. Our friendship,” Shouto finally says, connecting constellations like his life depends on it. He clenches his fists at his side to keep himself from doing something stupid like crawling over and sealing his lips against Midoriya’s, or spilling his guts in a bullshit impassioned speech of I think this might be love but I’m not sure since I’ve never felt this way for anyone else before.

Midoriya, to his credit, seems only a little bit disappointed in his answer. He settles back, turning his gaze back to the blue-black blanket of the sky. “Oh,” he murmurs. “What about us?”

Shouto digs his fingernails into the palms of his hands. “I’m just… thankful to be here.” He swallows his heartbeat and counts backwards from a million. “With you.”

Midoriya scoffs lightly. “Like I’d bring anyone else. This place is sacred.”

“I’m glad you think I’m worthy enough to be here, then.”

“You’re my best friend,” Midoriya says, shrugging like it’s the most obvious explanation in the world. “There’s no one else I’d rather be with.”

Shouto feels a pleasant warmth course through his veins like slow-moving lava. He smiles faintly. It’s selfish, he thinks, to get such a thrill out of having Midoriya all to himself like this, but he’ll be damned if he gives it up for anything.

“We’ll always be friends,” Shouto says softly after a moment. He turns to look at Midoriya. “Won’t we?”

Midoriya tilts his head to the side and gives him a flat look. “I broke my hand for you, dude. That’s, like, the epitome of ‘no taksies-backsies.’ You’re stuck with me forever whether you like it or not.”

Shouto huffs. “You know I still feel bad about that.”

“I know. It’s hilarious.”

“It’s really not.”

“Sure it is,” he retorts, nudging Shouto in the ribs with his elbow. Shouto bats his arm away with a grumble, but that only serves to make Midoriya smile even wider. “Come on, just think of my hand as… I don’t know. Insurance. A lifetime warranty sort of thing.”

Shouto raises an unimpressed eyebrow. “Insurance,” he repeats flatly.

“Yeah, totally.” Midoriya nods eagerly, holding up his hand over them both. He splays out his fingers against the stars, gnarled knuckles and knobby fingers coming to rest at awkward angles that make Shouto grimace, despite himself. “It’s basically our friendship badge—I can’t get rid of this, so I can’t get rid of you.” He glances over. “Make sense?”

Shouto bites his lip. “I suppose.”
Midoriya drops his hand and laces his fingers behind his head. He’s the picture of ease and relaxation, surrounded on all sides by open air and perched on the precipice of something infinitely high.

It’s no wonder Midoriya loves this place—it’s likely the closest he’ll ever come to flying.

“We’ll always be friends, Todoroki,” he says softly sometime later, when the stars have shifted and the moon sits higher overhead. His expression is wistful and so, so beautiful. “Always. Even when we’re not together, we’ll find each other, no matter what happens. I promise.”

Shouto believes him.

Present day

Todoroki Shouto considers himself to be adept at many things in his life. Purchasing quality produce for absurdly low prices is one of those things, as is his ability to differentiate between Greek yogurt brands by taste alone. He’s excellent at long-range combat, reading a battlefield at a glance, cooking healthy meals that suit his lifestyle, and folding perfect hospital corners every time he makes his bed in the morning.

He also happens to be very good at compartmentalizing—which, as a hero, is a very important skill to have.

It’s always been easy for Shouto to sort his thoughts and feelings into the cardboard boxes and neatly-labeled cubby holes that line every dip and fold of his mind. He keeps his professional thoughts at the forefront of everything, followed closely thereafter by his family, his friends, and finally his acquaintances and ex-boyfriends from years past. It’s an organized system—everything is color-coded and lined up neatly, just the way he likes it, and it all suits him perfectly fine, thank you very much. He’d be remiss to change a single thing about it.

At least, that’s what he thought before Midoriya Izuku came out of goddamn nowhere and smashed all of Shouto’s neat little boxes and file cabinets to smithereens with nothing more than a smile and his simply-worded questions.

**Do you ever wish you could go back?**

Yes. No. **Never.** Only on Fridays and holiday weekends. **(All the fucking time.)**

**Tell me the truth.**

He can’t. He **can’t.** He’d never even dare.
Instead, Shouto locks his filing cabinets and tapes his boxes up tightly before falling in step behind Midoriya’s left shoulder—it’s Shouto’s spot, it’s always been his spot, ever since high school—as they walk the remaining length of the collider tunnel under the cover of darkness. Their footsteps are silent and perfectly in sync, heartbeats evenly paced with the steady thrum of impending danger. The air vibrates around them.

They have no plan of attack. No idea if any backup will come once they reach ATLAS. They don’t know how many villains they’re up against, nor how long it will take Kirishima and Jirou to reach the detector from their side of the LHC loop—if they reach the detector, that is.

They’re flying blind. It’s not exactly the best scenario Shouto’s ever worked with, but he supposes he’s been in worse spots.

“Nervous?” Midoriya asks at one point, eyes fixed straight ahead with grim focus. His titanium mask is fixed over the lower half of his face, glinting sharply every time they pass one of those flicker-flare lights on the walls.

Shouto cracks a knuckle without missing a beat and rolls his shoulders to loosen his muscles.

“Never. You?”

“Always.”

They approach ATLAS on eggshells, tiptoeing carefully around the shadows and darting from alcove to alcove, server room to server room, being careful to avoid the blue lights that pepper the tunnel every few meters. They can hear muted voices up ahead—distant and indecipherable, but there nonetheless.

Suddenly, Midoriya stops short in the middle of a step a few hundred meters from their destination.

“Do you feel that?” he breathes, voice tight. “That rumbling?”

Shouto closes his eyes and focuses, channeling his attention to the soles of his feet. He feels something. A pulse, surging faintly like an echo of his own heartbeat. “ATLAS?” he guesses, opening his eyes.

“Must be,” Midoriya says grimly. He’s frowning deeply, a crevasse of solid shadow marring the smooth skin of his brow. “The scientists said that it wouldn’t be on at this time of night.”

“It’s the main collision point for the particles. If they’re trying to manufacture a black hole…” Shouto trails off, trying to ignore the cold feeling of dread that’s settled into his bones.

Midoriya seems to catch his meaning, eyes crinkling as he grimaces. “We need to hurry.”

Shouto nods. “Right behind you.”

Stealth abandoned, they quicken their pace until they’re running down the tunnel with apprehension twisted tightly around their hearts. Shouto can see a light in the distance—yellow, not blue, and very, very bright—that gets bigger the closer they get. Soon, the rumbling beneath their feet has turned to full-on tremors accompanied by a loud cacophony of machinery that drowns out their echoing footsteps. Shouto thinks he hears Midoriya swear at one point; he can’t be sure.

By the time they arrive, everything has already—and quite predictably—gone to shit.

“That’s ATLAS?” Midoriya asks incredulously, speaking loudly to be heard over the deafening roar of the collider epicenter. “It’s huge.”
Huge is an understatement. Gargantuan is probably a better word for it, Shouto thinks, or colossal.

No.

Monstrous.

ATLAS, as it turns out, is just as large as its name suggests and twice as frightening. The underground room they’re in reaches up hundreds of feet, filled to the brim with flimsy-looking metal catwalks suspended around the machine like a jungle gym, or perhaps a delicate cage meant for a vicious beast. The detector itself takes up the majority of space in the cavernous room like a living, breathing eye of glowing lights and whirring parts set into a sunburst-like disc of scientific technology Shouto could never even begin to understand.

It’s terrifying. It’s thunderous. It’s also on.

Shouto and Midoriya are standing on a bright yellow catwalk suspended halfway between the floor and the ceiling of the room that holds ATLAS in its clutches. The collider tube they’ve been following for the last eight kilometers is suspended in the air next to them, stretched out to intersect the dead center of the titan-sized ATLAS disc like a very sharp needle. It’s a twenty meter drop to the floor below them, easy. Fifty to the ceiling. Lots of places to hide and not a lot of extra space to allow for an easy fight.

“It certainly looked smaller in our physics textbook,” Shouto shouts back, glancing over the edge of the catwalk. The room vibrates around them as the machine hums and groans, lights flickering rapidly. It makes Shouto’s hair stand on end. “Is there any way to turn it off?”

Midoriya’s eyes narrow and he starts scanning the room, searching. “We could start pulling wires I suppose, but I don’t think they want us to damage the machine. Maybe there’s an emergency off-switch somewhere. If we flank the machine and start looking—”

“We can’t waste time looking for a switch that might not exist, Midoriya,” Shouto interrupts. “We don’t know how long this thing’s been active.”

Midoriya huffs. “Do you have any better ideas?”

“Find the villains,” he answers sharply, scanning the room for any signs of activity or movement. “If we find them, we might find the control panel that operates this thing. We’d do better to narrow our search—“

“And give away our position?” Midoriya shakes his head. “No. We need to stay hidden as long as we can. The second they know we’re trying to stop them, it might be game over.”

“They know we’re in the facility already.”

“But they don’t know we’re here,” Midoriya argues. “If we have the element of surprise, we need to keep that as long as we possibly can.”

Shouto glares at him, feeling a surge of irritation crop up in his chest. Burning, like an ember. “We don’t have time for cloak and dagger tactics right now. This thing might produce a black hole any minute, and we have to stop it before it happens.”

“What, you think I don’t know that?” he snaps, scowling slightly behind his mask.
“Obviously not, since you want to waste time sneaking around—“

“It’s not a waste of time! We have the element of surprise and we need to use it while we still have it. That’s a fact.” He points a gloved finger at the ceiling and the humming machine in front of them emphatically. “We can’t risk a fight in a space like this. The machine’s too delicate and we’re underground, if you haven’t noticed. The second things go to hell, this facility will be out a couple billion dollars and we’ll be dead and buried.”

“And I think Europe will be out Switzerland if we don’t hurry and find the villains before that black hole pops up,” Shouto retorts. He clenches his fist, calling upon his ice to cover his right arm in a thin layer of silvery hoarfrost. “We don’t have time for precision work right now, Deku. If you want to sneak around, fine. Be my guest. But I’m going to track down the villains.”

Midoriya blinks as he processes his words, then recoils in horror. “What? Are you insane? Splitting up is—“

“It’s our only option at this point,” Shouto says gruffly as he approaches the railing of the catwalk. “We’ll cover more ground that way, and you can search the facility like you want. I’ll detain the villains in the meantime. Distract them if need be.” He pauses, hands on the metal railing. He glances over his shoulder. “Unless you have a better plan in mind?”

“I do, actually,” Midoriya says, pushing his mask down around his neck. His mouth is set in a very thin, displeased line that doesn’t suit his face. “My plan involves sticking together because we shouldn’t be doing this alone. We’re supposed to be partners in this. Partners work together.”

Shouto sighs heavily, feeling his stomach twist sharply. “Now’s not the time to be sentimental. We have a job to do.”

“And I think we could do that job even better if we stayed in a team.” His jaw is clenched tightly. “That’s all I’m saying.”

“And I’m offering a compromise,” Shouto says, turning away from the railing to look him in the eye intently. He rakes a frozen hand through his hair in frustration. “I don’t know what else you want from me, Midoriya.”

“Some cooperation would be pretty nice,” he snaps.

“I am cooperating with you!”

“No, you’re charging off like an idiot and you’re going to get us both killed. Now quit being stupid and come with me—“

Shouto feels the explosion before he hears it.

It jars him to his bones, rattles his teeth inside his skull, and reverberates somewhere deep in his chest. Metal tears like tissue paper and screams around him as the catwalk rips apart beneath his feet, and heat blooms over every exposed inch of skin not covered by his fireproof costume. He barely manages to shield his face with his arms before shrapnel flies at him, burrowing deeply in the flesh of his forearms like red-hot stinging nettles.

He’s falling. He knows he is. The wind whistles past his ears, making his eyes water with airborne smoke, and the metallic scent of fried electronics cuts through his senses like a razor blade. He hears creaking in his joints and the rush of blood in his head.

Someone shouts his name. The word is all kinds of panicked, gutted and bled and completely
hollow.

Doesn’t matter. He can’t hear it anymore. He can’t hear anything, save the ringing in his head, all sharp and out of tune with the rest of the world. It’s all too much, too bright and burning and oh god, where’s Izuku? He’d been standing close by when the blast hit, he must’ve been—

Awareness comes back in spurts, lending splashes of color to this slow-motion disaster that’s rolling frame by frame in front of his eyes. Shouto is falling and bleeding and about to splatter against the concrete floor like an overripe tomato. In the back of his mind, he supposes he ought to do something about that first. Then he can worry about Izuku.

Knee-jerk. He can’t tell up from down or left from right, but he feels the indomitable pull of gravity and reaches, thrusting his right arm out in the direction he hopes is down and prays for a fucking miracle. With a shout, he calls on his ice.

A half-melted blue-white slope of jagged ice erupts from the ground in an instant, meeting Shouto halfway between the shredded remains of the catwalk and the floor. He hits the steepest side of the slope with an impact that he feels all the way up the column of his spine, ripping the air from his lungs and sending purple spots into his vision. In one last-ditch burst of instinct, he locks his arms around his head and tucks in, praying he makes it to the bottom of the slope without a concussion, or worse.

Finally, he rolls to a stop, lungs still screaming for air and body bruised in places it’s never been bruised before. He tastes gunpowder on the back of his throat, choking him with its chalky dryness and acidity; it reminds him of training sessions in school with Bakugou and the astringent scent of nitroglycerin that always followed him like a cloud. He wonders if the explosion was a Quirk or a weapon. Maybe both. He doesn’t know.

The concrete is cold against his cheek, and Shouto sinks into the sensation. In the distance, he hears… something. It’s muffled, strained through cotton weave a thousand times and compressed into something unrecognizable.

“…outo…hear…you…”

The backs of Shouto’s eyelids flare green for an instant, and the voice is suddenly gone, replaced with that steady, off-key ringing he hates so much.

Then something high pitched pops repeatedly around him, over and over again. It’s fast, whatever it is. The peppered noise reminds him of firecrackers or sidewalk snap fireworks during summertime. Popcorn in the microwave, sizzling scallions in a skillet. Pop pop pop—

He wonders if it’d be such a bad idea to sleep here.

Smack.

Shouto’s eyes snap wide and he jerks awake, thrusting his right fist out to strike whoever just slapped him, but his fist is stopped scant inches from his target by a strong, gloved hand. He almost freezes the person to the spot and burns them to ash for good measure, but the frost in his mouth melts away when his vision floods with the deepest green.

Midoriya is staring down at him, crouched on the balls of his feet at Shouto’s side. His eyes are wide and terrified, and his skin is frighteningly pale beneath the thin layer of grey-black soot that hides a few of his smaller, less noticeable freckles near his nose. There’s a cut above his eye, a singular slash of scarlet that seeps into his scarred brow, and a raw scrape spanning the length of
his right cheekbone. Shouto spots the beginning of a burn on the side of his neck, already puffy and blistered around the edges.

Midoriya’s mouth is moving rapidly, forming words Shouto can’t quite hear. In the back of his mind, he thinks he should be able to make out what’s being said to him, especially up close like this, but he really can’t think much past the sharp pain in his ribs—bruised, definitely; broken, perhaps.

There’s an icepick working its way through his skull in seventy different directions. He swallows the blood in his mouth. “I can’t hear you.”

Midoriya’s brow furrows. He mouths something else, but Shouto just shakes his head dumbly. The ringing in his ears is pulsing, ebbing between loud and soft like an alarm.

Midoriya grits his teeth in frustration and looks around frantically for an exit or a possible hiding place—they’re in the middle of the concrete floor at the base of the ATLAS detector, surrounded by piles of twisted, blackened metal and half-melted ice. He swipes at the thin stream of blood that keeps getting into his eye.

Then he stiffens. Eyes widen.

Shouto only has a millisecond to throw up an ice barrier around them before he feels the firecracker-vibrations of bullets pelleting the other side, burrowing deeply between the crystals. The sound of gunfire comes in bursts of clarity in between the ringing in his ears.

So that’s what that sound was earlier. The villains have guns.

Shouto hates guns.

With a pained grimace, he curls his fingers into a fist and adds a few more inches of ice between them and the villains; it won’t hold forever, but it’ll at least give them time to get their bearings.

“…eed to… move…” Midoriya is insisting, yanking on Shouto’s bloody forearm to drag him to his feet. His head is still bleeding steadily and that burn on his neck looks like second degree. “Idiot,” he suddenly hears, crystal-clear.

Shouto yanks his arm out of Midoriya’s grip and grits his teeth at the half-numb sting of hot blood that’s dripping down the insides of his wrists. He feels like somebody turned all his bones to metal and rang him like a tuning fork; his head fucking hurts, but at least his hearing is starting to come back.

“We’ll assign blame later,” he snaps in a voice that’s likely still a little too loud. He feels the vibrations of bullets as they burrow deep within the wall of ice at his back. “What’s the plan?”

“We had a plan,” Midoriya snaps, securing his facemask back in place. He wipes the blood off his forehead with the torn sleeve of his costume. “If you’d just listened to me—“

“The same could be said for you, Mr. Number One Hero,” he retorts, gritting his teeth. He feels a pull in his chest as he refortifies the ice wall, but he flinches when one bullet sinks a little too deeply for comfort, just barely skimming the inside surface of the ice near his face. “Argue later, plan now. What the hell happened?”

Midoriya looks frustrated. “I don’t know. One of the villains must have some kind of explosion Quirk. Long-range, like missiles.”
“How many are there?”

“Four at least, but there are probably more around here somewhere.” Midoriya points to a wall on the opposite side of the room that’s crumbled and partially caved-in. Shouto can see a slumped, shadowed figure leaning against the back wall with his mouth lolling open “I took one out already.”

Shouto blinks at the extensive damage. “Is he alive?”

Midoriya looks scandalized. “Of course he is! He’s just unconscious.”

“Unconscious and half-buried under rubble,” Shouto points out. “His legs are probably shattered, Midoriya. We’re supposed to subdue them, not cripple them.”

“I was a little pressed for time,” he grits out. “You see, I would’ve been able to make him more comfortable, but somebody decided to take a swan dive off a catwalk, so excuse me for—”

“Oh, so this is my fault—“

There’s deafening crack near Shouto’s ear as a bullet slices through a thin part of the ice, barely grazing his cheek. He drops like deadweight into a low crouch and hisses out a curse. The barrier won’t hold much longer.

“We have to move!” he shouts over the barrage of gunfire that is somehow still going. How many bullets do these people have? “I’m open to suggestions! Any ideas?”

Midoriya points directly upward. About fifty meters above their heads, there’s another set of catwalks that wind around the top of ATLAS, disappearing between the large tubes connected to the collider chamber and nodes of wires and circuits. The canopy above them is maze-like, but flimsy and made of metal mesh and steel railings—a death trap if one of those explosions were to happen again. Shouto’s not sure he could survive a second one.

“We’ve gotta go for broke,” Midoriya explains, grimacing. “Yank wires, see if we can shut the machine off. No other choice. It’ll buy us the time we need to take these guys out.”

Shouto nods. “Need a boost?”

“Yeah. I think I fractured something—” he frowns “—somewhere. Not sure exactly where though. I need to keep from overextending myself until I figure it out.”

Two injured heroes versus four-but-probably-more uninjured villains. Great odds. Shouto exhales sharply and splays his fingers to call upon his ice despite the blistering pain in his head—a bright, flashing warning to keep his Quirk usage to a minimum. He ignores his body’s pleas for now. A thin layer of crackling frost coats the ground beneath their feet, melted around the edges. It’ll have to do.

“All right,” he calls out. “Ready?”

Midoriya bends his knees, eyes cast skyward. “Ready.”

Shouto exhales a breath of frost. Now or never.

He clenches his fist, pulling as hard as he can from the very center of his being. Two columns of ice erupt from the ground, pushing hard against the soles of their feet with all the force of a high-speed train. Bullets whiz past them wildly as they rise up, up, the wind rushing past their ears
and arms outstretched as they reach for the railing of the rapidly-approaching catwalk—

The sound of ice splintering stops Shouto’s heart dead. Midoriya’s column cracks down the center, shifting and halting in its growth like a felled tree.

Wide, green eyes stare up at him with the truth etched into them. *He won’t have enough momentum to make the distance.*

Unacceptable.

Shouto’s body moves of its own accord. He grabs onto the railing of the catwalk milliseconds later, ignoring the bullets that ricochet off the machinery around him with tuneless clangs like hailstones on a rooftop, and immediately lunges out to catch Midoriya’s wrist as he reaches the apex of his stunted ascent. Fingers clamp, digging in. The sudden weight nearly pulls Shouto’s shoulder out of socket, stretching his tendons like rubber bands, and searing pain erupts somewhere deep inside his elbow.

Fighting the urge to pass out on the spot, Shouto clenches his jaw and pulls with every ounce of strength he has, hissing through his teeth as his muscles tear and flex beneath his skin. Somehow, he manages to haul Midoriya up and over the railing where they tumble gracelessly onto the metal floor of the catwalk, chests heaving and hearts pounding.

They stay there for several precious seconds, ignoring the sound of bullets hitting the other side of the metal pressed against their backs. The air feels thinner up here.

“Thanks,” wheezes Izuku.

Shouto lifts a hand weakly. “S’no problem.”

Suddenly there are more bullets, these ones a little closer than before as they whiz past the edge of the walkway. They both swear and roll in the same direction, scrambling down the length of the catwalk that stretches out above the massive ATLAS detector for meters upon meters upon meters, *dear god, does this room never end?* The machine below them glows and hums like a monster half-asleep, the noise almost verging on deafening.

Shouto grabs his sore, strained shoulder and winces, glaring at all of the wires and hoses that seem to lace the inside of this room like brightly-colored veins. Catwalks branch out before them, twisting and turning in every available direction. He can’t see the villains down on the floor, but he has a feeling they’re not far behind.

“Start pulling?” Shouto asks, eyeing the wires above his head.

Midoriya looks frazzled, but the line of his shoulders is tense and stalwart. He nods. “Yank anything that looks important.”

They get to work. Midoriya zips around the catwalks, green lighting arcing across his body as he grabs fistfuls of wires and tubes and begins to pull them like errant weeds in an overgrown garden. Shouto opts for a simpler approach, focusing instead on creating large ice crystals behind the lacework of technology before him and expanding them just enough to force the wires out of place. He melts copper tubing and fries circuit boards with his left side, feeling somewhat lightheaded by the time he’s halfway done.

Shouto’s in the middle of melting a large plastic regulator node when he feels the catwalk shudder beneath his feet. He turns on his heel, raising an ice-covered arm instinctively, and he just barely manages to catch a twisted metal rod that had been aimed for his head. He staggers under the
weight of the blow as the villain leans into it, pressing him lower.

“Well, well, well,” the villain sneers. He has crooked teeth and a mop of black hair that’s falling out in odd clumps, and the dark circles beneath his eyes speak volumes of sleep deprivation or drug use. Maybe both. “If it isn’t Shouto, Japan’s best hero. I suppose we should be honored you thought we were worth the trip.”

Shouto glares up at him, feeling the strain in his muscles as he presses his aching arm against the rod in their mad fight for dominance. “Never been to Switzerland,” he manages, voice tight. “Figured the countryside would be beautiful this time of year.”

“It’ll be beautiful when it’s a fucking crater, that’s for sure.”

Shouto ekes out a smirk. “Shame we aren’t going to let that happen.”

The villain snarls at him and pulls the rod back so he can swing again, this time at Shouto’s ribs, but he stops it with his hands and pours his left side into the metal until it glows red-hot. The villain drops it with a sizzle and a scream, flailing his scorched hands wildly. Shouto takes the opportunity to grab the back of the man’s neck and pull him forward, sinking his knee into the man’s face with enough force to break his nose with a satisfying crunch.

Released and blubbering with scarlet stained down his face, the man stumbles backwards, hands clutching at his ruined face. Shouto prepares to freeze him up to his neck in six inches of ice.

Two green-clad arms snake around the man’s neck, cinching tightly in a secure headlock that Shouto knows will be impossible to escape from—he’s tried, and it never works. Midoriya’s strength has always been too much for any one man alone.

Midoriya raises his eyebrows over the top of the man’s head. ‘Good cop-bad cop?’ he mouths. ‘I’ll be good cop.’

Shouto shakes his head. “No time. Incapacitate him,” he says, turning back to the wires he’d been in the process of melting into a mass of plastic and copper—and then a thought occurs to him. He turns back. “Why am I always the bad cop?”

Midoriya blinks and shrugs a little bit. The man in his arms is still wailing in pain. “I dunno. You’ve got the face for it.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means—” But he stops short, bites his lip, and quickly shakes his head. “You know what? Never mind. Feel like this is an argument I won’t win.” He nods at the villain. “What should I do with him?”

Midoriya beams. “That’s the best plan you’ve come up with so far.”

Shouto bristles. “Midoriya—“

“Shouto, come on, calm down. It was a joke,” he says exasperatedly, crooked grin on his soot-smeared face. He proceeds to squeeze the villain’s neck, not even flinching as the man begins to spasm wildly in his arms. “I’m trying to lighten the mood a bit. It’s not a crime.”
Shouto tries to refrain from rolling his eyes as he continues to superheat a bank of tightly-packed circuit boards that look particularly important. They fizzle and fry one by one. “Doing our jobs would lighten the mood quite a bit.”

“Well, you’re a grump, so pardon me while I take your suggestion with a grain of salt.” With the villain unconscious in his arms and still bleeding heavily, Midoriya drops him in a heap on the floor and takes special care to lock the Quirk-suppressing handcuffs around his wrists before arranging him neatly against one of the railings that line the walkway.

When he stands back up, he crosses to Shouto’s side. His expression is stormy once again. “Is any of this working at all?” he asks, peering over the edge down at ATLAS. “I swear I’ve ripped out a thousand cables by now. I can’t tell if it’s made a bit of difference.”

“I can’t tell either,” Shouto says grimly, left arm smoldering. “Since it’s still running, I’d say no.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Midoriya mutters, pressing his fingers against his mouth as he frowns in thought. “It’s running on reserve power right now since it isn’t supposed to be on in the first place, so it shouldn’t have a secondary source to default to in case of a malfunction. Where’s its power coming from?”

“Maybe they reconnected the generators while we were still searching the loop?” he suggests.

Midoriya shakes his head. “All the lights would’ve been on in the tunnel in that case, not just the emergency ones. Something else is powering it that’s not on CERN’s grid. Something big.”

“A Quirk,” Shouto says grimly.


“This thing relies on electromagnetism to push the particles through the LHC. I’d imagine this epicenter works the same way.”

“But it still needs electricity to run at all. Maybe two villains with Quirks working in tandem? A technopath?”

“Two Quirks held by separate people would be too imprecise to get the results they want with this machine. And there’s no way it’s a technopath.”

Midoriya looks over, brows furrowed. “Why not? ATLAS is a machine, so theoretically—“

“My sister’s married to one of the most powerful technopaths in the world right now,” he says quickly. “But even he’d have a hard time spreading his Quirk out over 27 kilometers. Not to mention the energy draw of this detector would probably put him in a coma.”

Izuku blinks. Then, comprehension dawns on his face, bright as sunlight. “Oh, right! Totally forgot about that. Saw him at the funeral, I think. Nice guy.”

“Not that nice,” Shouto grumbles, ripping out a bank of wires that looks important with a little more force than necessary. “He cheats at Monopoly.”

Midoriya snorts. “Dude, hate to break it to you, but you’re just not good at Monopoly. Nobody has to cheat to beat you.”

He stiffens. “That’s not true.”
“It totally is. You go bankrupt every time.”

“It’s an antiquated game!” he bursts out, crossing his arms over his chest indignantly. “In a real-world housing market, the proposed price of houses and hotels when accounted for inflation—“

“—wouldn’t be balanced out by the internal return rate and net present value of the property they’re placed on,” Izuku finishes. He’s grinning, shoulders shaking with amusement and teeth blissfully white. He nudges Shouto’s shoulder with his own. “Trust me, I know. You’ve given me this speech before. Many times, actually.”

“Then you know the game’s all bullshit.”

Izuku laughs, and the sound makes Shouto’s heart stutter uncomfortably. “No, Todoroki. You’re just really awful at it.”

Shouto huffs and glares out at nothing. He’s not bitter. He’s not. “I’ve… gotten better,” he mutters under his breath.

“Huh?”

“I said I’ve gotten better.” He clears his throat and purposefully doesn’t look over to see the look on Midoriya’s face. “I play with my siblings sometimes when we’re all in town together. Mizuki likes to throw the money off the table because it reminds her of butterflies.” He swallows. Fries a few more circuit boards for good measure. “Anyway, I… won. Once.”

“Once,” Izuku repeats dubiously, and Shouto can hear the smile in his voice.

He ducks his head to hide the way his lips twitch. It’s a knee-jerk response, something he’s never really been able to control around Midoriya. Especially when his voice sounds like that. “Shut up,” he mutters.

“No, no,” Midoriya laughs, stepping into his path when Shouto tries to shoulder past him back the way they came. He’s grinning, all teeth and flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes and it’s annoying—or at least it should be annoying. Annoying in the way that it’s not annoying at all. “If you’ve really gotten better, we should play again sometime. Have a rematch for old time’s sake. Maybe you won’t set the board on fire when you lose and we can be…” He shrugs. “I dunno. Civil and stuff. We can act like normal human beings without anger issues or weird vendettas against the housing market.”

It’s tempting. Shouto remembers those late nights in the common room, mortgaged properties laying face-down as far as the eye could see and scant dollars tucked underneath Shouto’s side of the board. They both knew better than to play with Iida, who didn’t believe in house rules, and Uraraka, who was especially cutthroat when it came to acquiring Park Place and Boardwalk. Tsuyu and Momo made great players, too, when they had time to spare.

Shouto thinks back to the last time they played. New York, he thinks it was. He remembers the soft rug on the floor of Midoriya’s living room and the sunset over the Midtown skyline, a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc shared between them with no need for fancy stemware. He accidentally set the board on fire in his rage when he inevitably went bankrupt—which was and is still bullshit to this very day, thank you very much. St. Charles Avenue can burn in hell.

It feels like so long ago.

But then the rest of Midoriya’s words filter in, and he has enough wherewithal to manage a fierce scowl. “Wait, when I lose?” he demands, brows knitted together. “What do you mean when I lose?”
Izuku rolls his eyes. “Oh, for the love of— that’s what you got out of what I just said? Come on, Shouto.”

“Well, I just think it’s a bit presumptuous of you to instantly assume I’ll—“

“What are you doing December 27th?”

The question stops Shouto’s heart cold in his chest. He stares, suddenly feeling every inch of his own skin, like the nerves have been electrified, sensitivity turned up to a million.

“Why,” he asks flatly, zero inflection on the single syllable.

Midoriya blinks and bites his lip, almost looking halfway nervous. He laughs awkwardly. “Uh, wow. O-Okay then. Not the harshest rejection I’ve ever gotten before, I guess, but it’s in the top three, easy. Jesus.”

“I’m not—“ But Shouto stops, suddenly unsure of himself. One wrong move, and everything might shatter, fall to pieces like they did all those years ago in such spectacular fashion. He digs his nails into the palm of his hand until it hurts.

“That… wasn’t a no,” Shouto says carefully. “I’m just surprised, I guess. I didn’t think you’d ever want to resume that after— um, after all that’s happened.”

Izuku’s face screws up. “What, because of our fight?”

He remembers razor-sharp lilacs and moonlit gardens and you’re not supposed to be here. Shouto swallows thickly, stuffing the memories back in their boxes. “Among other things,” he answers vaguely.

If Midoriya hears the tension in Shouto’s voice, he doesn’t let on. He frowns faintly. “Right. Well, I don’t know what those ‘other things’ are, but I’m prepared to look past them if you are,” he says instead, straightening his shoulders and looking Shouto squarely in the eye. His expression is taut around the edges with… something. “If you want to, that is.”

Shouto doesn’t know what to do.

He doesn’t know what to do.

He clenches his fists at his sides and tries to keep from tearing apart the inside of his cheek with his teeth while he processes and calculates every possible outcome of this no-doubt terrible decision. Would it be so horrible to reestablish what they had? Start anew, bury the hatchet? Shouto doesn’t know. He hates working with unknowns.

Below them, ATLAS lets out a groan. The catwalk shudders beneath their feet.

“If we survive this, I’ll… think about it,” Shouto finally says, averting his gaze. “I won’t promise anything now.”

Midoriya only looks slightly disappointed at this answer, but he doesn’t protest. He clenches his jaw and nods tightly, slipping back into his grim-faced hero persona. “I can respect that.”

“It’s not a no, Midoriya.”

“It’s not a yes, either.” Izuku smiles sadly, eyes crinkling at the edges with morbid amusement.
“But hey, I suppose it gives me something to look forward to when all this is over. Something—something worth fighting for.”

There are a lot of things worth fighting for in this world. Shouto never thought he would be one of them.

Before Shouto can open his mouth to take it all back and say yes, yes, please play Monopoly with me and watch shitty infomercials on my couch again, Izuku turns on his heel and begins marching down the length of the catwalk back the way they came. His cape flutters behind him majestically, making him look every inch the Symbol of Peace rather than Midoriya Izuku, the boy with the supernova smile and enough spirit to fill an ocean. He beckons Shouto forward over his shoulder without looking back.

“Come on!” he calls, voice suddenly ten times brighter than it was a minute ago. “I’m gonna earn that yes from you, Shouto, but we’ve still got a few things to do before that happens. You with me?”

Always.
The second Izuku cracks his eyes open, he knows that something has gone terribly, terribly wrong.

The stars shimmer down at him from above, each one silver and cold against the velvety night sky like freckles on a face he’s never been able to fully see. He spots the Big Dipper and Aquarius glimmering faithfully like luminous beacons, and he hears the trees as they rustle in the distance, disturbed by the nighttime breeze that carries the sound of chirping crickets and shrieking cicadas on its coattails.

Massive plumes of red-black smoke billow upward into the vast infinity above him, obscuring the rest of the constellations and greying out the crescent moon. It grins ghoulishly down at his crumpled figure, mocking him in the paper-thin silence.

_You're not supposed to be here_, the moon cackles gleefully. _Where are you supposed to be?_

Izuku stiffens, spine going rigid against the pile of jagged rubble and twisted metal he’s lying on. Suddenly, bits and pieces of memories all bleed together at once, the colors swelling, saturating and edges sharpening into something much more fatal than remembrance.

There’s wind, cold and harsh, that cuts through the torn parts of his costume like needles. Inch by inch, he tunes into the signals of his body and tries to focus past the pain—oh, god, the pain—as he forces himself to move. His arm is pinned by a giant chunk of blackened concrete and there’s something sharp digging into his left side near his ribs, but a quick burst of One for All has him sitting up again. He cradles his ruined arm against his chest and tries not to think.

Fire burns through his veins. There’s a clawing in his heart, a creeping bitterness in the back of his throat that tastes an awful lot like fear.

_Shouto._

Clambering to his feet, Izuku stumbles over piles of dirt-encrusted concrete rubble, warped metal rods that must’ve been railings at some point, and scorched piles of frayed copper wires that glint brightly in the reflection of the fiery wreckage. The air is hot and dry and sour-tasting against his sandpaper tongue. Something warm and sticky is trickling down his left side in a steady gush—but hell, he doesn’t care about any of it.

“_Shouto!”_ he calls out, voice tinged with faint traces of panic. He turns in place, eyes scanning the devastation for that telltale flash of navy, white, and crimson, but all he sees are the charred remnants of ATLAS and the room that _used_ to be underground, suddenly exposed to the elements like a gaping wound. “_Shouto!”_

The moon laughs at him, thousands of miles away and utterly untouchable. Izuku has half a mind to make the jump and smash it to bits with his fists just because he can.

Izuku tears through the wreckage with Shouto’s name on his lips, scrambling up the steep incline toward the edge of the crater to see if he can spot Shouto from a better vantage point. The air is cold against his scorched skin and he’s bleeding, he’s _bleeding_, but he doesn’t care because none of it really hurts as much as it should. He only feels fear, heavy and hot in his veins like molten iron. _Metallic. Bitter._
Using a burst of power, Izuku scales the side of the caved-in crater, ignoring the shards of broken glass and jagged pieces of steel that tear into the thick rubber soles of his shoes. He grips twisted metal supports with his scraped-raw palms and swings upward with a grunt, hitching a leg over the edge where crumbled concrete gives way to dirt and grass and miles upon miles of open space. The field that sits on top of the Large Hadron Collider is impossibly vast and perfectly flat, covered in immaculately-trimmed grass without a single wildflower or weed in sight. Izuku spots a bank of trees a few kilometers away and the Alps in the distance, their snowy tips painted rose-gold and lavender as the sun hesitantly shows its face over the horizon.

On any other day, it would be incredibly beautiful. Picturesque in its tranquility. On any other day, Izuku would give a shit.

Arm pressed against his bleeding side, Izuku swallows the ashes in his throat and staggers through the bits and pieces of wreckage that pepper the edge of the impossibly deep crater. He sees warped sheets of steel and copper and gargantuan chunks of shredded cables, crumbled concrete and melted tubing that used to be the LHC at one point, but now just looks like nothing more than an unearthed water main pipe.

He sees death and destruction and mayhem in every corner. Evidence of a plan that had sounded good at the time but ultimately didn’t pan out the way they wanted.

*I have to find him I have to find him I have to find him—*

Then, another thought occurs to him, and Izuku has to keep himself from vomiting.

*My fault.*

*This is all my fault.*

---

**One hour earlier**

“Midoriya, on your left!”

Izuku springs off the floor with a burst of green lightning, flipping over the head of the villain on his left and narrowly avoiding bright pink, razor-sharp nails that hiss and drip with what appears to be some kind of deadly poison. He lands nimbly on his toes and sweeps out with a leg, catching the villain in the back of the knee to send her to the floor with a pained grunt. Then Todoroki ices her to the concrete up to her neck, effectively trapping her.

One down. Seven to go.

“Thanks!” Izuku calls out, grinning. He sends Todoroki a thumbs up across the battlefield.

Todoroki waves him off, eyes narrowed in deadly concentration as white-hot fire erupts from his palm with righteous fury, engulfing the other half of the room in scorching flames as he attempts to corner a villain with an elasticity Quirk. His hair whips wildly around his face and steam evaporates off the surface of his skin, condensation dripping off the tips of his fingers as he pours his power into the effort of trapping the villain behind a melting pile of metal wreckage. He’s a phoenix, rising out of the ashes of his own destruction, teeth bared in a feral grimace and muscles tense beneath the torn parts of his costume.
Izuku tries not to stare as he zips around the room, bouncing off the impossibly high walls to run interference for Todoroki. It’s proving more difficult as the fight wears on, but dammit, he just can’t help it. Watching Todoroki in action has always been a sight, impending death and world destruction notwithstanding. With a Quirk that flashy, he’s one of those heroes people can’t but watch, slack-jawed in pure awe. He’s just so *transfixing*.

A spray of bullets jars Izuku from his reveries. They burrow deeply into the concrete next to his head, barely skimming the split skin of his cheek. He swears, and with another surge of power, pushes off the wall, heading directly for the villain in the center of the room who can apparently spray thousands upon thousands of high-caliber bullets from her fucking *fingertips*. Because yeah, the world is totally fair. Totally.

He feels bullets whiz past his ears, a little too close for comfort, and he twists in midair, landing with an earth-shaking boom that echoes throughout the chamber and cracks the concrete beneath his feet. The villain swings her hands out wildly, gunpowder-stained fingertips glowing red-hot with overuse. She squints down the length of her arm as she takes aim at Izuku, upper lip curled in a sneer.

He dodges the initial barrage and rolls around to her left—her non-dominant side, he’s noticed—pushing off the ground with his shoulder before he can make a full rotation to launch himself sideways. He tenses up and lashes out with a foot, coming into contact with her spindly legs. She falls in a graceless heap to the floor, but before she can even get her bearings, Izuku has Quirk-suppressing handcuffs locked around her wrists and a breath of relief seeping past his teeth.

“Midoriya!” Todoroki shouts, sounding strained. The fire from his left side is still roaring, sucking all the air out of the room and drying out Izuku’s mouth like the Sahara. Todoroki points with his free hand up toward the network of catwalks above him where their main villain had dashed several minutes ago. “Go! I’ll cover you!”

He doesn’t question it. Bending his knees, Izuku springs up off the wall, building momentum so he can make it. He grabs the railing and swings over it, landing on the thin metal walkway hard enough that the entire structure shudders—

Helicopter blades. Revving car engines. Somewhere, a voice.

—and the deafening clap of an explosion that makes the rest of the world go quiet, vibrations in his veins and panic knotted tightly around his throat like a noose—

Izuku blinks once, twice, and finally emerges from his memories, coming back down to the present like a helium balloon that’s lost just enough air to begin its descent.

He thinks his head hurts. Or maybe it’s his teeth, sitting sorely in his mouth and attached to a jaw that aches from being clenched for far too long. He’s pretty sure the bones in his left hand are broken, but he’s too afraid to look down and find out for sure. Not like knowing would make a difference anyway.

He… might have a concussion.

The crater of ATLAS stretches out in front of him, blackened and burned like a pockmark on the face of the world. He sees ribbons of metal knotted and crumpled together, the shell of ATLAS
collapsed in on itself like an oversized tin can. The tunnels of the LHC must’ve collapsed when they—

When they—

Izuku curls his broken hand into a fist of white-hot, searing pain, steadfastly ignoring the way his metacarpals scrape against each other. *Don’t think don’t think don’t think don’t think just act act act*—

Shouto is down there in the wreckage, Izuku knows. He just… *knows*. He can feel Shouto’s heartbeat as surely as he can feel his own, pulsing and pushing blood out of the deep gash on his side in a river of red that refuses to stop. Shouto is alive and alone somewhere—he might be in worse shape than Izuku, for all he knows—but he’s *alive*, dammit, and that has to count for something. The only problem is finding him.

There’s a ringing in his ears and every bone in his body hurts, so using his Quirk to search the area is probably out of the question—unless he wants a very angry Christmas card from Recovery Girl this year, that is, which might already be a very real possibility. Izuku grimaces, feeling the half-closed cuts on his face tear open with the movement. He’s not looking forward to that.

*Don’t think don’t think don’t think—*

*Act.*

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*Forty-seven minutes earlier*

Izuku presses his back against Todoroki’s, feeling the heat differential between his left and right sides through the fabric of his costume. On any other day, he’d enjoy the temperature against his aching muscles. As it stands, however, Izuku doesn’t have much time for anything aside from *punch this* and *kick that*.

Simply put, it’s a shitshow.

They’re both in the dead center of the room, surrounded by villains on all sides and fighting as the clock *ticktickticks*, ATLAS glowing a little brighter with every heart-pounding millisecond. Todoroki turns with Izuku and vice versa, never leaving their backs vulnerable for a single second. Fighting like this isn’t ideal for either of them, but they don’t have the luxury of choice at this point.

“We’re running out of time!” Todoroki calls out over his shoulder as he sends shards of ice in the direction of a nearby villain. He follows the attack with a blast of fire that singes the skin on the back of Izuku’s neck. “Any genius ideas?”

“A few.” Izuku grits his teeth and lunges forward to catch the oversized fist of a villain with a size Quirk, diverting the punch just enough to send the villain’s knuckles crashing into the concrete floor. Izuku leaps up and kicks him while he’s crying out in pain, sending him flying into the far wall with a satisfying crunch. Izuku falls against Todoroki’s back as soon as he can to cover his blind side. “I wouldn’t say they’re genius, but they’re *ideas*.”

“Better than nothing.” With a grunt, Todoroki releases a barrage of needle-like icicles, effectively
Izuku ducks automatically, barely avoiding a swipe from the villain with the poisonous nails once again. He grits his teeth and flicks a finger in her direction the second she’s out of reach, sending her skidding back on her heels twenty meters across the room with a screech of protest.

“We gotta wrap this up fast,” Izuku shouts breathlessly, eyeing ATLAS as it continues to power up more and more. The air vibrates around them, taut like a mainstay. “I’m thinking we have to destroy the machine. I don’t see any other way of winning at this point, do you?”

“Not really.” Todoroki’s voice is tight. “I’m exhausted, so I’m not sure I’d have enough power to do it. Can you?”

“No idea,” he wheezes. He clenches his aching fists and wonders how many bones he’d break if he punched a solid piece of metal. Flashbacks to the U.A. entrance exam flicker behind his eyelids. He shakes them off just as quickly. “Doesn’t matter. Have to try—

…on your right, Shouto!”

A wave of searing heat stops the teleportation villain in his tracks and sends him fleeing. After that, conversation dies, exchanged for flurries of punches and kicks and blasts of ice and fire that sting Izuku’s exposed skin mercilessly. They fight and fight, never straying far from one another, always covering each other’s blind spot.

Across the room, that villain with the gigantification Quirk begins to stagger back up to his feet with some help from the girl with those awful, razor-sharp nails. And suddenly, there’s a metal clanging overhead as even more villains scamper across the network of catwalks, clearly on their way to come ruin Izuku’s day even more. God, there must be dozens.

Izuku and Todoroki freeze in place, breathing hard. He can feel Todoroki’s heart hammering inside his chest, beating a steady staccato against Izuku’s left shoulder blade.

When Shouto speaks, the vibrations of his voice travel up and down Izuku’s spine.

“Midoriya,” he starts, sounding strangely calm as he surveys the numerous villains above them. “Do you remember that thing we used to—

“Way ahead of you.” Izuku is already holding out a hand for Shouto to take.

He hums, and clasps Midoriya’s wrist in a vice grip. “Two rotations for the space ought to do it, I think.”

Izuku shrugs. “Could probably do it in one.”

Shouto shakes his head slightly. “No time to test it. Two, just to be safe.”

“You got it.” Shouto’s hand is frigid, crackling with ice, but solid and frighteningly familiar in its strength. Izuku braces himself, digging his heels into the ground and bending his knees a little bit. “Ready?”

“Ready,” he answers grimly.

Green lightning skitters up and down Izuku’s arm, leaving the thrill of apprehension in its wake. He tightens his grip, focuses on not shattering Todoroki’s wrist by accident like he did the first time they tried this back in high school, and swings him around in a circle once, twice—

_Release._
He launches Todoroki up into the air like a discus, watching for a few perilous seconds as he shoots toward the catwalks overhead with laser-like precision. Right before he smashes into the ceiling, however, he calls on his ice and turns head over heels so he hits his ice feet-first, relying on his momentum to carry him around a rounded track of ice that floats parallel to the catwalk the villains are standing on. He cries out and thrusts his right fist forward, fingers splaying wide.

And even at this distance, Izuku can feel the deep chill that settles into his bones as Shouto ices the entire upper half of the room, freezing everything and everyone solid with a single, impossibly powerful gesture.

He’d be lying if he said it didn’t leave him just a little bit breathless.

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Izuku clenches his teeth, ignoring the metallic taste of blood in his mouth and the empty, sensitive space where a molar used to be up until about an hour ago. He forces his legs to keep moving through the wreckage, skirting the top edge of the crater to scan for any trace of Shouto—his hair, a hint of his costume, anything. Izuku pinches the scorched skin of his forearm every few steps in an attempt to keep his eyes open. Sleeping with a possible concussion is bad, right?

Right.

…God, he’s so tired.

The flat ground swims before his eyes like a surrealist painting, growing a little more abstract with every step. More and more spots crowd his field of vision as the minutes pass, and his body oozes exhaustion out of every single pore. Still, Izuku forges ahead, ignoring his body and flipping the off switch in his brain in favor of stumbling around burning pieces of metal and half-melted chunks of plastic that litter the scorched grass around him.

He searches everywhere, even the impossibly small places where Shouto’d never be able to fit realistically. He checks the depths of each oily shadow, underneath twisted support beams, and even follows trails of bright red blood that make Izuku’s stomach turn by virtue of the mere implication.

Izuku pushes that thought away and locks it in a box. Shouto is alive. He’s alive. He has to be.

He can’t bear to think of the alternative.

“Shouto!” he calls out again, hearing his voice echo in the bowl of the crater—or maybe it’s in his own head? He can’t be sure at this point.

“Shouto!”

On the opposite side of the disaster zone, Izuku identifies the presence of blinding blue and red emergency lights as police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances screech to a stop in the grass several meters back from the edge of the smoldering hole in the ground. Izuku can just barely make out the straight-backed posture of Agent Altherr as she climbs out of a black, unmarked sedan near the forefront of the police escort. He can’t see her expression, but he’d bet cold hard cash that she’s some modicum of intensely displeased.

The logical side of Izuku’s brain screams at him to hobble over and collapse into the back of one of those ambulances before he passes out among the wreckage. The less-than-logical side of Izuku’s brain says screw self-preservation. Find Shouto, and find him fast.
So that’s exactly what he does.

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**Thirty-nine minutes earlier**

There is no pomp and circumstance when the black hole finally opens up inside the ATLAS detector’s particle collision chamber. There is a sharp inhale of air, a half-heartbeat of piercing silence that bottoms out somewhere in Izuku’s stomach. Everything stops for that split-second of nothingness—even the villains.

They all pause. Listening. There’s an oversized fist inches from Izuku’s face, his back pressed uncomfortably against the wall where he’s pinned. The villain’s fingers are digging into his aching ribs, trapping his arms against his sides at painful angles. Overhead, Todoroki has stopped with one foot on the railing of the central catwalk, one foot braced against the frozen shoulder of one of the villains he’d managed to catch. His expression is cracked wide open.

And then the metal walls of ATLAS begin to buckle.

Even from across the room, Izuku can feel the shift in gravity as the black hole inside the cylindrical chamber collapses the collider from the inside out like it’s nothing more than an oversized soda can. Metal screams as it tears, crumples, and condenses down to something unrecognizable—scrap metal for recycling, not priceless scientific technology.

Every organ in Izuku’s body shifts to accommodate the new indomitable pull of gravity, and the villain holding him is stunned enough at the spectacle to loosen his hold just enough for Izuku to wriggle free. He lands lightly on his feet and kicks out at the villain with his right leg, suddenly entirely aware of the possibility of death in his immediate future that is looking more and more likely as the seconds pass.

He doesn’t have time for Quirk-suppressing handcuffs. He doesn’t have time for villains or justice or logic. He needs to find a way to keep the black hole from consuming this facility and everyone in it, or worse—the entire country. As it stands, every piece of machinery in the room is beginning to lean in toward the crumpled collider chamber, which is slowly but surely being eaten from the inside out by the beach ball-sized black hole that’s floating in midair, dark enough to absorb light at a molecular level.

Izuku swallows down the nauseating feeling of the world tilting on its axis as it shifts his stomach and redirects his blood flow. The pull continues to increase in intensity, ripping catwalks from their places and shredding metal workstations, raining sparks and filling the air with the sound of fizzling electronics.

Izuku’s feet skid across the floor several inches, pulling both him and the stock-still villains toward the black hole. Not even stopping to think, Izuku grits his teeth and activates One for All, leaping forward with the aid of the wonky gravity to snatch the two villains in front of him around their waists, pulling them backwards with all his strength toward the LHC tunnel that leads out of the room. They don’t protest past pained grunts, and they definitely don’t protest when he dumps them unceremoniously in the tunnel.

Todoroki seems to have the same idea, seeing as he slides down a bank of ice with a skinny-looking teenager thrown over his shoulder. He drops the kid as gently as he can, but Izuku doesn’t
miss the way he winces when he does it—_strained shoulder muscle, possible concussion_. Izuku knew he was more injured than he let on, but if he’s actually letting it _show_, he must be a lot worse off than Izuku thought.

The kid along with the other two villains all scamper away into the darkness. “There were more upstairs, but they bolted as soon as that thing popped up,” Todoroki shouts over the cacophony of shearing metal and crumbling concrete.

Izuku frowns. “Even the guy from earlier?”

“His friends broke his cuffs as they ran past."

Izuku nods grimly, hoping silently that all of them will be able to get out one way or another. Villains or no, they’re still _people_, and Izuku’s job is to protect them at all costs, no matter their occupation. With luck, Altherr’s backup teams will catch them somewhere inside the LHC loop.

Izuku and Todoroki stagger as a giant crack appears in the ceiling of the underground room, spilling concrete dust and spewing water from the plumbing system. ATLAS is little more than a half-eaten shell of itself at this point. The catwalks have been ripped from the walls, twisted together and torn as easily as tissue paper. It’s a vortex of terror, pulling in everything the world can provide with no sign of slowing down.

Their feet slide forward a few more inches as the pull intensifies, making Izuku feel strangely lightheaded as the blood drains from his head.

Todoroki waves a hand and throws up a thick wall of ice for them to brace themselves against. “Please tell me you know how to get rid of a black hole,” he calls out, gritting his teeth. The ice cracks and splinters, but Todoroki adds sheet after sheet of thick hoarfrost faster than the black hole can tear it away. He’s shaking, clearly fatigued.

The chill that touches Izuku’s skin makes him nauseated, but for all the fear coursing through his veins, his mind is surprisingly clear.

“Hawking Radiation!” he shouts back, brows furrowing as he works out the logistics in his head. “The answer is Hawking Radiation. The more energy that’s consumed by the black hole, the more energy it’ll have to expel in order to consume it. So the more energy it expels—”

“The faster it’ll decay,” Shouto finishes, nodding in grim understanding. “So we need something that’s extremely high-energy. What do you suggest?”


“Not sure if you’re noticed— oh, _dammit._” Todoroki clenches his fist and adds another six inches of ice to the barrier, but it’s disintegrating faster now. His breath pale and frosty as it passes through his teeth. “Not sure if you’ve noticed, but Bakugou isn’t here. We can’t make an explosion that big—”

“Sports Festival,” Izuku blurts out.

Todoroki stares at him, eyes wide and lips parted in mute horror as the implications of those two words set in. Izuku knows he’s likely recalling the blast that nearly ripped apart the festival stadium all those years ago—the day Izuku shattered every bone in his hand for a boy he barely knew. The day they became friends.
Izuku could choke on the irony of it all.

Todoroki blinks hard, and shakes his head slowly from side to side. “You’re insane.”

“Not insane,” Izuku says, blinking back the stars in his vision that suddenly sting a lot like tears. “Desperate, maybe. But not insane. A blast like that will be the only chance we have of destroying that black hole and not getting buried alive when the room collapses in the gravity shift. We need that outward force, or else we run the risk of caving in the other connecting tunnels.”

Shouto presses his forehead against the ice barrier and squeezes his eyes shut for several precious seconds. The muscle in his jaw flutters beneath bruised skin as he thinks. Finally, he opens his eyes and glances sidelong at Izuku. He looks like he hasn’t slept for five years.

“Izuku,” he says, voice subdued and strained around the edges. Like broken glass. “In an underground space like this with nowhere for the pressure to go—”

“I know.” Izuku smiles sadly. “Trust me, I know.”

“You have a wife.” He shoots Izuku a pained look.

Izuku forces a smile that pulls on his heartstrings in all the wrong ways as he thinks of Lucy, who’s waiting at home for Izuku to come back for dinner. Lucy, who worries over him when he bleeds and chastises him while she sews his wounds closed. Lucy, who loves him. Lucy, who he’ll never see again.

Izuku exhales slowly. “We all have to make sacrifices in this line of work, right? You’re the one who taught me that, back in New York.” He swallows thickly. “Remember?”

Shouto’s face crumples, and the ice in front of them cracks a little bit more. “I—“

But Izuku just smiles a little brighter, even though it hurts. He always smiles when it hurts because that’s what the Symbol of Peace does. He’s never had a choice in the matter.

And he’s never minded it until now.

Fear abandoned, packed into a tiny box in the back cupboard of his mind, Izuku reaches out and covers Shouto’s hand where it’s splayed out against the flat surface of the cracked ice. He squeezes lightly. “Hey,” he says. “It’s okay. It’s all gonna be okay.”

“It’s not,” Shouto spits vehemently, ducking his head to hide his face. “God, it’s not, all right? I owe you so many apologies, and now—” His voice cracks on the word, splintering between syllables. He bites his lip and meets Izuku’s gaze head-on. “Now I’ll never get the chance.”

Izuku’s heart hurts, but he manages to bump Shouto’s shoulder with his own. “There’s nothing to forgive. Never has been, never will be.” He lifts his chin as high as it will go. “And if I’m gonna go out in a blaze of glory, I’m… I’m glad it’s with you. Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Shouto’s expression is wrecked, bruised and blood-spattered and shattered into a thousand pieces—destroyed, irreparable. Something Izuku never, ever wanted to see twice in his lifetime. Shouto stares at Izuku’s hand on top of his, eyes tracing the lacework of veins and silver scars that crisscross up and down the length of Izuku’s arm.

Then, hesitantly, he turns his hand over and laces their fingers together, squeezing like Izuku is the only thing anchoring him to the spot.
“I’m free the 27th,” Shouto blurts out, eyes still glued to their joined hands. Izuku can’t tell who’s trembling more. “I mean—if the offer’s still open. I’d like to… to take you up on that. When we get out of here.”

They won’t be getting out of here. The sky is blue and taxes are inescapable and they won’t be getting out of here.

But Izuku nods and squeezes Shouto’s hand anyway.

“Definitely.”

Izuku skitters down the steep slope of the pit, plunging back into the mess of sparking wires and torn metal with knock-kneed panic he refuses to acknowledge. He can hear the blades of two helicopters somewhere overhead, but the smoke is thick enough down here that they likely won’t be able to spot him. Just as well, he supposes. Any rescue team would get him out first and look for Shouto second—and that just won’t do.

Izuku gingerly lifts his facemask over his nose and mouth, noting the dents and scorch marks that have twisted it beyond recognition. It still works though, partially purifying the smoke-laden air. Swiping at his watering, stinging eyes, he trudges forward, climbing over debris three times his size.

“Come on, Shouto, where are you?” he calls out, voice sounding like crushed gravel. He’s lightheaded and his fingertips are going numb, goosebumps rippling over every inch of damaged skin. By all accounts, he shouldn’t be cold right now—fires burn and singe his skin as he passes them.

He wonders how long he’s been bleeding. Too long, probably.

Izuku shouts until he’s hoarse, stepping through the remains of the crater as carefully as he can on his bruised, unsteady legs. His heart sinks lower and lower every time he turns a corner and doesn’t see Shouto. His head hurts, he’s exhausted, and he’s freezing to death. He doesn’t have to look down at his hands to see that his skin is much paler than it should be. And still, he doesn’t care.

Left foot, right foot, stumble, start again. He focuses on the pattern like it’s the only thing keeping him alive.

He’s rounding the back side of the half-corroded shell of ATLAS, hand pressed against the gaping wound in his side and teeth chattering excruciatingly when he sees a flash of fabric that doesn’t match the crimsons and blacks of the scenery around it. It’s a deep blue, rich, royal, and soot-stained—and so very, very familiar.

Izuku’s heart lurches painfully, slamming against the inside of his ribcage. He falls over himself and curses as he staggers over piles of burning debris, hands fumbling numbly as he finds one Todoroki Shouto, limp as a ragdoll and half-buried by loose gravel and shredded metal plates. His eyes are closed, face bruised and covered in grime and oh, god, is that blood?

Izuku can’t tell if he’s breathing. Panic sets in.

“Shouto, oh my god, oh my god, please—” Izuku falls to his knees next to the fallen hero, shoving heavy pieces of crumbled concrete off his legs and activating his Quirk in his fingers to pry the
heavier metal supports out of the way. He keeps up a babbling, nonsensical mantra of *heys* and *come ons* and *wake up, please, I need you to wake ups* while he works frantically, ignoring the agonizing rending of his heart and the nausea in his stomach.

Once free of the weight pinning Shouto’s legs, Izuku grits his teeth and slips his hands beneath the hero’s arms, dragging him backwards through piles of ash and gravel and not minding one bit that his own side is bleeding a little more forcefully now. The only thoughts in his mind are *ambulance, hospital, help, for the love of god, help us please.* But the smoke is too thick, and Izuku knows they won’t be found down here. He has to get them out of the crater, and fast.

He has only one option. His legs are shaky and unstable, but there’s enough adrenaline in his veins to block the most immediate pain. He can do it. He has to.

He doesn’t think. He acts, and acts fast. Izuku ducks down and sweeps Shouto up into his arms, putting all of his leftover power into his legs, and he finally *leaps* like it’s the only thing that matters. There’s an explosion of pain somewhere in the region of his left knee, but he’ll think about that later. The only thing on his mind right now is the heavy, limp body of his friend in his arms and the fact that Shouto might not be breathing.

They land on the grass just outside the crater and Izuku’s knees buckle immediately, sending them both sprawling onto their backs, side by side in the soft grass. Izuku breathes hard, gasping and ripping off his mask with a wheeze before tossing it to the side uncaringly. *Torn meniscus, maybe another shattered kneecap.* He files his injuries away for later, and shakes his head to clear the spots from his vision. Glancing over at Shouto, Izuku notices a thin stream of blood coming from his left ear, trickling slowly down his neck and blending into his crimson hairline. *Perforated eardrum, possible concussion, need to find his other injuries, need to get help, need to —*

Izuku bites back a cry of pain as he sits up on his elbows, rolling over to look down into Shouto’s too-peaceful face. His eyes are closed, his face frighteningly still in the ghostly pale light of impending dawn. His eyelashes are covered in a thin layer of frost, hair pushed back from his face and singed at the ends, lips chapped and bloody.

And Izuku still can’t tell if he’s fucking *alive.*

Hands shaking, he reaches up and presses his fingers against Shouto’s pulse point, hoping and praying that he’ll feel the telltale thudding of a warm heart working overtime. His fingers are clammy and numb with blood loss, so he presses a little harder, determined to feel *something.*

“Please, please, *please*,” he chokes, focusing all his attention on the ends of his numb fingers. *Please, don’t let him be gone.*


*There.*

It’s faint, but Izuku’s eyes widen when he feels Shouto’s pulse fluttering weakly, unevenly under his skin. He lets out a wheezing half-laugh of relief and slumps over, pressing his forehead to the center of Shouto’s chest right above where his heart should be. He’s alive. He’s *alive,* even if he’s barely there. Blood is flowing and he’s hardly breathing, but he’s not dead. That’s all that matters.

Izuku looks over his shoulder and sees rescue teams descending into the pit and working their way around the top edge of the crater to search for survivors. He spots the signature red hair of
Kirishima standing next to Agent Altherr, Jirou on her other side, speaking in hushed tones while they scan the devastation. With luck, they rescue team will come around to Izuku’s side of the crater in ten minutes. Seven if they’re fast.

A lot can happen in seven minutes.

Izuku, not wanting Shouto to sleep in case he has a concussion, shakes the hero’s cold right shoulder gently. “Hey,” he says softly. When Shouto doesn’t budge, he shakes a little harder. “Hey. Shouto, wake up. They’re coming to get us soon.”

Nothing. He doesn’t even flinch, or wrinkle his nose. Izuku huffs and tries pinching him, waving a hand in front of his face—still, no movement. He starts to panic a little bit.

“Shouto?” he asks, voice rising. His hands are shaking as he turns the unconscious hero’s face this way and that, watching for movement behind his eyelids. Izuku bites his own lip until it bleeds. “Come on, please… please wake up. I can’t—“

He can’t what? Izuku isn’t sure he has the answer to that question.

In the end, he pushes the thought from his mind and does exactly what he did earlier this evening—he smacks Shouto across the face as hard as he possibly can and hopes for the best.

The second Izuku’s hand makes contact with cold, still skin, Shouto’s eyes fly wide open and he sucks in a sharp breath of surprise. His chest heaves and his eyes dart every which way in bewildered panic, taking in the fading stars overhead, the smoke from the explosion, and Izuku’s face hovering mere inches above his own.

Shouto tenses his muscles as if to lash out. He ultimately stops short with a hiss and groans in pain as everything filters through his senses one by one. Carefully, he presses one hand to his bleeding ear and the other to the red handprint on his face, squeezing his eyes shut as if to block out the rest of the world.

Izuku’s tries and fails not to laugh hysterically in relief. His heart flutters in his chest painfully. “Hey, hey, heyheyhey,” he says softly, knowing full well how much a burst eardrum hurts. He gently prises Shouto’s hands from his face and peers down at him from above. He tries for a shaky smile. “Hey, you’re okay, we’re okay, everything’s okay. They’re coming to get us soon. We’re okay.”

Shouto stares up at him for several seconds, eyebrows furrowing slightly as if he can’t quite believe what he’s seeing. Then, he croaks, “Did… did we win?”

Izuku feels tears sting his eyes as he grins a widely as he can. He nods, laughing and crying and feeling too much all at once. “Yeah, man. We won.”

Shouto blinks tiredly, sinking back into the grass as the tension bleeds from his body. “And we’re… not dead?” He sounds confused.

“I can’t even a little bit.”

He nods, then winces, dropping his head back against the soft grass with a groan. “Oh. Well, that’s…” He swallows. “Good.”

Izuku wheezes out some pained laughter and collapses onto the grass next to Shouto. They lay there, side by side with shoulders and sore elbows pressed against one another, staring up at the stars as they fade, chased away by the hesitant light of early morning. They can hear the crackling
fires and the murmur of voices as they get closer and closer to their position, but neither of them sit up to wave them down. Maybe it’s because they’re too sore to move. Maybe it’s something else. Izuku doesn’t know, and doesn’t bother to think about it.

“Aquarius,” Shouto says suddenly no more than thirty seconds later, his voice almost too hoarse to hear.

Izuku glances sidelong at him. “What?”

Shouto’s mismatched eyes are directed skyward, narrowed in concentration and heavily shadowed with weariness. He points limply up at the sky, which still has a few stars left in it. “Aquarius. I remember that one.”

Exhaustion seeps into Izuku’s joints, weighing down his eyelids. He’s so tired. Still, he manages to point with his mangled, bloodstained fingers at the southern part of the sky that still retains some of its inky darkness. “Cepheus,” he whispers weakly.

“The king,” says Shouto, sounding just as tired as Izuku feels. “He was married to…” He trails off, thinking hard for a second. “Cassiopeia?”

Izuku manages a nod, blinking slowly. “Yeah. Pegasus…” He shakes his head, forcing himself to stay awake. “Pegasus is up there, too. I think.”

Shouto tilts his head off to the east. The blood from his ear is shiny and candy-apple red. “I see it.”

Izuku remembers rock quarries and bottomless glass lakes and the company of the stars, pale and constant and perfect.

I promise.

There’s a sharp pressure against the inside of his wrist. Izuku looks down to see Shouto pinching him, tugging on translucent scarred skin with his blunt nails until it stings.

“Don’t go to sleep,” Shouto mumbles, eyes half-lidded, callused fingertips still pressing against the tracery of veins beneath Izuku’s skin. “You need to stay awake.”

Izuku nods slowly, then reaches over to pinch him right back. Shouto hisses, but his eyes open a little wider than before. “Same goes for you,” Izuku tells him, smiling faintly.

There’s a pause, long and full of something tense that could prick Izuku if he were to reach out and touch it. Pointed enough to pierce skin, if he’d let it. Shouto turns his head and peers at Izuku curiously, a crease between his brows as he scans Izuku’s face for… something. Izuku’s not sure if he finds it in the end.

“My place or yours?” Shouto finally asks, voice soft.

Shouto’s eyes begin to drift shut again, so Izuku pinches him while his heartbeat pounds in his throat. “What do you mean?”


Something warm unfurls in Izuku’s chest. He pinches himself, just to be sure he’s not the one who’s dreaming, but the pain fades, and nothing changes. The battlefield is still on fire, they’re both still injured, and Todoroki Shouto is asking about December 27th.
This is real.

“Your place,” Izuku says, biting back a stupid smile and hot, astringent tears. “Let’s do it at your place this year.”

And, like the sun peeking over the Alps, Shouto smiles at him.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr | Twitter | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist
The River Bears No Empty Bottles

Chapter Notes

Enjoy Friend Day!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December 27th, 2024

Shouto begins his morning by staring at his reflection in the mirror, wondering if he should fake a stomach bug or move to Kazakhstan and change his name. It’s a good plan, save for the fact that Shouto has been sick exactly twice in his life, and the chances of him coming down with something spontaneously—today of all days—are practically in the negatives. Worse yet, Midoriya knows that. He’d see through the excuse in a second. As for moving—

Well. Shouto’s not moving to Kazakhstan.

New plan, then: fake an emergency call. Some monster is stomping around downtown, wreaking havoc and scaring children probably. Flattening grocery stores, breathing fire. Shouto would only feel a little bit bad using his agency as an excuse, and technically it wouldn’t be a lie—surely somewhere in the city there’s something evil going down that requires his undivided attention. It might not be a monster, but still. It’d be something.

But Midoriya might want to come along and help if that’s the case. Scratch that—he’d definitely come help, unstoppable smile and freckles in tow, intent on saving the day with a snap of his fingers or a wave of his gloved hand. In fact, Midoriya might actually prefer fighting crime to hanging out like normal people. Disappointedly, Shouto files that plan in the ‘hell no’ pile and releases a weary sigh through his nose.

He has to do this. He promised. They’d fought together and almost died three months ago. It shouldn’t be that awkward, right? Once you’ve brushed hands with death in the company of someone else, you’re supposed to feel close to that person. That’s what all the storybooks say at least. There has to be a shred of truth in there somewhere. Right?

Shouto glares at himself in the mirror. His wounds from Geneva have long since healed, replaced instead with a litter of silver scars that pepper the lengths of his forearms and an ear that still isn’t working quite as well as it should be—but that, at least, should be back to normal within the next few weeks, or so claims the doctor. (The smoke inhalation, concussion, burns, and broken bones all healed a while ago thanks to Recovery Girl’s expert, emergency touch.) All things considered, he’s fit as a fiddle, just in time for December 27th.

How wonderful.

For what feels like the fiftieth time this morning, Shouto straightens the collar of his sweater and yanks the sleeves down around his wrists before he lets out an irritated huff and shoves them back up to elbows where they belong. He even fiddles with his hair a little bit—it’s now long enough to
keep pushed back on the white side, but he lets the red side hang loose in front of his scarred eye, styled just enough to look like he actually cares about this sort of thing. Which he doesn’t. Not really, anyway.

(He does. He cares a lot, actually.)

“You are such a moron,” he tells his reflection, glaring with enough heat to make his eyelashes sizzle and smoke. “The biggest moron on planet Earth.”

Glancing at his watch, Shouto sighs through his teeth. He’s stalled for twenty minutes longer than he should have. He’s supposed to meet Midoriya at his mother’s apartment in half an hour so they can catch the train into the city for their day together, and Shouto hasn’t even figured out what they’ll be doing yet.

With a grumble, he snatches his peacoat, scarf, and hat from their pegs in the foyer and bundles up. If he dallies any longer, he might actually catch that plane to Kazakhstan and be done with all of this. He grabs his key, tries not to rip the door of its hinges as he opens it—

And comes face-to-face with his very out-of-breath, very pregnant older sister and his niece.

“Please tell me you’re not working today,” Fuyumi wheezes, hanging onto Mizuki’s tiny hand like it’s the only thing keeping her upright. She hisses and braces a hand against her lower back, squeezing her eyes shut. “Just… oh my god… why do you live on the fifth floor? It’s like you’re trying to fend off visitors, you recluse.”

“I’m not a recluse,” he says dumbly, confused beyond all belief. He opens his mouth to ask what the hell she’s doing here, but he’s cut off by Mizuki’s excited shriek as she attaches herself to Shouto’s left leg like a starfish, squeezing tightly with her tiny arms. Her tiny fingers grasp the fabric of his trousers and she buries her face against his knee, babbling senselessly.

“Hi, snowflake,” he says, unable to keep his lips from twitching upward at the corners.

“Shou!” she chirps, looking up at him with a toothy grin. “ShouShouShou!”

“She’s still working on multiple syllables,” Fuyumi explains breathlessly. She sags against the doorframe, hands pressed to her swelling stomach. “And you didn’t answer my question. Are you doing anything today? I need someone to watch Mizu while I go to my appointment in the city. It’ll only be a few hours, I promise.”

Unconsciously warming his left side a little bit to keep Mizu warm, Shouto frowns at his sister. “Appointment? Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” she admits. She bites her lip.

Unconsciously warming his left side a little bit to keep Mizu warm, Shouto frowns at his sister. “Appointment? Is everything okay?”

“Oh, of course.” She waves dismissively. “Just routine stuff. Almost at the halfway point of my pregnancy, so my doctor wants to check on things.”

Something in her voice makes Shouto narrow his eyes in suspicion. “Fuyumi,” he says quietly. “Your normal doctor is in Fukuoka.”

Her cheeks flush a little bit. “Well, yes, but—“

“Hey,” he murmurs, cutting her off gently. He levels a no-nonsense look down at her. “Tell me what’s going on. Are you all right?”

She sucks in a deep breath and opens her mouth, excuse on the tip of her tongue, but her shoulders deflate when she meets Shouto’s gaze. “Everything’s fine,” she admits. She bites her lip.
“Probably.”

Alarm claws its way through his chest, settling in somewhere behind his heart. “Probably?”

“My doctor’s worried about my second trimester since I had so much trouble with Mizu last time. They’re just going to run some tests to make sure everything’s okay—which I’m sure it is.”

Shouto rocks back on his heels, dropping a hand to run his fingers through the silver strands of Mizuki’s curls. He… doesn’t know what to think. Or do. Worry is something he’s never been able to quantify or mold to his liking. “Are you… I don’t know. Feeling okay?”

“I feel fine,” she insists, smiling warmly. “But it doesn’t hurt to check on these things, you know? Trust me, if I wasn’t okay, you’d be, like, the fourth person to know. I promise.”

Shouto’s face sours. “Fourth? Why fourth?”

“You’re right behind me, my husband, and mom, nerd. Don’t get jealous.” She sucks in a deep breath and shuffles uncomfortably on her feet. “So, can you watch Mizu? Because if not, I really need to know now so I can catch Natsu before he leaves—”

“I can watch her,” he says automatically, ignoring the part of his mind that screams no, no, no, what are you doing? At his side, Mizuki giggles and jumps up and down with excitement, cinching her arms around his calf with surprising strength. “I was going out to, um—” he racks his brain for an excuse, “run some errands around the city. But she can come with me, if that’s all right with you.”

“Yes! Oh my god, yes, that’s totally fine. I can meet you in the park in three hours or so to pick her up—you know the one by the hospital downtown, right?”

Shouto nods. “I know the place. We’ll be there.”

Fuyumi’s face hardens inexplicably as she looks down at her daughter, one eyebrow raised. “And you’re going to be good for Uncle Shoucchan, right? Mizu, quit hiding. Mizu. Honey, look at—right?”

Mizu gnaws on her fingers a little bit, but she stops bouncing on her toes long enough to nod sheepishly before burying her face against Shouto’s leg once again. Fuyumi looks positively relieved, expression lax and shoulders slumped beneath her winter coat. “Little barnacle,” she mutters affectionately, watching Mizuki with soft eyes. “Five bucks says she won’t let go of you for a second.”

Shouto snorts and glances down at his niece, tousling her moonbeam curls with his warm fingers. “No bet.”

“Because you know I’ll win.”

“Can’t help it if she likes me more than you.”

“Only because you spoil her rotten.” Fuyumi smiles wryly up at Shouto, glasses sitting low on her nose. Her cheeks are rosy and her skin glows with life, and Shouto doesn’t think she’s ever looked more like their mother. “I owe you one, Shouto. Thanks for taking her.”

“It’s not a problem,” he says easily, refusing to think about the very big, very real problem that lies before him in the form of one Midoriya Izuku and December-fucking-27th. Maybe Mizuki can be his Kazakhstan and get him out of this. Or maybe he just screwed himself over even worse than
“Sweetheart, please quit pulling my hair.”

“No.”

A sigh. “Mizu—“

“No,” she insists stubbornly, yanking on the different colored strands from where she’s perched on Shouto’s shoulders. She kicks against his loose grip on her ankles, but he is careful not to budge, making sure she doesn’t fall off as he climbs the stairs to Midoriya Inko’s apartment. Each step feels like a mile. A familiar, horrible mile. A mile he never thought he’d walk again, after what happened in New York.

He hasn’t made this climb since the day he graduated high school. It feels weird, coming back here eight years later with the Number Two hero moniker plastered on his forehead and scars in places he never knew he had. His left ear rings in the silence. His heart pounds a drumbeat in his veins. Making this journey feels different in the way that nothing really feels different at all—save for the giggling toddler on his shoulders. That, at least, separates this day from all the rest.

Shouto exaggerates his steps and sways around corners just to make Mizu squeal and giggle, wincing as her tiny hands fist in his hair every time. His hair is likely a tousled mess, coat rumpled and scarf hanging slack over his shoulders. By the time he reaches Midoriya Inko’s doorway (413B, set in polished brass; the B hangs a little crookedly), he hasn’t decided if he cares or not. Staring at that crooked B, however, he begins to wonder if maybe he should care a little bit more.

“Shooooou,” Mizu mumbles against his ear, reaching around to press her hands against his cheeks from behind. She sounds suddenly nervous, subdued and dimmer than a dying star.

Shouto huffs out a laugh and pries her hands from his face. He squeezes her fingers one by one. “Hey, it’s okay,” he says softly. “Nothing to be scared of. We’re going to meet some friends of mine, all right? They’re nice people.”

She grunts like she doesn’t believe him. Shouto doesn’t exactly blame her; he didn’t sound very convincing, even to his own ears.

“Do you want to get down?” he asks her, tugging at one of her snow-booted feet. She hugs his neck a little tighter, hands cinching in painfully to the too-long strands of his hair. He takes this as a hell no. “All right, all right, fine. Little barnacle. Your mom was right.”

“Barcle,” she parrots clumsily.


He can practically hear her face screw up in concentration. “Barcn,” she spits determinedly.

“Barnacle.”
“Bernal.”

Shouto shrugs. “Close enough. Don’t tell your mom.”

She tugs on his hair and gurgles happily, and Shouto can’t help but smile in response. It’s enough of a distraction for him to reach out and knock on Midoriya Inko’s door without feeling too bad about it or wondering how long it would take him to conjure some ice and skate away from everything that today stands for. He only has a moment to ponder before voices get louder on the other side of the door, and footsteps follow close behind.

“Coming!” shouts Midoriya, voice muffled. His tone sends shivers down Shouto’s spine for all the wrong reasons, and he hangs on a little tighter to Mizuki’s ankles. “Hang on, I’m coming—“

The door whips open to reveal Midoriya in all his denim-and-graphic-tee glory, hair mussed and thick-framed glasses perched on his freckled nose like they belong there. Shouto still has no idea when he got those, nor why the Symbol of Peace has vision issues. (It’s actually slightly concerning, when he thinks about it. The fate of the world rests in the hands of a man who can’t read tiny text or basic road signs without squinting. The horror.)

Vision issues notwithstanding, however, Midoriya looks... good. Better than last time Shouto saw the Number One hero, that’s for sure. He’s not covered in blood and burns, for one thing, and he’s not being wheeled into the back of an ambulance, either. It’s definitely an improvement. Midoriya’s face breaks out into a blinding smile—

Then his eyes go wide as dinner plates, gaze fixed about six inches above Shouto’s head.

“Um,” Midoriya stammers. He blinks rapidly, those evergreen eyes of his even larger behind his glasses. He stares up at Mizuki with nothing short of abject shock on his face. “That’s a—“

“I’m sorry,” Shouto blurts out immediately, mouth running away without him. He suddenly doesn’t mind that Mizu’s practically tearing his hair out by the root. “My sister needed me to watch her. It was a last minute thing, I didn’t know—“

“Seriously, Todoroki, it’s cool. I was just surprised.” He holds the door a little wider and gestures inside. “You wanna come in for a few minutes? I need to find my shoes and stuff before we leave.”

Not trusting his own voice, Shouto nods and slips past Midoriya, ducking under the doorway to keep Mizu from hitting her head. Once the door is closed firmly behind them both, Shouto and Midoriya are left standing across from each other in the entryway, exactly five feet of air between them and miles of awkwardness Shouto doesn’t even want to think about traversing right now.

“So,” Midoriya says after an uncomfortable moment. He clears his throat. “Are you, uh... going to introduce me?”

Shouto starts slightly. “Oh. Right.” Carefully, he reaches up and detaches Mizuki from his shoulders, lifting her and setting her on her feet. Her silver hair sticks out in cloud-like tufts from
behind her fluffy pink Uravity earmuffs, and her dark eyes are lowered shyly. As soon as Shouto stands back up to his full height, she reaches out clumsily and attaches herself to his left leg like a lifeline.

“Oh, jeez,” Shouto mutters, cursing her sudden shyness. He raises his voice, lightening his tone a little bit for her sake. “Hey, snowflake.” He taps one of her earmuffs affectionately. “Can you introduce yourself for me? This is, um...”

Shouto falters, looking at Midoriya helplessly—his eyes are wide with wonder and his smile is crooked on his face, dimples out on full display and deep enough to swallow some of his freckles. Midoriya mouths something along the lines of oh my god and she is so cute—neither of which help Shouto out with his current predicament whatsoever. He gives Midoriya a please-help-me-dear-god look that he seems to understand, thankfully.

Midoriya drops down into a low squat in front of Mizuki, elbows braced against his knees so he sits eye-level with her. She clings to Shouto even tighter.

“Hi there. I’m Izuku,” Midoriya says softly, doling out his brightest Symbol-of-Peace smile all for her benefit. He cocks his head to one side, hair flopping to the side in a tangle of green curls. “What’s your name?”

Mizu appears to think about it for a minute, eyeing Midoriya up and down from beneath her lashes. Shouto holds his breath—

She shakes her head resolutely, burying her face against Shouto’s leg timidly. Dammit.

Shouto sighs softly, raking his fingers through his tangled hair. “Sorry. She’s sort of shy around new people,” he says, gesturing helplessly down at her. “I’m sure she’ll come around eventually. Just give her some time.”

Midoriya nods and hums lowly, not looking up. He tilts his head to catch Mizu’s gaze, a soft smile settling in on his face that twitches a little bit with amusement. There’s a glint in his eyes that make Shouto nervous—it’s Midoriya’s I-know-something-you-don’t face that, in the past, has usually ended with a building exploding into dust or Saturday detention with Aizawa-sensei. Neither of which were good outcomes for either of them back when they were seventeen and stupid.

Still, the expression looks a little different when it’s directed at Shouto’s niece. More contemplative, less hey, let’s break shit and see what happens. It’s... strangely comforting.

In the end, Midoriya’s plan boils down to a sentence:

“I really like your earmuffs.”

And that, of all things, manages to snag her attention. Shouto watches, baffled, as Mizuki slowly turns her face away from Shouto’s leg, eyes wide and uncertain, but bright with unbridled curiosity like flickering candle flame.

Midoriya grins and takes his chance. His cheeks are flushed and his voice is softer than velvet. “Is Uravity your favorite hero?”

Mizuki blinks at Midoriya warily, then looks up at her uncle as if asking for permission.

“Go ahead,” he tells her, smiling faintly. “It’s all right.”

Hesitantly, she releases his leg and turns to face Midoriya, hands pressed against her mouth as she
chews on her knuckles nervously. Her gaze flickers up, then over, then back again before settling on the floor between Midoriya’s feet. She doesn’t speak for several long, taffy-stretched seconds.

Midoriya glances up at Shouto, who shrugs helplessly. Midoriya frowns a bit, brow furrowing in thought for half a heartbeat before his face clears once again, splitting into a smile that brightens the room.

“Hey,” he tells Mizuki, leaning in conspiratorially. “You wanna know a secret?”

She blinks at him, glancing back at Shouto. Slowly, she ducks her head in a nod. Midoriya accepts this answer, and lowers his voice even more. “You can’t tell anybody,” Midoriya informs her seriously. “Not even your uncle, all right? You have to promise me.”

“I’m right here,” Shouto protests, but Midoriya waves him off, not tearing his gaze from Mizuki. She bites her lip and nods again, this time a little more confident than before.

“All right. You seem trustworthy,” Midoriya determines, eyes narrowed in mock importance. He leans in, cupping his hand over his mouth to whisper in her ear. Mizuki tilts forward on her toes, stumbling slightly over her feet, but Izuku catches her with his other hand right before she tumbles.

“Uravity is my favorite hero,” he tells her, voice forced into a loud whisper. He smiles secretively. “So if she’s your favorite hero, that means we can be friends. Best friends. Right?”

Mizuki pulls back, eyes wide with wonder. Her smile is big and toothy and ridiculous, and Shouto melts just a little bit.

“No!” Mizu shouts with a giggle right before she launches herself at Midoriya like the polar end of a magnet. “Nonono!”

Midoriya’s expression falters as he adjusts his arms to accommodate the insanely strong starfish that’s suctioned to his narrow midsection; Mizu’s angelic hair pokes out in stardust tufts and her earmuffs slip crookedly around the wrong side of her head. Midoriya fixes them, but it only makes her hair even fluffier than before—as if that’s humanly possible. Which it isn’t. Mizu’s curls are almost as bad as Midoriya’s.

He looks up at Shouto questioningly. ‘No?’ he mouths.

Shouto sighs. “She uses no for both yes and no right now. And food. And… pretty much everything else.” He huffs a laugh, raking a hand through his ruined hair. “We’re trying to break her of it, trust me. She’s stubborn.”

Midoriya’s expression smooths over. He snorts and slips his arms beneath Mizu, hoisting her up as he stands to his full height. “Wonder where she gets that from,” he says wryly as the tiny toddler in his arms wraps her arms around his sinuous neck and refuses to let go.

(Something about seeing Midoriya with a toddler in his arms feels… right. Almost expected. Like this is the way things are supposed to be, everything stained sepia with the warm hues of domesticity and the passage of time. Almost normal.)

Shouto doesn’t dwell on it. With a sharp exhale, he shoves his hands in the pockets of his coat and shrugs noncommittally, pushing the thoughts from his mind. “Well, it’s not me, that’s for sure. She gets her stubbornness from her mom.”

“What are you talking about?” Izuku’s expression is pinched in incredulity. “It’s totally you. I could see that the second she came in, no contest.”

“I’m serious!” He’s laughing, and it’s just as musical as it was the day they met. Stupid. “Like, your sister’s awesome and all, but this kid has your facial expressions down to a science. It’s so obvious.” His expressions twist sharply. “Wait, what’s her name again? I know you told me in Switzerland, but—“

“Mizuki,” Shouto reminds him, realizing that they never actually got around to introductions like they intended. He clears his throat. “We, uh, call her Mizu for short.”

“Right, right, I remember.” Midoriya’s eyes light up with curiosity as he touches a few silvery strands of her tousled hair where they float around her soft, gleeful face. “Was the moon symbolism intentional, or—?”

“Coincidence, I think. Her hair came in later,” Shouto says, frowning. “Not sure though. I’ll have to ask Fuyumi.”

“You don’t have to. Just wondering.” Izuku begins bouncing on his toes lightly, grinning as Mizu clings to him. She giggles and babbles nonsensically, soft consonants blending together to form almost-words interspersed with the occasional no. With flushed cheeks and clumsy hands, she attaches herself to Midoriya like an octopus and doesn’t spare a single glance in Shouto’s direction at all.

“Mizu-chaaaan,” Midoriya coos softly. She shrieks in delight when he bends forward, dipping her upside down for a brief moment in time, their hair defying the laws of gravity and physics when they swing back up. Midoriya, breathless and flushed with arms full of exuberance in toddler form, looks over the top of Mizu’s head to meet Shouto’s gaze. “God, can I keep her? Your sister won’t mind, right?”

His words strike a chord, and Shouto stiffens. Oh my god, he thinks, horror cresting in his stomach. Is this how Fuyumi feels whenever I come over?

Shouto makes a mental note to apologize to her and buy her a bouquet of flowers or three next time he visits. (He also makes another note to tell Mizuki that she’s a filthy traitor and he’ll never trust her affections again. Goddammit.)

Shouto starts to say something along the lines of, ‘My sister is incredibly pregnant and lives in a state of constant rage these days, so I’m fairly fucking sure she’d mind if you kidnapped her firstborn,’ but he doesn’t get a syllable out before he hears a door open down the hallway in the direction of Midoriya’s old bedroom. He clamps his mouth shut. Even Midoriya seems to deflate a little bit, Mizu quieting in his arms as if she can feel the sudden apprehension floating in the air.

Footsteps. Two sets. One familiar, one… not so familiar. Light, and almost hesitant. Shouto frowns, wondering if Midoriya Inko started dating somebody, or perhaps Bakugou’s mother is simply here visiting—

Oh.

Oh.

Shouto feels the blood drain from his face just as Midoriya Inko and Lucy Albright-Midoriya round the corner of the hallway on the other side of the living room. Time slows and grinds to a halt, the seconds growing sticky and syrupy like molasses in the dead of winter. Shouto drips and stretches, pools and wilts; he’s putty, all malleable and raw in a way he hasn’t felt for years. Years.
Unsurprisingly, Midoriya Inko looks exactly the way she did seven years ago, a few silver streaks in her hair and some new smile lines notwithstanding. Her face is kind and soft around the edges, green eyes a perfect mirror of her son’s. When she sees Shouto she practically glows, smile widening and eyes crinkling at the edges like candy wrappers, and when her eyes fall on Mizuki she radiates like a beacon. Blinding. Effervescent. A solar flare made flesh.

And then there’s Lucy.

Shouto’s skin stretches taut over his tempered steel skeleton, bones unbending and rigid against the onslaught of things and feelings and too much, need to leave, can’t do this oh my god—

Lucy, with her sunshine hair tied up in a messy knot and circles beneath her eyes. She looks exhausted, shoulders slumped beneath her cashmere sweater, and her rose-petal lips are thin, pressed together and downturned at the edges as she looks between Shouto and Midoriya, Midoriya and Mizuki, and Mizuki and Shouto. Her plucked eyebrows furrow, confused, and she opens her mouth to say something, but she is stopped by a languid yawn at the last second.

She looks like she hasn’t gotten sleep in ten years. Frustratingly enough, even in this state, she is still undeniably beautiful.

Shouto burns.

I’m fine. I’m fine. Everything is fine. He recalls high ceilings and swirling skirts and you’re not supposed to be here, where am I supposed to be, then? Lilac flowers dipped in mercury and sharp enough to cut under the tintype scrutiny of the stars. A kiss that never happened.

Everything is not fine.

Thankfully, Midoriya Inko is there to save the day in the only way she knows how: with hugs and joyful tears to rival those of her only son.

“Todoroki Shouto, as I live and breathe,” she gasps, marching across the living room to gather him in a hug that practically knocks the wind from him. She pats his back and rubs small circles against his shoulder blades just the way she used to, and he tries not to melt into her touch instinctively. When she pulls back, her eyes are shining. “Oh, honey, you’re so tall! When did that happen?”

“Somewhere in between ages eighteen and twenty-five, probably,” Midoriya chimes, smiling crookedly. Mizuki buries her face against his neck with a giggle. “But that’s just a guess. Could be wrong.”

“Hush, you,” she tells him over her shoulder, smiling up at Shouto like he’s the brightest one in the room. She pats his unscarred cheek lovingly. “Goodness, I feel so old now. Where have the years gone?”

Shouto smiles. “It’s very nice to see you again, Midoriya-san,” he says, bowing a few inches perfunctorily. “It’s been a while.”

“Shouto, dear, how many times do I have to tell you to call me Inko?”

He laughs quietly through his nose. “At least a few more times, Midoriya-san. I’m sure I’ll get it right eventually.”

She chuckles warmly and squeezes his shoulder lovingly with her tiny soft hand. Midoriya Inko has always been a tactile person—a trait she passed onto her son in spades—and Shouto, despite his general aversion to being touched or handled in any way, has never minded her motherly
attentions. He tells himself it’s because she’s persistent to a fault and never lets a hug go unreciprocated, but he knows it’s actually because he likes Inko. Quite a lot, really. (What can he say? The woman makes a mean bowl of soba.)

“And who do we have here?” Inko asks, turning to face her son. She braces her hands against her hips and smiles sweetly at Mizuki, whose eyes are wide with fear as she looks between Lucy and Inko. “Shouto, is this your daughter? She looks just like you.”

Shouto blinks and shakes his head back and forth. “No. Uh, no, no—this is my niece. Mizuki. My older sister’s daughter. I’m just… ah. Babysitting until lunchtime. As a favor to my sister.”

Inko tries to catch Mizu’s eye, but she clams up and holds onto Midoriya even tighter, pressing her face into the fabric of his t-shirt to hide from the rest of the world. Midoriya laughs quietly, the sound resonating from someplace low in his chest. “She’s a bit attached to me,” he says, rubbing Mizuki’s back gently.

“You think?” Shouto repeats, raising an eyebrow.

Midoriya smirks. “All right, I know. But come on, can you blame her?”

No. “Yes.” I don’t blame her at all. “I can, actually. I do.”

“Ooh, somebody’s jealous.” Midoriya laughs, looking rather pleased with himself. His eyes are bright as cloverleaves. “You’re just mad she likes me more. Fess up, Todoroki.”

“I’m not jealous,” he mutters under his breath. Minutely envious, perhaps. A little miffed. But he’s not jealous, no way. Todoroki Shouto does not get jealous.

(Todoroki Shouto gets a little bit jealous.)

Inko coos at Mizu where she’s tucked into Midoriya’s shoulder, obsidian eyes peeking through the strands of her superfine silver hair where it hangs in front of her face. Inko sighs dreamily. “Oh, sweetheart, she’s just adorable. Reminds me of when Izuku was small—”

“Mom.” Izuku sounds pained. He shifts Mizuki a little higher on his hip. “Come on, really?”

She tuts in disapproval. “It’s my job to embarrass you whenever you’re home, Izuku. And you’re never home. Let me have this.” She waves her son off. “Besides, everybody loves a good potty-training story or two. Right, Lucy? Izuku was just the cutest little boy—”

Slowly, Midoriya Inko’s words fade out of existence, slipping between the spider web cracks in Shouto’s carefully-maintained façade. Sound seeps through those horrible, bottomless fissures bit by bit until all he can hear is the steady drumbeat of his pulse as his heart fights to pump ice-cold slush through his veins. Syllables and hard consonants muddle together, crushed between periods and commas; vowels dissolve into hollow echoes of their former selves.

When Shouto looks at Lucy, it’s like that damn explosion all over again. Ears, ringing. Breathing, loud. The end of something undefinable resting beneath his fingertips, ripe for harvest, but no matter how hard he tries, he can’t bring himself to find the strength to pull.

Lucy Albright isn’t the blushing bride she was last time Shouto saw her twirling across the dancefloor in layers of silk and satin with wilted wildflowers in her hair. There is no laughter in the lines of her face, around her mouth. No, Lucy’s face is all diamond-edges and flat planes now, carved from solid alabaster and sanded smooth with raw intelligence. Her eyes are the color of sea glass—chipped at the edges, reflective. Translucent, but no less indecipherable.
Cold. Sad. Empty.

(They say that eyes are the windows to the soul, but if that’s true, then what is it that died in Lucy Albright and left her hollow?)

Somewhere off to Shouto’s left, Midoriya flips Mizuki upside down to make her squeal with delight. Inko gushes and Midoriya laughs. It all sounds like white noise to Shouto’s ears. He should be paying attention, but he just… can’t.

Lucy’s eyes shift as if she can hear his thoughts in the empty black-and-white space around them, her gaze spearing Shouto in place with its intensity.

It… feels a lot like the end of the world. In an instant, every inch of skin on Shouto’s body goes numb, dread bottoming out somewhere in the pit of his churning stomach. There’s a paper-thin shred of reality pinched between his fingers. It rips, tears. Shreds into nothingness. He couldn’t piece it back together if he tried.

She knows. She knows. There’s no way she doesn’t. Shouto feels his fists clench at his sides as he stares, unblinking, at the wife of the man Shouto loved once upon a time—not anymore, of course, but that doesn’t fucking matter because Lucy’s right there in front of his face and Shouto feels like he’s about to be swallowed whole, consumed by the sadness that lurks in the shadows of her dull green-grey eyes as she studies him like an organism under a microscope. She doesn’t look angry, or even irritated like Shouto expected. She merely looks unsurprised, brow slack and expression drawn and lifeless. Almost like she expected this—whatever this is.

And in a way, that’s almost worse. Shouto knows what to do with anger—he knows how to direct it and how to diffuse it, turn it to his advantage in a sticky situation—but apathy?

He doesn’t know what to do with that.

Shouto can’t breathe. He feels like Lucy sank her manicured nails into his chest and cracked him wide open, splitting him apart at the seams without even trying. She watches him and blinks once, twice, eyes skimming him up and down, lingering on the left side of his face for three seconds too long. Shouto’s mouth goes dry as sandpaper.

‘What are you looking for?’ he wants to ask. ‘Did you find it?’

(He wonders if Izuku was the one who told her. Or maybe she was simply smart enough to put two and two together. He wonders why it even matters.)

Lucy’s gaze flickers over to where Izuku sits crossed-legged on the living room rug, expressively telling a story to Mizuki about some search-and-rescue op he did with Uraraka a few years back; his hands wave wildly to and fro as he details explosions and crumbling debris, his eyes illuminated like cracked glowsticks. Mizuki sits in his lap, wide-eyed and grinning as she listens to story after story about her favorite hero. Inko smiles from the kitchen where she’s putting on the kettle for tea, listening contently to the stories as they unfold one right after the other.

He sees the exact moment Lucy’s breath stutters, catching on the jagged edges of her expression. Her eyes turn to glass. Lashes flutter, skin blanches.

If there were flowers in her hair, they’d be wilting.

(Shouto doesn’t think he should be seeing this.)

“Luce?”
Shouto’s head snaps to the side. Midoriya has stopped talking, brows furrowed in concern, and Mizuki is kicking her feet wildly in his lap. He doesn’t seem to notice the disturbance, instead peering up into his wife’s face with nothing short of pure, unadulterated worry. “Luce, are you okay?” he asks again, voice soft. Personal.

Lucy blinks once, twice. She sucks in a breath through her nose and, like a snake shedding its skin, leaves everything in her expression in a heap on the floor behind her. Waxy and piecemeal. The rind of an orange.

She forces a smile that looks like it’s made of plastic. “I’m fine,” she says, but Shouto knows she’s lying. Anybody with eyes would know that she’s lying. “My stomach’s just bothering me.”

Izuku’s face only twists more. “Again? Maybe you should—“

“I’m going to go take a nap for a bit.” She doesn’t speak loudly, but Izuku stops short, hanging on her every word. She smiles tightly, like a marionette that has all the wrong strings pulled. “You’ll be back after lunch, right?”

Shouto’s stomach lurches.

Izuku glances over at Shouto for half a second, fingers twitching in his lap. He bites his lip. “Um… yeah. Sure, I can be back after lunch. No problem.” He hesitates visibly. “Hey, are you sure—?”

“I’ll be fine after I sleep for a few hours,” she tells him. “Don’t worry about me. Have fun, you two.” And with that, she gracefully sweeps into the room and dips down to steal a kiss from Izuku, tilting his chin up with two fingers for a better angle. Midoriya’s brows are pinched when she pulls away and he reaches for her hand to stop her, but she steps out of reach with a shy smile that almost looks convincing. “I’ll see you after lunch, Izuku.”

He looks torn. “Luce…” he trails, then lets out a slow sigh. “I’ll call you when I’m on my way back from the station.”

“Promise?” she asks.

“Promise,” he says. And that’s that—or so Shouto thinks, right up until it isn’t.

Lucy smiles again—this one is real, if only just—and with a pleased hum, she swoops down low once again to press another kiss against Izuku’s open mouth, stealing his breath in one deft movement.

Shouto doesn’t watch. He tries not to think about why.

“Oh, okay—“ Izuku mumbles from beyond the edges of Shouto’s vision, his words slightly muffled by skin and lips and teeth. He laughs, and the sound sends Shouto’s stomach roiling. “Luce, come on, there are children present. And my mom. It’s not— jeez, what’s gotten into you?”

She snorts. “I’m allowed to kiss you goodbye, dork.”

“No,” Mizuki grumbles, sounding remarkably put-out with the display of affection.

Shouto has the sudden and uncontrollable urge to squeeze her for the next ten years of her life and pay for her college fifteen times over. It’d be a good start, he thinks.

Chapter End Notes
A lot of people requested an in-depth analysis of Lucy as a character, so head on over here for that, if you want. If you've read this far, there are no spoilers in that post, so you're good on that front. It just might help explain some of the behind-the-scenes stuff of Izuku and Lucy's relationship that hasn't been shown in this story yet. It also justifies her response at the end of this chapter just a little better.

Tumblr | Twitter | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist
As a general rule, Shouto tries to avoid parks.

He likes to tell himself it’s because he’s far too recognizable within the confines of his home country to consider going someplace so public. That the countless fumbled autographs, awkward selfies, and droves of giggling schoolgirls with absolutely zero sense of personal boundaries all add up to a heaping serving of Way Too Much that rubs him the wrong way. Since going pro, he’s gotten in the habit of donning slouch beanies and buttoning his coat up to his eyeballs every time he goes out in public—if not for his own sanity, then for his family’s, at the very least. Any attention he diverts from himself, he diverts from them.

Parks are the worst offenders for this unwanted attention. When he was a sidekick, he used to route his morning jogs through nearby parks because he enjoyed the scenery and the clear, paved paths—but now? Now Shouto has to jog through back alleys and empty side streets just to avoid being mobbed by his unofficial fan base. He can hardly open a window in his apartment without somebody recognizing him and screaming his name, much less visit a public park full of giddy children and moody teenagers all wearing his merchandise like walking advertisements. (Shouto never approved those two-toned snapbacks, no matter what PR says. Fucking humiliating.)

But that’s… not the worst part.

Parks, by their very nature of being public meeting places, attract trouble like magnets—nowadays more than ever before, for some unfathomable reason. Perhaps it’s the appeal of the densely-packed trees and misty groves; the rusted, abandoned playgrounds with peeling paint and scuffed plastic dipped silver in the mercury moonlight; the way the cicadas shriek and drown out hushed voices that ought to travel much further than they actually do. There’s something unknowable and ominous about a park, especially at night, that makes Shouto’s skin itch right below the surface. The feeling is still there even with the sun directly overhead—it’s just a little harder to notice.

Maybe he’s just paranoid. Maybe he’s seen too many bodies dumped into decorative ponds, or witnessed too many late-night drug deals gone south. Maybe it’s because he sees death everywhere he goes these days and he’s just ten times more aware of it whenever Mizuki’s perched on his shoulders, laughing and reaching for falling snowflakes with her clumsy hands like the world isn’t actively rotting from its core.

Or maybe Shouto’s simply much too jaded for twenty-five years old.

Maybe, maybe, maybe—

“No!”

Shouto blinks once. Twice. The dirty metal floor jostles beneath his feet as skyscrapers whiz past.
them on the other side of grimy, handprint-smudged windows of the transit train. The press of bodies is warm and stifling against the back of his neck. Dropping his gaze, he finds Mizuki at his feet, tugging on his trouser leg with one of her mitten-clad hands, eyes wide.

“No,” she repeats, quieter than before.

Shouto sighs through his nose and smiles softly down at her, adjusting his hold on the worn handle above his head as the train cuts a sharp right curve around the financial district of the city. Absently, he reaches down with his free hand to adjust her earmuffs. She’s never liked public transit very much before, but she’s doing well this time, all things considered. He’ll have to tell Fuyumi.

“No,” he agrees seriously, smoothing her silver curls down a bit. When the train jostles them again, Shouto grips the back of her coat and shifts his foot forward so she can wrap her arms around his calf securely. “Hang on, kiddo. We’re almost there.”

“Shou,” she says quietly, pressing her face against his leg. “Mmpfthree.”

“Hmm?”

“Mmpfthree.”

Shouto huffs a quiet laugh. “You’re going to have to run that by me one more time.”

She tilts her face up toward him, eyes filled with sadness and frustration. “Mommy,” she says a little more clearly, voice wobbling dangerously.

Somewhere deep inside his chest, Shouto’s heart folds in half, edges all crimped and crumpled. He grips the handle above his head a little more tightly. “You’re going to see her soon, snowflake,” he says warmly. “Just a little while longer. I promise.”

Thinking quickly, he pinches his index finger and thumb together and pulls them back apart. Ice crystals thread together, overlapping and interlocking with one another as the ice expands into a smooth sphere about the size of a jumbo jawbreaker. Wordlessly, Shouto hands the ice to Mizu, who grabs it greedily and begins sucking on it. Water dampens her mittens as the sphere melts in her hands; he makes a mental note to dry them when she’s done.

Then Shouto hears an awed whisper over the roar of the train.

“Oh my god, I cannot believe this.”

Invisible ice water drizzles down his back unpleasantly. Shouto glances up through his lashes, eyes already narrowed in exhausted irritation. He sees the silvery backside of a phone being held in his direction, reflecting the morning sunlight that streams through the dirty windows of the elevated train.

“Midoriya,” Shouto starts wearily, sighing. “Please—“

“You sap.” Midoriya is fit to burst with light, smiling as stupidly as he is. His dimples are deep and his scarf matches his garish red shoes—he’s basically a walking Christmas advertisement in all the best ways. And he’s still recording Shouto, dammit. “You filthy sap. That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Please stop recording me.”
“No way, dude. This is a once in a lifetime chance for the rest of the world to see your human side.” Midoriya points down at Mizuki, who is sucking on the ice and looking around the train at all the people that surround them. “Does that calm her down or something?”

Shouto bites through the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood. He counts to ten and only makes it to six. “It’s…” he starts, then exhales sharply through his nose. “I don’t know. She sucked her thumb for a while, but she wouldn’t break the habit without some kind of replacement. It’s—it’s a stopgap, I suppose.”

“Stopgap,” Mizuki mumbles around the ice she’s holding against her lips.

“Stopgap, sweetheart, not—” Shouto stops himself, noticing Midoriya’s growing grin and the camera that’s still trained on him. He huffs in irritation and holds up a hand in front of the lens, effectively blinding Midoriya. “If you don’t stop recording me, I swear I’ll—”

“You’ll ice the circuitry in my phone, I know, I know.” Midoriya bats his hand away and tries to raise the phone above Shouto’s hand to get a better angle, but Shouto’s hand follows his movement and impedes his footage once again. Midoriya pouts. “Come on, I just want a little proof,” he pleads. “For posterity, you know?”

Shouto doesn’t budge. “No. Give me the phone, Midoriya.”

“But this is just like those Nat Geo specials we used to watch in high school! I mean, just imagine it.” He lowers his voice, grinning cheekily until his eyes crinkle at the corners. “The wild Todoroki Shouto in his natural habitat, acting like a human for the first time in—”

“Rude.”

“—heart of ice, melted by a toddler in pink earmuffs, in plain view of God and everyone—”

“Oh, wow. You’re hilarious,” he deadpans. “Really, a true comedian. Have you considered a career in stand-up?”

Midoriya shrugs and locks his phone, slipping it into the back pocket of his jeans with a crooked smile that puts the rising sun to shame with its brightness. “Hey, I thought it was funny. Not my fault you’re a bitter old man with no sense of humor.”

Shouto gives him a look. “Midoriya. You are literally six months older than me.”

“That’s beside the point.”

“What are you talking about? That’s exactly the point.”

“No, the point is that you’re secretly ninety-two and don’t think I’m funny anymore.” Midoriya’s expression becomes somber. “A true tragedy. The world will mourn.”

Shouto rolls his eyes and bites the inside of his lower lip to keep it from doing things it shouldn’t—like smiling, for instance. “All this coming from the guy who thinks putting chopsticks in his mouth and pretending to be a walrus is hilarious.”

Midoriya recoils, scandalized, and places a hand over his chest. His eyes are wide and hurt, but Shouto can’t miss the way his mouth quirks upward against his will at the very last second. “Words hurt, Todoroki. We’ve talked about this.”

“Have we?” Shouto purses his lips, feigning remembrance. He shrugs. “Sorry, don’t recall.”
Midoriya barks out a laugh, shaking his head. “Now who’s the rude one?”

“Still you.”

“Uh-huh,” he says, clearly unconvinced. His eyes light up with mischief and he looks down at Mizuki, whose mouth is red and damp with the half-melted ice she’s still happily suckling on. “Hey, Mizu-chan,” Midoriya asks, voice pitched with deceptive friendliness. “Do you think I’m rude?”

She blinks at him, eyes wide and mouth slightly open. She thinks for a moment, then says, “No.”

Midoriya lifts an eyebrow in Shouto’s direction. “Well, there you have it. My new best friend has spoken.”

Shouto laughs under his breath and opens his mouth to say something. Maybe it’s another humored jab or a dry comment, or perhaps a half-amused threat of semi-violence. He doesn’t know, and it doesn’t matter. What matters is that he ultimately doesn’t get to say anything before the words are torn from his mouth.

For the briefest, most elusive moment, the train passes between two skyscrapers, allowing the midmorning sunlight to stream in through the windows of the transit and stain Midoriya’s skin a warm, buttery, honey-gold color. Shouto can see the edge of that silver scar that bisects his eyebrow right below the edge of his knit cap. The hat is somehow managing to smash his unruly hair flat for once in his natural-born life, and Shouto would be lying if he said it didn’t look some modicum of… pretty. Impossibly pretty.

Midoriya is smiling at Shouto and waiting for him to say something, unaware that Shouto’s suffocating in time, choking on memories of weekend excursions into the city with their friends at school and the trip they took to Long Island that one time they had two days off in a row in New York. The air reeks of familiarity, sour and impossible to ignore.

Suddenly, the press of people on all sides of them is too cloying, too close, too warm, even for someone like Shouto with the homeostatic regulations of his Quirk. Shouto can’t breathe with Midoriya looking at him like that, much less put two thoughts together—

Just as quickly as it happens, the train passes into the shadow of another building, plunging them back into shades of steely grey and glimmering glass. Time resumes its clip.

Somewhere overhead, the PA system warbles out an announcement.

“Our stop’s next,” Shouto murmurs, dropping his gaze to Mizuki. She’s finished with her ice treat and clinging to his leg once again, so Shouto bends down and slips her mitten off, heating it up in his left palm until the water evaporates out of the fabric in curls of pale steam. He shakes it out before returning it to her, helping her slip it on over her stubby fingers with practiced ease. “Want me to carry you?”

She nods shyly and lifts her arms up. Before Shouto can swoop down to grab her, however, Midoriya gets there first.

“Gotcha!” he exclaims, hitching Mizuki against his hip. She giggles and squeals, and Midoriya bounces her a few times until she’s laughing so hard she can barely breathe. She secures her arms around his neck and buries her face against his shoulder, hair puffing outward like a cloud.

Shouto swallows. He feels oddly dizzy. “You— you don’t have to,” he says. “Carry her, I mean. I can do it.”
“I want to.” Midoriya meets Shouto’s gaze over the top of Mizu’s head, green eyes determined and brimming with fondness. He smiles softly. “Besides, I’ve got to keep up with my competition somehow. She’s going to start calling me Uncle Izuku before you know it.”

Shouto’s face screws up. “No she won’t. She doesn’t even call me Uncle Shoucchan, so there’s no way—“

“‘Uncle Shoucchan?’” Midoriya wheezes, clapping his free hand over his mouth. He guffaws through his fingers, shoulders shaking with unbridled laughter. “Oh my god. Oh my god. That is the purest thing I’ve ever heard in my life, I swear. I am totally telling Uraraka and Iida about that one next time they call.” He shakes his head, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. “‘Uncle Shoucchan,’” he says once again, shaking his head. “Amazing.”

There’s a market on the eastern side of the park when they arrive, and at first, slipping into the throng of people seems like a really good idea.

Mizuki is perched on Midoriya’s broad shoulders, her boot-clad feet swinging wildly as she reaches out toward every brightly-colored stall laden with stacks upon stacks of worthless holiday trinkets, freshly-made sweets and spiced drinks, and fluffy rainbow assortments of homemade scarves, mittens, and masks meant for fending off the winter chill. Shouto follows closely behind, keeping his hat tucked securely over his hair and his scarf wrapped tightly around the lower half of his face. Nobody seems to notice them in their civilian clothes, thankfully—though admittedly, that’s likely due to the fact that Mizuki is drawing all the smiles and attention, not them.

“No!” she giggles as she leans to the right, surging against Midoriya’s firm grip on her legs. There’s a stand selling roasted nuts she has her eye on, but Midoriya huffs a laugh and steers her the other way despite her protests.

“This was a bad idea,” Midoriya says over his shoulder where Shouto has fallen into step since exiting the train. “She wants everything.”

Shouto reaches up to push her reaching hands down right as they round a corner around a stall selling small hand-carved wooden trinkets for Shogatsu. “Of course she does,” he sighs. “Haven’t you been around toddlers before? They’re magpies.”

Midoriya bounces Mizu with a shrug. “Eh, not really. I guess this would be count as my first time.”

“Really?” He tries not to sound as surprised as he feels.

Midoriya bites his lower lip as he skirts around a woman selling spiced cider by the cupful, shaking his head when he’s offered some. “Well…” he trails, sounding unsure. “I mean, I’ve been around kids before—you know, school tours, convention signings. All that stuff. But I’m an only child and so is Lucy, so we don’t have a lot of kids in our extended family.”

Shouto pulls a face. “You do those?”

“What?”

“Signings.”
His face clears in understanding. “Oh. Yeah, all the time. As many as I can, at least. I always liked going to hero cons and stuff when I was a kid, so I like to return the favor whenever I can.”

Midoriya raises a disbelieving eyebrow in Shouto’s direction. “You don’t?”

Shouto winces and busies himself with twisting the buttons on his peacoat. “I might always conveniently get sick or injured whenever they come around.” Hurriedly, he adds, “And before you say anything, no, I’m not proud of it.”

Midoriya snorts and shakes his head. “Figures,” he says, and keeps on walking. “You’re too cool for those sorts of things.”

Too cool for those sorts of things.

Shouto stops short in the center of the plaza, a stone’s throw from the holiday hero merchandise stand that’s set up near the dry, empty fountain. The marketplace bustles around Shouto on all sides like a living, breathing current, and the crisp December air slices through his lungs with every inhale. From here, he can see the telltale pastel pinks of knockoff Uravity merch and a collection of blue-and-silver hats made to look like Ingenium’s helmet. Shouto doesn’t see any of his own merchandise.

Too cool.

Huh.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he inquires, tilting his head to one side. A few red strands of hair fall into his eyes.

Midoriya stops walking. He turns on his heel and blinks in surprise—first at Shouto, then at the empty space between them that hadn’t been there a few minutes ago. Mizuki, obviously displeased with the sudden halt of her progress, curls her fingers into the folds of Midoriya’s beanie and tugs it halfway off his head impatiently, sending green curls springing loose on the left side of his head. He doesn’t seem to notice.

“Are you—” Midoriya starts, but stops short and shuffles his feet. There’s a stiffness to his shoulders and a redness to his cheeks that reminds Shouto of candy apples. He laughs awkwardly, eyes skittering over everyone and everything except Shouto, oddly enough. “Uh. Sorry, I’m confused. Did… did I say something wrong just now? Because if so, I really didn’t mean—”

“No,” Shouto answers honestly, shaking his head. He shoves his hands in the pockets of his coat and approaches, careful not to bump anybody on accident. When he’s standing directly in front of Midoriya, he finishes, “I just don’t know what you meant by that.”

Midoriya blinks, eyes wide—the color of pine needles and tangled ivy. “Oh. Oh. Right. Um.” He clears his throat and reaches up to fix his hat clumsily. “Well, I’m just not surprised you don’t do stuff like that—conventions and signings and whatever, I mean. They… they don’t seem like your thing?” His cheeks are flaming. “That’s all I meant. I wasn’t trying to insult you or anything, honest.”

“Midoriya,” Shouto says quietly. He chances a faint curve to his mouth and meets his line of sight head-on, sinking into that pine needle gaze like a featherbed. “Relax, I’m not upset. Just curious.”

Midoriya’s grip tightens a bit around Mizuki’s ankles and he clamps his mouth closed, jaw muscle fluttering delicately. He looks rather pale beneath the thin veneer of cinnamon-speckled spots that dust his cheekbones.
“Sorry,” he stammers after a moment. “Sorry, you’re—"

He exhales a bitter laugh and shakes his head, dropping his gaze to the frosted cobblestones beneath their feet. Shouto curls his hands into fists in the pockets of his coat and tells himself he’s not about to turn himself inside out from nerves.

Midoriya lets out a long, low sigh and reaches up to press against his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. “You know, I almost didn’t go through with this today?” he asks all of a sudden, laughing bitterly. “Thought about calling in sick or something like that. Rescheduling. I don’t know.” He sighs sharply, shaking his head. “I mean, I was so freaking nervous, I couldn’t even eat breakfast. My mom said I was being—”

“Me too.”

“—ridiculous, that it’d be stupid for me to even consider calling this off after what happened in Geneva, but I told her—” Midoriya stops short, words failing him. He stares. Blinks. “Wait, what?”

Shouto tugs his lower lip between his teeth and shrugs, sinking into the confines of his coat as much as possible. “I almost did the exact same thing—calling and telling you I was sick, faking a work emergency. Something.”

Midoriya is staring at him wide-eyed, incredulous. “Why didn’t you?”

A loaded question with a simple answer: “I knew you wouldn’t buy it.”

He barks out a laugh, dimples deepening. His eyes crinkle at the corners. “Well, duh. You’ve been sick, what, once before? And you still showed up to class anyway. I remember.”

Shouto remembers, too. He remembers waking up one morning with his bedsheets singed and subsequently iced over, his skin pale and clammy, and a throat that refused to cooperate outside of manic coughing and hacking. Aizawa had been the one to erase his Quirk until Shouto succumbed to his shivers in the back of the room and had to be walked back to the dorms—by Midoriya, of course, because who else would volunteer for something like that? That self-sacrificing idiot.

“I wasn’t that sick,” he mumbles under his breath, glaring out across the crowd of people around them. “All of you panicked over nothing.”

Midoriya raises his eyebrows in disbelief, mouth twitching into a faint curve of amusement. “Todoroki, you were basically dead. Like, call-the-morgue-and-inform-your-next-of-kin dead. Of course we panicked.”

“I was fine. You’re remembering it wrong.”

Midoriya sputters a laugh incredulously. “Trust me, I’m remembering it perfectly. I was the one who brought you notes from English for a week until you got better. You yelled at me every time I showed up before you lost your voice.”

“I was fine. You’re remembering it wrong.”

Midoriya sputters a laugh incredulously. “Trust me, I’m remembering it perfectly. I was the one who brought you notes from English for a week until you got better. You yelled at me every time I showed up before you lost your voice.”

“You were treating me like an invalid,” he says stubbornly. “I think I was justified in that.”

“You had a fever!”

“I always have a fever.”

Midoriya rolls his eyes good-naturedly. “Well, if you’ll remember, you ended up giving me that fever, so I think I’m the most qualified to judge just how sick you really were. Let me have this.”
And with that, he turns and begins walking back through the crowd, Shouto in his place at Midoriya’s shoulder like always. It feels normal, natural. Like they never stopped in the first place.

“That was your own fault,” Shouto argues lamely as they slip through the crowd, ignoring the scent of fried meats, spiced pots of tea, and golden taiyaki as best they can. “I told you to stay away from me. You’re the one who didn’t listen.”

Midoriya shrugs, bouncing Mizu on his shoulders. “Pretty sure you would’ve failed English otherwise.”

“A few points wouldn’t have killed me,” he insists, lying through his teeth. “I would’ve been fine.”

Midoriya glances sidelong at him. “Uh-huh. Sure.”

“I mean it, Midoriya.”

“Mm. Totally believe you.”

Shouto blindly reaches out and shoves Midoriya’s shoulder until he stumbles half a step with an incredulous laugh, fighting the way his own mouth threatens to stretch into a traitorous smile.

“You’re really good with her, you know.”

Shouto’s heart stops. Lodges somewhere in his throat, right behind his tongue; it presses on his teeth, threatening to overflow.

Carefully, Shouto looks up at Midoriya, who has reclined back on the bench they’re both currently sharing. His sinuous arms are crossed over his chest and there’s a small smile on his face that widens imperceptibly as he watches Mizu play in a pile of freshly-made snow.

It’s an odd little pocket of time, Shouto thinks to himself. The air is cold and they’re sitting next to each other on this yellow bench under the too-blue sky like they never left seventeen behind. Shouto keeps them both warm with the residual heat from his left side while Midoriya massages the stiffness out of his ruined, scarred hand; he’s never done well in cold weather, Shouto knows.

“Thanks,” Shouto finally says, lacing his gloved fingers together. “You’re… not half bad with her yourself. She—” Here, he winces slightly, words turning bitter on his tongue. He watches as Mizu falls back into a bank of snow to make some angels, limbs flailing outward with a giggle. “She likes you.”

“...She adores you.”

“You’re... not half bad with her yourself. She—” Here, he winces slightly, words turning bitter on his tongue. He watches as Mizu falls back into a bank of snow to make some angels, limbs flailing outward with a giggle. “She likes you.” She adores you. “I’m honestly surprised she came around that quickly.” It’s not surprising, not at all, not even a little bit.

Midoriya snorts and shakes his head, a few green curls bouncing against his forehead where they stick out from his hat. “Wow. I could hear how much it pained you to say that.”

Shouto bumps his shoulder with a grumble. “Oh, shut up. I said it, didn’t I?”

“You did, yeah. I suppose that’s gotta count for something.” He laughs, and Shouto swears the sound slices straight through him to bury somewhere deep inside his chest. Midoriya gently elbows Shouto good-naturedly a moment later, eyes crinkled at the edges and so very, very green. Lush.
Resplendent in the midmorning sunlight.

Midoriya’s been the Number One hero for years—the Symbol of Peace, herald of justice in an inherently unjust society—but up until this moment, he’s never felt truly dangerous. Not to Shouto, at least.

And Shouto… doesn’t know what to make of that. He doesn’t know what to make of any of it.

Several feet away, Mizuki holds up grey slush in her hands and frowns in dissatisfaction at the half-melted snow at her feet, trampled down by excited winter boots and misshapen by half-formed snowmen. Shouto startles out of his reveries, turning away from Midoriya long enough to flex his right hand. He leeches water from the air to make a little more snow for Mizu, wincing at the slight brain freeze he gives himself in the process. Wordlessly, he dusts the entire grove in powdered sugar whiteness, blanketing the world in a second skin of something softer for his beloved niece.

Then he hears the sharp inhale of air through teeth.

He turns to find Midoriya staring at the descending snowflakes with abject wonderment reflected in his wide eyes. His face tilts upward at the faint blue-white mist that floats above them all in this isolated part of the park, sharp gaze following each flake that the breeze sees fit to deposit on his freckled face—a few land on the ends of his hair, his long, curved eyelashes, the tip of his nose, his mouth. They pepper his face, melting away to dewdrop gemstones on the scarred surface of his skin—

And Shouto doesn’t think he’s ever seen anything more transfixing in his life.

“Didn’t know you could do this,” Midoriya murmurs, reaching up to catch a few windblown flakes in the palm of his gloved hand. His smile is small and secretive. “I mean, when you made the snow pile earlier, I figured out you could make the stuff. Obviously. But not like…” he waves vaguely.

“Not like this. *This* is incredible, Todoroki.”

A snowflake lands on Shouto’s left cheek with a sizzle and a sputter. He swallows thickly and stares long and hard down at the tangle of fingers in his lap, squeezing until his leather gloves complain under the strain.

“Thank you,” he says quietly. Across the glade, Mizuki dashes in circles with a bright smile on her face, catching snowflakes on her tongue. “I figured snowflakes out a few years ago, but there, uh… wasn’t a practical application for them.” He nods in Mizu’s direction. “Until her.”

Midoriya sinks back against the bench, smiling up at the open sky. It’s blue and bright today; an ocean of air, all crushed sapphires and utterly infinite like the sea. *Tip the world over and drown,* Shouto thinks, eyeing Midoriya’s smile like the catalyst it is. If anyone’d be able to reverse gravity in a heartbeat, it’d be him. No doubt about it, not even a little.

(Shouto wonders how long it’d take for his toes to touch the bottom of that endless ocean. He wonders why he cares.)

“Wow. You’re, like, *really* good at all of this,” Midoriya says finally, catching a few snowflakes on his tongue. He eyes Shouto sidelong, mouth quirked up at one corner in a wry smile, dimple flashing. “The whole ‘cool uncle’ shtick. Faux-fatherhood, domesticity, whatever you want to call it. It suits you.”

He hums. “It suits you, too.”

The words are out before Shouto can stop them. He clamps his mouth shut tight enough for his
teeth to crack and curses in every language he knows. He expects Midoriya to blush, to reject the sentiment, to get up and leave—

Except he doesn’t do any of those things because he’s Midoriya, and Midoriya always does the exact opposite of what Shouto expects.

Instead, he only chuckles at the slip and shrugs, tilting his head back as he sinks into the bench comfortably. His eyes drift shut, features bathed in buttery sunlight and pale snow and oh, god, Shouto might actually be having a heart attack right now. His fingers spasm, curling into the fabric of his trousers.

Midoriya doesn’t seem to notice his plight. “I don’t think I’m meant for that sort of life,” he says, not opening his eyes. “You, on the other hand, maybe. I can totally see that happening someday. But me?”

He smiles blindly up at the sky—the vast emptiness that makes them both look so small and insignificant, no matter their hero rankings. No matter their history.

Midoriya lets a small sigh out through his nose, drowning out Mizu’s giggles in the background for a heartbeat and a half. “I don’t think kids are my thing,” he says, voice hushed and oddly subdued. “They’re not in my cards, I guess. You know what I mean?”

No, Shouto thinks. I don’t.

No because Midoriya is a natural with Mizu, the girl who was picky enough to not befriend her own father for six weeks just because she felt like it. No because Mizuki clearly likes Midoriya even more than Shouto, no matter how much it stings to even think about admitting that. No because Midoriya has always been extraordinary father material and the world would be lesser without his contribution to the gene pool.

In the end, he lies. “Yeah,” he says, hating every syllable. They taste like bitter lemons on his tongue. “Hero life makes things difficult. I get it.”

“Mm. Figured you would.” Midoriya cracks open one eyelid and looks up at Shouto, mouth crooked and…

Odd.

Very odd.

It’s not a smile, whatever it is—not quite, at least. It’s etched into his face, all jagged and glasslike in its transparency, pressing against his freckles like a key jammed into the wrong lock.

Shouto doesn’t know why it bothers him so much. Maybe it’s because he simply doesn’t know what it means and he’s unused to such a feeling when it comes to someone as open and genuine as Midoriya. Maybe it’s because that smile looks like molded plastic manufactured in the finest factory this side of the Pacific Ocean. Maybe it’s something else, something indefinable that Shouto just can’t quite grasp without more information.

In the end, Shouto doesn’t manage to figure it out before their time is up. Midoriya leaves precisely at noon after receiving a text from his wife that makes his mouth twist once again—there and gone in a flash, too quickly for Shouto to analyze further. But then Midoriya is smiling again because that’s what he’s good at, and Shouto pushes the worry from his mind.

They say their goodbyes and promise to keep in touch this time around—Mizu cries a little bit and
refuses to let go of Midoriya’s leg for the longest time, only releasing him after receiving multiple half-promised visits to Kyushu and two pieces of candy he produced out of fucking nowhere. (Honestly, the man is a magician; Shouto needs to ask him how he did that.)

And then he’s gone, disappeared into the crowd in the plaza like a specter. And not for the first time on December 27th, Shouto finds himself alone.

He’s never minded being alone before.

This time feels different.

March 11, 2025

That not-smile burns itself into Shouto’s mind like a white-hot iron brand with watercolor edges stained in sepia. By all accounts, it shouldn’t stick out in his mind—between the villains raiding Tokyo, Fuyumi’s developing pregnancy, his mother’s latest obsession with cactus gardening, and Natsu’s brand-new fiancé, Shouto has plenty to keep him busy.

And yet.

Shouto finds himself lying awake at night in the weeks following December 27th. He is twenty-six years old now, past the first quarter of his lifespan and contentedly watching one of the Vine compilations Midoriya sent him this morning in a friendly-worded text. (“You’ll love the one at 13:27!”) As he watches the clips he’s seen a thousand times before, grainy footage blurring together into an amalgamation of noisy pixels, he can’t help but stop and wonder about what it all meant. That smile. That weird, uncomfortable smile that hardly looked like a smile at all.

It doesn’t make sense, his mind screams at him. It means something, it means something, I have to figure out what it means—

Six weeks later on a warm evening in late April, Lucy Albright-Midoriya is murdered on international television.

Everything makes a little bit more sense after that.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Lucy’s death is blatantly foreshadowed and explicitly mentioned in this. The rest of the chapter is soft and fluffy. It’s a little jarring, but that was the intended effect I’d hoped for. Death is usually pretty sudden and unexpected.
In Noctem

Chapter Notes

If you've ignored all of my other author's notes, PLEASE READ THIS ONE:

Starting here, you are officially entering into the darkest part of this story, both content-wise and emotionally speaking. CONSIDER THIS TO BE YOUR WARNING.

Grief is not an easy thing to go through for anybody, as I'm sure many of us know. It is a long process that impacts everything else in a person's life, and we will see that in upcoming chapters as Izuku copes with Lucy's death. This death sequence has been planned since chapter eleven or twelve and will MAJORLY affect the rest of the story, so don't think of this as an easy way for me to open Izuku back up to a possible relationship with Shouto or anything like that. It won't be that easy for either of them. Not at all. However, Lucy's death is necessary for a myriad of reasons that will be discussed later on in the story or in a Tumblr post if there's enough demand for that sort of thing. We've got a lot of tiny moving cogs that will be syncing up here shortly, tying everything together. It may hurt to read, most likely, but it serves a larger purpose. As the author, please trust me to do this story justice.

This chapter is part one of two, by the way. I wanted to ease you guys into things as best I could so you can all acclimate to the situation and the stakes set henceforth. The next chapter will be where all the big stuff happens.

This is your final warning. Roots is an inherently angsty story. Remember that before you make the final decision to read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning of April 22nd starts out like many others—with a cup of coffee and a phone call.

Outside the large glass windows of Shouto’s apartment, the city begins to stir, taking that first shuddering breath of morning as the sun touches the horizon with curious, rose-gold fingertips. He watches the sunrise from his usual spot at the kitchen island, yesterday’s newspaper spread flat on the countertop in front of him with the half-finished Sudoku puzzle and angrily scribbled-out crossword both glaring up at him in spider-scratch blue ink. He braces his elbows against the cold granite, sighing softly through his nose, and clutches his coffee cup between both hands before taking a languid sip that cools the second it hits his tongue. French roast isn’t his favorite, but it works in a pinch.

Need to hit the grocery store this morning, he muses. Bookstore, too.

It’s Saturday. A day of rest for most, but not for Shouto—heroes don’t get to take it easy on weekends like everybody else. He has patrol at noon on the south side of the city today, right in the worst part of town. It’s routine, nothing super invasive or involved; he’s not expecting anything to go wrong. Still, he is expecting something because that part of town always delivers on scum and villainy.
Maybe it’ll be a drug deal or a drive-by shooting today. Perhaps he’ll bust another human trafficking ring or three. Stop a kidnapping. Or maybe—just maybe—a real, honest-to-god villain will show up to keep Shouto on his toes.

*Unlikely,* he thinks bitterly. He sighs, steam curling past his nostrils to mingle with the cooling vapor from his coffee. He knows he should be grateful for the lack of activity that’s overtaken Japan these last few months—nobody’s suffering any more than usual at the hands of villainy this morning, *hooray*—but he can’t help the thread of resentment that tangles every thought in his head. All the action seems to be happening in Europe and America right now, keeping Midoriya, Bakugou, and Kirishima plenty busy. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, Shouto sits in his kitchen, three helpings short on action. Even Momo is running out of office filing cabinets to reorganize and homeless shelters to resupply. Yesterday, she started sorting her *thumbtacks*—first by color, then by sharpness.

Boredom, Shouto knows, is a sign of peace. A lack of villainy should always be taken advantage of. He can practically hear Aizawa droning on and on about it in homeroom, his teacher’s eyes half-closed with his sleeping bag pulled tightly around his face like the petals of a very puffy, very tired sunflower. *Be thankful for downtime when you have it.*

Yet Shouto itches to get out there and do something. *Anything,* just as long as it’s not boring and doesn’t require a whole lot of brainpower on his part. He’s a weapon—point him and shoot. Figure out the logistics later.

Suddenly, his cell phone begins to buzz.

Shouto blinks down at his phone where it sits face-up on the counter. It vibrates a steady pulse, shifting in an awkward circle with every iteration; He feels it through the granite countertop and up his elbows.

*Momo,* the caller ID reads.

Shouto takes one more sip of his coffee, sets his cup down over the remnants of the crossword puzzle, and answers the phone.

“Shouto speaking.” His voice is still slightly rough around the edges with the final vestiges of sleep.

Momo, on the other hand, sounds out of breath. Something uncomfortable pricks the back of his neck. “Shouto?” she asks. There are voices on the other end of the line and the sound of a muffled crash. “Shouto—oh my god—are you there? Please be there…”

“I’m here,” he repeats, a little louder this time. He frowns, noticing a blue thread that’s come loose on the hem of his plaid pajama pants. He reaches down to tug at it absentmindedly. “Need me to come in early again? I can be there in ten if—”

“News,” she gasps out, panicked. “The— the news, Shouto, check the news. Right now. God, it’s *everywhere.*”

Shouto feels ice creep up his spine, the sensation insidious and positively frigid. He presses the phone to his ear. “Momo, what are you talking about?”

“The goddamn news!” she snaps, sounding almost hysterical. She sucks in a sharp breath and exhales with a shudder, voice more subdued than before—but not by much. “Just… watch it, all right? I don’t have time to—”
He doesn’t hesitate, slipping off his padded island stool in one fluid movement. He stalks into his vast living room with feet slapping against cold tile and thudding against the soft carpet one right after the other, reaching for the remote that always sits on the left side of his coffee table, unused. It takes him a moment to find the power button and switch on the flatscreen mounted on the wall.

He flips through channels, only half-paying attention to the sharp-tongued orders Momo is throwing around at their agency. He hears “Mach jet” and “evac squad” and “move your asses.” He flips past game shows and infomercials, shitty soap operas and B-list films dubbed in Chinese. He doesn’t even know what channel the news is on, much less how to find it faster.

Rapidly hitting the button, he shakes his head. “Momo, I don’t…” he starts helplessly.

“—in the Anchorage Channel, somewhere just below the southern tip of Manhattan and directly west of Brooklyn where three ships are being held for ransom at the hands of Vindicator, a supervillain the hero association of Manhattan has been after since early 2023. Rescue efforts are being spearheaded by none other than the Number One hero and Symbol of Peace—”

Shouto’s fingers go rigid in an instant, every joint locking into place one by one. His blood runs cold.

The live footage is dark and grainy as it plays on his television, all purple and black like a bruise. Shouto sees the Hudson where it meets the East River, waves capped in the pale silver reflections of the stars. The cameraman must be in a helicopter or using a Quirk to levitate; the vantage point of the shot is dizzying in its vastness, impossibly high up.

And in the background, the City That Never Sleeps is pitch-black.

Shouto feels his lungs seize up in his chest, shrivel like raisins and suffocate him. New York may have been years ago, but if there’s one thing he’ll never forget about that place, it’s the blinding brightness of it all—the in-your-face billboards and neon advertisements, glowing amber windows and flickering streetlights that never turned on when they were supposed to. Even at two in the morning, the city glowed in the dark—otherworldly. Self-sustaining in its intensity.

Now, not a single light pierces the midnight veil that’s fallen over the city, save the paleness of the full moon that edges everything in silver. Skyscrapers cut against the inky backdrop of the sky like razor blades, the water glimmers grey. It’s so unequivocally wrong that Shouto almost feels sick looking at it.

The newscaster’s voice is steady, cut from stiff cardboard and constant over the rush of white noise in Shouto’s ears.

“Eyewitness reports confirm that the ships are still somewhere in the bay, but the number of people onboard is unknown at this time. Estimates place the headcount anywhere from six to eight hundred people on all three ships, but experts are working to track down an exact figure.”

The screen keeps flickering from the live footage of the bay to a shaky video of the exact moment the lights winked out in the city, most likely recorded on a random civilian’s phone. Shouto sees the Statue of Liberty standing proud one second, torch illuminated like a beacon for all to see in the middle of the bay. Behind her, the city lights glitter like bits of yellow stardust.

The live feed flickers back. The eternal flame of Lady Liberty does not burn, and the buildings are shadows of themselves along the shoreline. Shouto can’t even see the damn monument in the bay.
He can’t see much of anything besides his own horrified reflection in the television screen.

“What is happening?” he breathes into the phone, raking his fingers through his tangled hair. The short bristles of his undercut tickle his numb fingers. “Momo, what is—?”

“We don’t know,” she answers. Her voice is clipped, professional. Nervous. “Secure comms are down in New England, so we’re going off of what we’re seeing on social media and the news. We have conflicting stories, messages being ferried by Quirk, heroes failing to report. We’re doing everything we can, but there’s not much we can do from here until we hear from the States and get clearance to go in. Everyone outside their borders is just as stuck as we are.”

“It looks like the power is out in the city,” he says numbly. Shouto sinks down onto his couch, eyes glued to the TV screen. He shakes his head. “How is that even possible? New York’s one of the biggest cities in the world, they’d have backup power—“

“I told you, we don’t know anything yet.” Momo sounds strained. She lets out a half-hysterical laugh that echoes helplessly. “Trust me, I’m frustrated too. We only caught wind of this twenty minutes ago. All we know is that those three ships are missing and the city is flying blind, heroes included.”

Shouto recoils. “That’s it? That’s everything we have on the situation?”

A pause. A horrible, horrible pause that reminds Shouto of the exact moment that black hole opened up in Geneva. Like the world was folding in on itself. Collapsing.

“Momo,” he says carefully, fighting down nausea and nerves and a million other things he’s too scared to acknowledge. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Here, she hesitates. Shouto can practically hear her bite her lower lip over the phone—a nervous habit, one she’s never been able to get rid of. One she’s never been able to hide.

Inside Shouto’s chest, his heart pounds erratically.

“It’s unconfirmed,” she finally says. “We don’t know for sure, so it’s probably best if I don’t—”

“Just tell me.”

“But it could be completely wrong!” she blusters. “We can’t assume it’s a reliable source of intel.”

“Tell me.”

“With everything so scattered, it’s impossible to corroborate—”

“Yaoyorozu!” he booms.

“We believe they’re targeting Midoriya!” she finally blurts, voice rail-thin and unfamiliar.

And in that moment, Shouto simply… stops breathing.

targeting Midoriya believe we Midoriya they’re targeting targeting targeting targeting

Midoriya

It’s all a jumble, a mess in his mind. A tangle of words and feelings, knives and broken glass, horror and confusion all crumpled together like aluminum foil. It tastes like metal in Shouto’s mouth, whatever it is, and it snakes up the inside of his esophagus and squeezes until he chokes on the air trapped in his lungs.
After Momo says his name for a third time, he realizes what this feeling—this *horrible*, inexorable feeling—is.

**Fear.**

Shouto has felt the red-hot fingers of panic close around his throat and squeeze him lifeless before. He’s experienced that heart-stopping half-breath of sheer terror right before a building collapses on top of innocent civilians. He’s gotten sick at the sight of mangled bodies and settled into grim, shameful silence at the rare sight of a failed mission or the zipped-up body bag of someone he failed to save. He suffers for his career and tries to remind himself that he helps a lot more than he harms, but every night when he sees those faces painted in watercolor shades of crimson and ash, he thinks to himself, *‘This is what it’s like to be afraid,’* and wakes up in a frozen, steaming sweat that reeks bitterly of dread.

But fear? True, gut-wrenching fear?

He doesn’t feel that very often at all.

Thickly, Shouto swallows the bile in his throat. His tongue is sandpaper, scraping the roof of his mouth raw. “Why?” he asks, just to have something to say.

“You know why,” Momo murmurs miserably.

He does. He really, truly does, but the stubborn part of Shouto’s mind wants to reject Momo’s words outright, call her on the impossibility and ridiculousness of the simple statement. Only a fool would target the Symbol of Peace and try to kill him on a public stage like this. It’s the whole point of that stupid, overblown title in the first place. Midoriya Izuku might cry and laugh and bleed like the rest of them behind closed doors, but Deku—the Number One hero and Symbol of Peace—does not. He’s stalwart, indestructible. Unshakable. A bastion clad in green with a smile that makes you feel like your lungs have been trapped in your throat and your heart dunked into the pit of your stomach.

The more logical side of Shouto’s mind, however, whispers tiny, traitorous thoughts. Thoughts that reek of practicality and reason, that echo and bump against each other with the trademark flatness of Aizawa-sensei’s tone from school. Shouto hates them. Hates them all.

*It makes sense to put Midoriya on display like this,* Shouto hears somewhere in his mind. It makes sense to target him for his life, or to set him up for failure in some spectacular way so the world can see that he’s not half as perfect as they think he is. If you can’t kill the man, kill the myth. Pull his legacy from the soil, root and all.

Shouto stares at the television screen, fingertips sputtering sparks that fizzle when they reach the carpet; a few land on his feet, but he doesn’t feel them. He never feels them.

He wishes he could.

Onscreen, Shouto sees more shaky footage taken from the ground-level of that pier where all the heroes are currently gathered. He spots several big-name American heroes among the crowd and countless police officers, EMTs, and firefighters on standby, their mouths moving rapidly and eyes lined with grim determination as they watch the waterfront. Past the end of the pier, the bay drops off into stark blackness, inky and absolute. Shouto can’t see anything out there, much less three ships full to bursting with innocent people.

Then it’s back to the young newscaster again. She’s biting her lip. One of her acrylic nails has been
ripped off in her anxiety, the edge ragged and raw where it taps a tattoo against the tabletop. Shouto watches the newscaster adjust the collar of her navy blouse, noting the way her hands tremble ever so slightly before they disappear beneath the table. She’s pale, whoever she is, and very young.

Scared, his mind supplies, picking out the thinness of her stained lips and the wild sheen to her eyes.

“All right,” he chokes out, raking his fingers through his hair. He squeezes his eyes shut and tries to block out the mantra of information pouring from his flatscreen. “So… what. What do you need from me? How am I supposed to help with this?”

“You can’t, not directly,” Momo says quietly, “but you might know something that could help us. You’ve been talking to Midoriya again, haven’t you?”

“A bit. Why?”

“Right, well, has he mentioned anything about this villain to you?” She makes a noncommittal noise. “Vindicator or whatever her name is? I was thinking that if you knew something about her, we might be able to scrounge up enough cause to call it an extenuating circumstance and go in without clearance.”

Shouto squeezes his phone, thinking of all the stupid memes and ridiculous videos Midoriya’s sent him since December—recaps of rescues featuring their friends and former teachers, pictures of Shouto’s merchandise in a storefront somewhere in New Jersey (“dude those snapbacks are AMAZING and im buying two okay? OKAY”), and ridiculous screenshots puns about the superhero lifestyle from some weird subreddit Midoriya’s a part of, apparently. How he has the time to find all of these things and send them to Shouto at absurd times of the night, he’ll never know.

(And although he’ll never admit it to anyone, Shouto absolutely loves those messages. They’re dumb and frivolous, but they’re fun and make him smile despite himself. It’s almost like passing notes in class again.)

The only downside is that Shouto rarely responds to these messages. He always smiles to himself and laughs under his breath when they light up his screen, but he rarely bothers to type out a response. Usually he’s too busy. Sometimes he just doesn’t know what to say. They’ve struck a delicate balance since December—a balance Shouto doesn’t want to disrupt by saying the wrong thing or giving the wrong impression. Sometimes he’ll send a picture of Mizuki along with a brief caption, but that’s as far as he goes. They don’t actually talk.

“We… don’t really discuss work,” Shouto says vaguely. Frustration sets his jaw and his left index finger ignites, bright blue flames engulfing the digit up to the second knuckle. He clenches his fist to extinguish it before his smoke alarm goes off again. “He’s, ah, never mentioned her to me before. I don’t know anything. I’m sorry.”

Momo lets out a defeated sigh, almost as if she’d expected this answer. “Dammit,” she mumbles. “I’m out of ideas, then. I’ll find someone to cover your patrol today. We need you on standby in case things go to hell.”

He nods stiffly. “Got it.”

“Keep your phone on you,” she tells him. Returning to her clipped, professional tone. He thinks she’s about to hang up on him. Then, as an afterthought, she adds, “And keep the news on.”
He bites his lip. “No problem. Call me if something comes up.”

She hangs up. With a heavy, strained sigh, Shouto tosses his phone to the opposite end of the couch and sinks into the cushions. He wishes he could disappear between the threads, sink into the stuffing and never return.

The next several hours pass uneventfully. Shouto manages a quick shower around nine and slips into his costume just in case he gets that call from Momo, telling him to screw the politics and jet off to America because *that’s what he should be doing, goddammit.* To say he’s *hoping* for that call to come is a giant understatement. Monumental, even. No, he’s *praying* that his phone will ring. He’s praying that New York City will light up just in the nick of time. He’s praying that those ships of people will turn up and no one will be hurt. There are eight hundred and thirteen passengers on all the ships combined, says the news anchor at about ten-thirty in the morning. One hundred and twenty-seven of those are children under the age of ten.

He restocks all the vials on his belt and paces his living room when he’s done with that. His television blares the same information over and over again: the power is still out, all cell towers are somehow online but disrupted and inoperable, they still haven’t found the ships in the pitch darkness, and no demands have been made yet. None of it makes sense. *None* of it. Shouto can’t puzzle it out in his head no matter how hard he tries. He has bits and pieces to a larger, more complex puzzle, but when it comes down to it, he’s just as clueless as the rest of the world.

So he twiddles his thumbs for the time being, trying to avoid biting the inside of his cheek raw. He vacuums his carpet and dusts his bookshelves, does the dishes and finishes his Sudoku puzzle while they dry, and makes pot after pot of hot tea just to have something to do with his hands. He even plays with the damp leaves in the bottom of his cup when he’s finished. He hasn’t done that since he was *ten.*

Seconds tick. It feels like years, an eon, five minutes, a decade. Shouto waits. He waits and waits and *waits* for something to happen from his living room, eyes dried out from staring at the TV for so long. He knows it’s coming, whatever it is. He just doesn’t know when.

He doesn’t have to wait long.

It’s precisely forty-two minutes past noon when the pale, young newscaster stutters and stops in the middle of reading her teleprompter, mouth falling slack. From his spot on the couch, Shouto looks up sharply.

The newscaster is looking off-camera, eyes wide as dinner plates, expression cracked open a mile wide. She’s listening to something. *Someone.* She’s listening with trembling lips and rapidly-blinking eyelids and she looks half a second away from bursting into tears. Shouto feels ice crawl up the backside of his hand, curling around his wrist and inside the sleeve of his costume like veiny, frigid fingers searching for a hold.

“Oh my god,” the girl exhales, biting her lower lip hard enough to draw blood. It comes away in beads on the porcelain white of her perfect front teeth, scarlet staining pink. She stutters wordlessly, then covers her mouth with a shaking hand.

Shouto wants to reach through the screen and shake her by the shoulders. ‘*What is it?’ he wants to scream. ‘*What is so fucking wrong now?’

The newscaster swallows thickly, dropping her hand back to the tabletop where she begins picking at her nails with renewed vigor. “Are you sure we can… um. This is——” but she’s cut off by someone else who draws her attention on the other side of the camera.
Shouto stands from the couch. There’s ice on the surface of his skin and fire in his blood, and he is scared.

Finally, whoever is talking to the newscaster apparently stops. The young lady clamps her mouth shut, blood welling up on her lower lip. She nods stiffly. Her fingertips are ragged and swollen raw, paint chipping away in thin flakes like snow. Her shoulders are ramrod straight, lips thin and shaky.

She opens her mouth, then closes it. Half a heartbeat later, she tries again, but still, nothing passes her lips. Shouto tries not to tear his hair out by the root.

“Come on, just say it,” he mutters, clenching his fists at his sides. He’s staring down the television, ignoring the dread that threatens to drown him, flood his lungs inside his ribcage with something a lot more saline than sweet. “Say it.”

By some miracle, the girl hears his plea. With a sharp inhale, she raises her gaze and stares directly into the camera lens, jaw set and brows furrowed for forced determination. Her makeup is ruined and her styled hair has long since gone flat with the repeated abuse of quaking fingers.

“This just in,” she says, voice slightly cracking on the last word. She clears her throat. “While reports from the situation in New York City are still sparse, we’ve just gotten word through multiple sources on social media that—”

Here, she falters. Shouto holds his breath.

“T-That… um.” The newscaster rubs her forehead, smearing her makeup. Her lips bleeds a little more. “Apparently, demands have been made for those held captive on the ships in Anchorage Bay. Vindicator and a small faction of other villains have officially taken responsibility for this horrific situation, citing Deku, the Symbol of Peace, as their… um. Their intended target. They have released livestream footage of yet another hostage who doesn’t seem to be on the missing boats, but rather somewhere in the city.” She swallows thickly, expression wavering dangerously for a split second. “We, uh, have pieces of the… footage. From the livestream. Though it is untranslated at this current time, viewer discretion is still advised. Some people might find the content of this clip rather… disturbing.”

Shouto’s heart is in his throat. He chokes, bleeding apprehension from every pore.

The newscaster blinks out of existence, replaced with grainy, dark footage of what appears to be an empty construction site somewhere in the city. Shouto spots the silver reflection of the moon as it catches naked steel girders and stacks of uninstalled glass windows laid out on a raw, concrete floor. It’s high up, wherever they are. There are villains scattered throughout the construction site as well, talking and spitting words in rapid English that Shouto doesn’t bother to translate because he can’t even breathe, much less devote brain power to translating shitty Brooklyn accents. The camera pans left around a corner and—

And then he sees her.

lump blonde hair pale skin green eyes are closed eyes are closed tied up hostage oh god oh god ohgodohgod no please no

The cold shock of seeing Lucy Albright-Midoriya tied to one of those vertical steel girders numbs Shouto from his scalp to his toes in an instant. It’s all pins and needles and prickly deadness that suffocates him, squeezes him within the confines of his skin and threatens to wring him out like a sponge. His legs give out from under him and he crashes to the carpet, landing hard on his knees,
but he doesn’t feel any of it. His heart pounds. His teeth rattle in his skull. All sound disappears into
a white wash of nothingness. Static, loud and deathly quiet all at the same time, consumes him
from all sides.

He thinks he hears his phone buzzing on the couch behind him. Shouto doesn’t even twitch a
finger to answer it.

He tells himself he’s crazy. That he’s seeing things that aren’t there. That this is insane and there’s
no way any of this can be fucking real because things like this don’t happen in real life, right? He
tells himself it can’t be real even when the camera zooms in on the name badge attached to her
green scrubs, focusing on the fine print that spells out “Lucille Albright, Nurse Practitioner” in
crisp font. He tells himself he’s dreaming when the villain holding the camera reaches out and tips
her slackened, unconscious face into the moonlight, revealing the straight nose and heart-shaped
face that Shouto knows all too well. He tells himself he’s hallucinating when he sees a thin stream
of blood leak out of the left side of her mouth and down her neck, disappearing into the collar of
his shirt.

Shouto tells himself a lot of things—none of them true.

And just as quickly as the video starts, it disappears, reverting back to the too-bright news studio
and the newscaster who looks like she wants nothing more than to pass out. The newscaster has her
fingers laced tightly together on the tabletop, knuckles blanched bone-white.

“For those who don’t know,” she says shakily, “we believe that woman in the video is the wife of
the Number One hero, Deku. Other details are not known at this current time. The rescue attempts
being set up near the Brooklyn Bridge pier have momentarily. Um. Stalled. But efforts will resume
shortly hereafter…”

If she says anything else after that, Shouto doesn’t hear her. He can’t hear anything over the sheer
panic coursing through his veins, flooding his heart and turning each atrium and ventricle inside
out. His blood is molten metal, hot and fluid and heavy enough to root him to the spot, to cast his
skeleton in solid steel until he can’t move.

Shouto stares, unblinking as the screen changes over to live footage of the pier where the heroes
are gathered. They’re all interspersed along the waterfront while they wait for dawn to arrive,
huddling in their coats and murmuring quietly amongst each other while they watch the black,
endless water that stretches out before them for miles upon miles. He sees the occasional familiar
face from his time in New York, but he doesn’t remember their names anymore.

Then the camera pans right. Shouto spots Midoriya almost immediately at the edge of the crowd,
skirting the mass of people gathered underneath the safety of the emergency spotlights—he’s
wearing a new suit this time, clad from neck to fingertip in impossibly dark shades of green, white
gloves replaced with something sleeker and much, much darker. He looks like he was fashioned
out of nighttime, sewn from shadows and cast in cold, Cimmerian shades of black and green. The
only bright part of him is his face and the mask that hangs around his neck, glinting silver in the
cold overhead lights.

Even now, he’s smiling at passersby and holding a conversation with a companion who walks
alongside him—it’s that woman Shouto met in New York many years ago. Amelia, he remembers.
Vault, the keeper of secrets and interrogation extraordinaire. She’s wearing her hero costume this
time, hair pinned back and gold eyes flashing dangerously behind her mask as she looks out across
the eerie midnight waters, searching for something, anything. Midoriya’s mouth is moving rapidly
while she searches, but it’s turned down at the corners and his brow is furrowed. They look
baffled. Frustrated.
Suddenly, the camera pans to showcase a small group of heroes approaching Midoriya from his left side. Shouto shakes his head back and forth as he watches their grim-faced approach, noting the glowing tablet the forefront hero has in his massive hands.

“No, no, no, no, no,” he murmurs, tasting bile on the back of his tongue. He has a million words and two trillion reasons why this is a bad idea. “Don’t—”

It doesn’t matter. The lead hero taps Midoriya on the shoulder to get his attention. Shouto can’t read lips in English, but he can clearly see the tormented look on the hero’s face when he shoves the tablet into Midoriya’s empty hands with a few words of explanation. The screen makes Midoriya’s freckled face seem so much paler, reflecting blue-white in the polished metal of his mask.

Midoriya raises an eyebrow, confused, but hits a button on the tablet and frowns down at the device as the screen begins to flicker and change before his eyes. At first, Midoriya’s face doesn’t change. He murmurs a few things to Amelia—if Shouto had to guess, he’s probably saying something along the lines of ‘skyscraper, construction site, narrow the search a bit.’ Amelia says something back under her breath—

Shouto knows the exact second Midoriya sees Lucy, her body limp and tied to that stupid fucking girder in some unknown skyscraper in Manhattan. He knows.

First, Midoriya blinks—once, twice. Three times. Then he frowns; his brows are dark and furrowed, angled low above narrowed, incredulous eyes. His lips part to voice a question, perhaps to Mia or one of the other heroes standing nearby.

Then his face goes deathly slack.

Shouto slips his fingers through his hair and pulls, letting out an incredulous gasp that feels more like a dying wheeze. He fumbles and collapses back against the front of the couch, tucking his head between his knees as he fights for air that just won’t come. He can’t watch. He can’t.

At Midoriya’s shoulder, Amelia is wide-eyed and grasping at one of his arms, tugging on it to get his attention. Her mouth moves rapidly, pleading, saying his name over and over again like it’ll make a damn bit of difference. He acts as if he doesn’t hear her, doesn’t want to, can’t. Not like it matters. Green sparks skitter up and down the lengths of his strong arms, illuminating the hollows of his cheeks and his deep eye sockets. With measured movements, he hands the tablet back to its owner with steady hands.

Then Midoriya begins to walk.

He’s heading for the far end of the dock, head lowered, shoulders tense. There’s a small commotion on the pier as heroes try to step in front of Midoriya and snag his attention, but he shoulders past them without a word and keeps moving like they’re not even there. He parts the sea of people, ignoring calls of his name and friends who attempt to grab his arm, gaze trained directly on the empty black nothingness past the end of the pier.

Shouto sees the green sparks skittering over his skin, the sharp slash of an unsmiling mouth. Then, Midoriya bends his knees and leaps from the end of the pier, disappearing into the darkness faster than the cameraman can track him.

He is gone.
Also we have some fan art of Midoriya and Mizu that I forgot to mention last time! **Hallelujah.**
Hell is Empty, and All the Devils Are Here

Chapter Notes

This is the worst chapter in the entire story, angst-wise. I could not be more seriously right now when I say this: DO NOT READ UNLESS YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY SURE. Don't think, "Oh, how bad could it possibly be?" because goddamn, it's bad. Probably the best thing I've ever written in my life, but still. Hard to read. If you're unsure about this chapter, go ahead and skip it. The plot isn't worth the cost of your own mental well-being.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Your call has been forwarded to an automatic voice message system. MIDORIYA IZUKU is not available. Please leave your message after the tone, or hang up and try again later.]

Hey, honey, it's me.

I'm calling from one of the supply closets in the hospital—you know, that one on the third floor near the cath lab where we ran into each other that one time when we were dating? Jesus, you were a mess that day. I've never seen so many stitches in a person before, you dorky pincushion.

Anyway, sorry I didn’t catch your call from earlier. I promise I wasn’t ignoring you or anything. Just got stuck in Obstetrics with Dr. Michele, so I didn’t have a free hand. You know how she is about phones and work hours. That crazy Russian woman, I swear. She needs to just retire already.

(Here, a hesitant pause. A sigh.)

Also, um. I’m… I’m sorry about this morning. For everything, really. What I said wasn’t fair to you and I see that now. I know what I signed up for when we got married, and I know these last few months have been hard with all the villain activity. I get it. Really, I do. Promise. I was just so mad, I… god, I don’t even know what happened. And yeah, you weren’t exactly accommodating either, but… but you were right, in a way. So I’m sorry.

I… I love you. You know that, right? I love you so, so much, Izuku.

I’ll see you tonight. Bulgarian food for dinner?

For all his hero training and field experience, Izuku has always hated free-falling.

There’s something about it that makes his stomach twist in his abdomen and his lungs feel ten times smaller than they actually are, all shriveled up and useless in his chest while the rest of his body screams for mercy. Plummeting to Earth feels an awful lot like the stars have reached out and pushed for all they’re worth, crushing him under their weight and insisting that perhaps Izuku’s not
ready to be his own constellation after all. A glorious leash, crafted by something invisible and way too fucking real. A cage.

Maybe it’s the limited amount of control he has in the air, or the clumsiness of his movements that makes him uneasy with the whole concept. Maybe it’s the inevitable crash landing that makes him jittery with anticipation. Whatever it is, free-falling always makes him feel like he’s about to burst apart at the seams like an overstuffed pillow, showering stuffing everywhere because the pressure is simply too great to handle.

Finding out about Lucy feels a lot like that.

The second Izuku lands on the northernmost lawn of Liberty Island, he stumbles and falls to his knees, tumbling a bit before rolling onto his back among the immaculate grass that, by all accounts, should be green instead of moonlit grey. Lady Liberty looms above him, standing tall on her pedestal with an extinguished torch and dark, vacant eyes Izuku can’t quite make out from this angle. On any other night, the monument would be beautiful, if not a little bit eerie against the glittering backdrop of cold, distant stars.

Tonight is not any other night.

There’s only a half-second of warning before Izuku rolls to his hands and knees and vomits into the expertly-cut grass, coughing and retching until nothing else comes up. His head pounds. The air around him is tangy with the sharp scent of bile, rancid seawater, and smothered electricity. He’s trembling, arms weak and heart racing, skin clammy and pale with fear—true, gut-wrenching fear—that Izuku didn’t realize he was capable of feeling until just now.

Far above him, the stars twinkle and glitter. Always there, always watching.

He wishes he could tear them down one by one.

With a sharp exhale, Izuku pushes himself to one side and rolls onto his back, breathing hard. His mouth tastes sour and his fingers tremble, gloved digits gripping the grass in clenched fists.

He’s… angry. He’s angry and he’s scared and he’s confused and a million other things he doesn’t know what to do with because this can’t really be happening, right? Emotions war within him, tangling into unbreakable knots and tempered steel chains. With a shuddering breath, he reaches up and presses the heels of his hands against his eye sockets until he sees psychedelic splashes of green and indigo, and he screams for all he’s worth, voice echoing against oxidized copper and empty air like a war cry meant for absolutely nobody.

Eight hundred and thirteen people.

One hundred and twenty-seven children.

Lucy.

It’s the kind of ruthless calculus Izuku’s never been very good at.

“Yaoyorozu, what’s the situation?”
Shouto’s steps are long and measured as he storms past bustling interns and half-suited sidekicks, baffled support staff and stone-faced executives as they all watch the screens that line the far wall. News reports flicker faster than Shouto can track them—clips of New York City and Midoriya disappearing into the darkness play on loop, as does the footage from the construction site—but Shouto doesn’t care. They aren’t telling him anything he doesn’t already know.

At the font of the room, Momo looks up from a tablet one of the sidekicks just handed to her. She’s wearing her hero costume, harsh lines etched into the skin around her eyes. Her lips thin in displeasure when she sees Shouto making his way across the bustling office floor, avoiding stray elbows and panicked analysts as everyone in the agency scrambles. The murmur of voices is verging on deafening; Shouto doesn’t hear it at all.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” she tells him tiredly when he jogs up the short staircase to the glass-walled briefing room. She doesn’t even protest when Shouto takes the tablet from her hands and begins to read hungrily. “Shouto, I told you to stay—“

“And I obviously ignored you,” he mutters, eyes scanning the rapid-fire feed of information that scrolls across the screen in his hands. He sees the words blackout and Deku and a million other things he already knows about, god dammit. “No updates?”

Momo yanks the tablet out of his hands and scowls up at the mounted screens on the walls of the briefing room. “I would’ve called you if we heard anything. Go home.”

“And do what?” Shouto asks, gritting his teeth. He jabs a finger up at one of the screens showing a replay of the moment New York City went dark. “Sit on my hands while eight hundred people die and Midoriya’s wife is held for ransom?” He scoffs, shaking his head. “I don’t think so. My place is here.”

“We don’t know for sure that it’s Midoriya wife,” Momo rushes to add, sounding flustered. She types stiffly, fingers flying across a digital keyboard as she drafts email after email and sends them out. “The quality of the video was poor and the nametag could be a decoy—“

“It’s her.” Shouto’s voice is stern and steady, caged in solid iron that weighs almost enough to make his knees buckle and his spine split. He swallows the bile in his throat. “Trust me, Momo.”

Her manicured fingers falter for a brief second, a half-breath of dread and impossibility. For a moment, hope seizes Shouto’s in its clawed fingers. He holds his breath.

She resumes typing just as quickly.

“Even if that’s true,” she says carefully, expression taut with worry, “we can’t do anything about it from here. Until we receive explicit permission from the US government, we’re stuck. End of discussion.”

Shouto slams a hand on the tabletop, rattling a few half-empty cups of coffee and stacks of datapads and clipboards. “Bullshit, Yaoyorozu,” he hisses under his breath, ignoring the way a few sidekicks watch him with wary eyes from their desks. “You’re really going to leave Midoriya to handle this by himself? It’s a no-win situation without backup and you know it.”

“They have backup!” she argues. “What, you think the Hero Association of New York is just standing by, doing nothing? Until we’re absolutely sure that this is beyond their capabilities, we can’t make any moves or else we’ll face diplomatic censure.”

“That’s ridiculous!”
“That’s the law.” Yaoyorozu straightens her shoulders and looks Shouto in the eye, squaring up to his height as best she can with her mouth drawn in a tight line. “And unless you’re dead-set on going rogue in the eyes of the United Nations or committing some good old fashioned international espionage, you’re just as stuck as I am right now. Go home.”

Turning on her heel, she hands off the tablet to a passing sidekick and trades it for another one on the corner of the table before cutting a path through the bustling agency floor. With a grumble, Shouto stays close on her heels, ignoring the intimidated looks a few of the sidekicks throw him as he makes his way through the commotion.

“Send me in,” he says automatically, falling in behind her left shoulder. He keeps his voice low. “This is bigger than red tape and you know it. Bigger than all of us.”

“Of course I know that,” she hisses, glaring at him. “But I’m not going to let this agency break the law just because one extra civilian’s been thrown into the mix. Nothing about the situation has changed.”

Shouto tears his hands through his hair. “She’s not just a civilian, Momo! She’s—”

Several feet from her office door, Momo whirls on her heel and plants herself directly in Shouto’s path, expression thunderous as she holds out a hand to stop him short. She jabs a manicured index finger at the center of his chest.

“Now you listen to me, Todoroki Shouto,” she says lowly, dangerously, “and listen well because I am not going to say this again: Lucy Albright is just another civilian. I realize that she’s Midoriya’s wife and she’s being leveraged against him, but we have to trust Midoriya to do the right thing here.”

Shouto remembers lifeless green eyes and windows too large to be practical and I’m not sacrificing you! (He wishes he couldn’t remember it at all.)

“You don’t know that,” Shouto argues weakly, feeling sick to his stomach. “You can’t know that.”

She pauses, pursing her lips as she searches his face. “Maybe not,” she eventually says, voice quiet, “but I like to think that I know Midoriya at least a little bit. His priority will always be the people of his city, no matter what. That’s his job. It’s all of our jobs. If it comes between saving one person versus saving the many…” Here, she shrugs weakly.

And with that, she turns around and slips into her office. Shouto stands stock-still, feet frozen to the ground as dread and doubt and fear curls in the pit of his gut and turns him inside out.

No, something whispers in his mind as she stares at the worn metal handle of Momo’s office door. I think you might be wrong this time.

I think we all might be very, very wrong.

[Your call has been forwarded to an automatic voice message system. LUCY ALBRIGHT-MIDORIYA is not available. Please leave your message after the tone, or hang up and try again]
later.]

Hey, sweetheart, it’s me. Guess we’re playing phone tag now. You’re it!

Anyway, sorry I missed your call earlier. I was chasing some lackey in Harlem for… um. Hours. It was a long chase, seriously. Slippery guy. I meant to call you back, but I swear, this city has it out for me today. Either way, yes to Bulgarian food for dinner and a hard hell yes to Dr. Michele retiring early. That woman is ancient and scares me on a primal level, seriously.

(A half-laugh, breathy and short. Then, a pause.)

Oh, about, uh, this morning… I’m sorry, too. You were right—I really need to prioritize some stuff, I think. Reevaluate a few things. I talked to my agency this morning and they approved some time off, actually, so I was thinking maybe we could head out to your parent’s cabin in Colorado for two weeks and just… talk, maybe? Focus on us for a bit, go hiking like we used to, take a break from your dissertation and my patrols. All that stuff. New York won’t burn the second I turn my back.

…I think. Pretty sure, at least. I dunno, we’ll see. What’s the worst that could happen, right?

Oh, and that reminds me: I talked to Mia a bit the other day and she gave me the name of a couple’s counselor we could see in Brooklyn. I know you mentioned the possibility a few months ago, but now that I have more free time, I think we could manage it. It’d be short-term, nothing major. Just a little something to get us back on track with things. I’m game if you are. And if you don’t want to, that’s cool, too. I’ll work with you on this.

Love you, Luce. Call me back, okay? I miss your voice.

The sunrise in New York City comes in shades of red and blue, swirling sirens that scream endlessly as they paint the skyscrapers purple in their haste. Spotlights scan the silvery waves of the Upper Bay as small boats strafe the coast up and down, searching for the lost ferries with a franticness that only ever hangs on the coattails of pure desperation. Cell phone flashlights twinkle in the distance as curious New Yorkers come out of their hovels to watch the world end.

From the torch of the Statue of Liberty, Izuku sees it all. The wind whistles through his hair, biting through the dark fabric of his costume as if it isn’t even there as he sits perched on the railing with his legs swinging numbly. The air is thin up here, but even if it wasn’t, he still wouldn’t be able to breathe.

Start with everything you know about that situation, Izuku. Don’t leave anything out.

It’s All Might’s voice, deep and inspiring as it always is. Pushing, prodding him along the path of answers he knows he needs to find.

“Okay,” he mutters, curling his fingers around the guardrail until the metal screams in protest.

“There are three ships missing that we know of. Approximately eight hundred and thirteen passengers are onboard all three ferries combined, not counting the staff and any stowaways. Possible explosives onboard as safeguards; unconfirmed at this time. Power’s been out in the city about six hours, comms are down, and all backup electricity has been disabled. Short-wave radio
transmissions are still working…” he trails, frowning. “I think.”

*Good, good,* says All Might. *Keep going.*

Izuku bites his lip and scans the bay, noting the Coast Guard speedboats and the illuminated pier where the majority of his coworkers are gathered with the first responders. “Thirteen pro heroes reporting and twenty-three sidekicks. First responders on standby. The Coast Guard’s searching the bay, but with so few of them, they might not find the hostages in time.”

*Don’t talk in hypotheticals. You can’t afford to right now.*

“I know, I know,” he wheezes, rubbing a hand over his face. “Fine. It’s more likely that the Coast Guard won’t find them before time runs out. We need to deal with that before anything else—but how?”

*Narrow the search.*

“It’s not that easy,” he mutters, gritting his teeth. He beats his fist against the guardrail hard enough to make it shudder and creak underneath his weight. “The Upper Bay is enormous and it’s *pitch-black.* Even if the ships were floating around in here somewhere, we’d never find them before the tide rolls in. Between the islands and the tide, the Lower Bay is going to—“

He stops short, words lodging in his throat like pieces of glass.

*The Lower Bay.*

With trembling fingers, Izuku fumbles for his facemask and secures it over his mouth, pressing the comm button on the underside of his jaw. The wind is loud and makes him sway dangerously on the railing. He stares out at the black void of nothingness, listening to the static crackle in his ears and the faint cry of seagulls as he waits for a connection to establish itself.

“Mia?” he tries, tapping the comm system with a gloved finger. “Mia, come in.”

Nothing. Just a faint buzz in his ear, like an insect. He bites through his cheek until he tastes blood and tries again, scrolling through the different channels. “Amelia, report. This is Deku. Do you copy?”

Still nothing. He fiddles with the channels some more, wincing when he gets some sharp feedback poured directly into his ears. “Oh for the love of—*please* tell me this thing is working. Mia, *do you read me?* Come in, I repeat, *come in.*”

He waits several perilous seconds, ears straining.

Suddenly, a sharp burst of static makes him flinch.

“I read you,” comes Mia’s voice, all crackly and indistinct. Izuku nearly slips off the flimsy guardrail in relief as her voice floors his earpiece with her faint accent. “Connection’s bad, but it’s better than nothing.”

“I’ll take it. Look, I think—”

“Where *are you?*” she interrupts, voice growing fainter before surging back to full volume. “The press thinks you’ve gone AWOL. Whole pier is up in arms.”

“No time to explain,” he says quickly. “Now listen to me, I think the ferries are in the *Lower Bay,*
not the Upper Bay. We’ve been searching the wrong place this whole time.”

There’s a thoughtful pause, then another burst of static. “That’s… possible, I suppose. What makes you so sure?”

“Not much,” he admits, eyeing the horizon in the distance. “I was just thinking about the tides. The ferries disappeared a little bit below low tide, right?”

“Right.”

“Yeah, so theoretically, they had time to slip through the Anchorage Channel before it got too shallow for other boats to pass. The villains might’ve banked on the assumption that we’d think the tide trapped them in the bottleneck after low tide.”

Another pause. Izuku holds his breath.

Finally, she relents. “Shit. That… actually makes sense.”

“Glad I’m not completely crazy.”

“Only partially. Listen, I can send some heroes and sidekicks southward through Brooklyn and a few over the bridge into Newark to see if you’re right, but we can’t spare too many from the Upper Bay or else the civilians will get antsy and panic.” She hisses air through her teeth, considering. Then, she murmurs, “You know the first responders aren’t going to like this, Deku. They think we’re spread thin enough as is.”

“So I won’t get a Christmas card from the NYPD this year,” he mutters, shrugging. “I’ll live. Make the call, Mia.”

“Already did. What are you going to do?”

Izuku turns away from the open ocean and gazes back toward the city, his expression settling into something grim and determined. The spire of the Empire State Building cleaves the moon into two distinct half circles that paint the skyscrapers of Midtown in dusty shades of silver.

“My wife and I have a date tonight. Bulgarian takeout—her choice,” Izuku murmurs, rubbing the hard outline of his wedding band through his glove. “I think I’d like to make that happen, if I can.”

[Your call has been forwarded to an automatic voice message system. MIDORIYA IZUKU is not available. Please leave your message after the tone, or hang up and try again later.]

Tag, you’re it, dork. Can’t believe I keep missing these calls from you—I swear, this has been the busiest day at the hospital since, like, my intern days. It’s nuts. You’d laugh if you could see me right now—I’m a walking disaster in scrubs. At least I’m on my way home now, right? I sorta blend in with the rest of Queens like this. The gross parts, at least.

I… think taking that trip to Colorado could be fun if you can really get away from work for that long. I don’t want to be the reason that New York City burns, but at the same time, it’d be nice to
have you all to myself for a little bit. And I’m all for that counselor idea. Whatever you want to do, sweetie. We can talk about it more tonight. It... honestly makes me really happy that you’re even considering this, you know what I mean? So thank you. Um. For that. It means a lot.

Hey, I’m getting on the subway now, so my service is going to drop in a minute. Uh, if you could pick up dinner on your way home, that’d be awesome—y’know, since you’ll be home later than me and all that. I’ll eat whatever you get me, you know I’m not picky.

Love you. See you soon.

“You’re sure this is it?” Izuku asks breathlessly, one foot braced against the lip of the warehouse rooftop.

He’s somewhere in Queens, near the industrial sector on the north side. There are lots of old Depression-era buildings in this part of the borough with cracked mortar and sun-bleached brick facades, peeling paint storefronts and dead payphones lining the streets that nobody’s used since the early 2000s. It’s the forgotten part of town—and, coincidentally, the newest pet project of New York City’s idealistic mayor.

Lucy’s old apartment used to be somewhere around here, Izuku realizes with a nauseating lurch. In the darkness, it’s impossible to tell how close he is to that old hole in the wall rat’s den, but he recognizes these streets nonetheless, if only barely.

Izuku’s earpiece crackles to life. “I think so,” says Mia, voice tense. “It’s impossible to track the broadcast signal of that video with the power out like this, but this neighborhood is what we’ve narrowed it down to.” She pauses, chewing on her words. “Well, this and another development sector in Newark. But you vetoed that one, so…”

“Can’t be Newark,” Izuku murmurs. “This place is closer to Lucy’s hospital and the subway station. If Vindicator picked her up at rush hour right after she called me—”

“They wouldn’t have been able to get her to Newark within the proposed timeframe before the city went dark.” She sounds exasperated, but warm. “I know. You told me already.”

Izuku swallows the bitter taste on the back of his throat and bites his lip. “Sorry,” he mumbles. “I’m just… nervous.”

“Scared?”

“Fucking terrified,” he says shakily. He clenches his jaw. “And angry. It’s a solid sixty-forty split right now.”

“Hey, hey, it’s all right,” she says softly, trying to placate him. Izuku fights to regulate his pounding heartbeat. “I know you’re freaked out. Hell, I am, too. But Luce will be okay, yeah? You’ll save her and take her home, have that date night, and then you guys will have epic ‘oh-my-god-we-almost-died’ sex and finally have that kid you’re always talking about. It’s like a bad rock song from the 70s.”

Izuku frowns. “I don’t think they wrote songs like that in the 70s.”
“Not the point,” she says, laughing quietly.

Izuku exhales a hollow laugh, ignoring the way his heart flutters in his chest and his stomach twists itself into knots. Focus, focus, focus. “Thanks, Mia. For everything. I owe you for this.”

“What are friends for if not helping each other disobey direct orders in a time of city-wide crisis and panic?” She snorts. “Don’t just stand there. Go get your girl, Deku, and give Vindicator a kick in the teeth for me when you see her. Want me to stay in your ear just in case things go sideways?”

“Not today,” he says, cracking his neck once, twice. “This one’s personal. Keep me updated on those ferries though.”

“Understood. Good luck, Izuku.”

The comm disconnects in a sputter of static, plunging Izuku into the pitch darkness of the city at large. This part of Queens isn’t largely populated due to the construction, so only a few people walk the streets here and there with grocery bags looped over arms and cell phone flashlights flickering madly over cracked and weed-consumed sidewalks. He hears the voices of people as they call out through their windows to neighbors and passerby, asking for news, is there any news about what’s goin’ on? Nobody seems to know. Nobody except Izuku.

The hostage video was taken someplace high up, on the thirtieth floor of a building or somewhere thereabouts. Izuku eyes the indigo skyline, brows set low as he squints up at three high-rise apartment buildings that are currently only half-built—mere skeletons of steel and concrete, half-installed glass and loose plastic sheeting that flaps lazily in the midnight breeze.

She’s got to be in one of those, he thinks to himself. Izuku glances down at the gravel rooftop beneath his feet and toes some of the larger rocks away, wondering how sturdy this rooftop actually is, considering its age. Grimacing, he takes a few precautionary steps backwards, bending his knees and bouncing on his toes to loosen up.

With a grunt, he takes a running leap off the edge of the building, putting all of his power into his legs as he kicks off the edge and careens through the air toward the closest apartment building. His eyes water in the wind but he shoots through the air like an arrow, straight and true with arms outstretched and grasping. He flies straight through one of the exposed sides of the structure, rolling to his feet as soon as he hits concrete.

On the inside, the building is bare, cold, and completely silent. Izuku stays light on his toes, darting behind support beams and piles of unused steel girders, ears listening for anything that could be construed as a voice, a hissed order, or—god forbid—a whimper of pain. Floor by floor, he clambers up the central elevator shaft and does a basic sweep, eyes peeled for Vindicator and her crazed disciples or a flash of golden, buttery hair.

With each passing second of fruitless searching, the wedding band on Izuku’s hand weighs more and more.

He’s at the second-to-top floor of the building when he finally sees something across the way. It’s in the next building over and faint, flickering like a candle—almost too faint to see. Izuku approaches the exposed edge of the floor he’s on and narrows his eyes as he waits for it to reappear, whatever it is.

He waits three heartbeats, two shallow breaths. A century.

There. He sees it five floor below him on the inside of a plastic-covered glass window that looks
only recently installed. It’s a light of some kind. A reflection, perhaps. He isn’t sure.

And right next to that flickering light sits Lucy, hands tied to an upright steel support beam a few feet on the inside of the window.

Izuku lets out a gasping breath and drops to his knees, clutching his stomach as he tries not to vomit again. There’s stinging moisture in his eyes and a lightness in his heart he can’t quite fathom just yet, but it almost feels like hope and horror and a million other things he can’t articulate. Seeing her means she’s close, she’s within reach—it also means that this nightmare is real and that this is all my fucking fault, oh god. It takes every ounce of his control not to jump down there, grab her and the support beam and whatever else they have her tied to, rip it all out with his bare hands, and spirit her away back to their Midtown apartment for the rest of forever.

Izuku clutches at the thick fabric over his heart, ignoring the way his hands tremble with some weird combination of anger, fear, and unabashed relief. He fumbles to activate his comm. “Mia? Mia, come in.”

“Here,” she says with a crackle. “Did you find her?”

“Yeah.” He smiles shakily and swallows back a ridiculous sobbing laugh. “She’s… she’s in the center building in the construction development. The second high-rise to the south.”

“Oh, thank god,” she exhales, sounding relieved. “Do you need backup?”

“I’ll take whatever you can give me. If Vindicator’s here, this could get messy.”

“Understood. First responders are on the way and we’ve got Dax and Reyna heading to your location for containment purposes.”

“What about the missing civilians?”

“We’ve found two of the ships so far, but the third one is still missing as of right now. Shouldn’t be too much longer before it’s located and evacuated. We’ll take care of the rest, don’t worry.” A hesitant pause. “What’s Lucy’s status? Can you tell?”

Izuku glances over the edge of the concrete floor, ignoring the dizzying height in favor of peering at the dingy blonde hair of his wife several stories below. Her head is pitched forward, legs splayed out in front of her with her hands tied behind her back at an uncomfortable angle. “Can’t tell. She… um. She’s unconscious, I think. Tied up, same as she was in the video.”

“At least they haven’t moved her,” Mia mutters gratefully. “All right. What’s your extraction plan?”

Izuku eyes the glass behind her. “She’s close to a window, so that’d be an easy escape option. Not an entrance, though. If I break it going in, I’ll hurt her. Have to find another way.”

“Fair enough. Backup will be there in twenty minutes. Your best option might be to wait for them and go in together—”

“Wait,” he hisses, rolling to the side so he’s belly-down against the floor. He inches forward, peering over the edge toward the window where Lucy’s being held, squinting through the darkness as a shadow moves behind the glass. “I see movement.”

“Lucy or someone else?” Mia demands. When he doesn’t answer, she adds, “Deku, talk to me.”
“Someone else.” He swallows, brows furrowing. The shadow behind the glass is willowy and fluid, but the angle is too steep for Izuku to see the face of the person. “Female. Could be Vindicator, but I’m not sure.”

“Standing guard?”

“Looks like it,” he responds grimly. “But if that’s the case, then why—“

That’s when Lucy moves. It isn’t much, admittedly—just a shift, a repositioning of a stiff neck—but it’s enough to earn the attention of whoever’s guarding her. The woman stops in her pacing, turns around as if surprised. Leisurely, she strolls over, almost meandering across the room in a teasing fashion, and—

Izuku doesn’t have to hear Lucy’s yelp of pain when the guard kicks her in the ribs to know how much it hurts.

Suddenly, everything else in the world seems really fucking unimportant.

“Mia,” Izuku says numbly. “I have to go now.”

She lets out a confused noise that crackles and sputters in his earpiece. “What? Why, what’s going on? Did they see you?”

It’s… it’s in slow-motion. All of it. The second kick, and the third kick, the fourth, the fifth. It’s undeserved, brutal. Punishing.

And Izuku burns.

“I have to go,” he repeats, voice frighteningly level. If Mia protests, he doesn’t hear it. He doesn’t hear anything over the rush of blood in his ears and the white-hot rage in his veins.

With steady fingers, he cuts the connection and rolls to his feet, jogging a few feet away from the edge closest to the building where Lucy’s being held hostage.

Izuku bites into the mouthguard within his mask and takes a deep breath. He holds it—and releases it in a slow exhale through his nostrils.

He runs.

He leaps.

For one horrifying half-second, Izuku free-falls through the air, arms locked in front of his face as he gets closer and closer to the tempered, glossy surface of the window. The air bites into his skin and he can’t hear anything past the whistling wind in his ears, and his stomach lurches up into his throat to choke him, makeitmakeitcomeonplease—

He feels the impact through his elbows and up his shoulders with all the force of a semi-truck ramming into him at full speed. The glass hesitates under pressure, then gives way in a spectacular, deafening shatter that makes Izuku’s ears ring with its intensity. He hits the ground hard and rolls, barely processing the pinpricks of pain in his face and scalp as little bits of glass rain down on him from above. He comes to a stop on his hands and knees, breathing hard.

There’s no thinking involved, no thought given to who or what or how when Izuku lashes out with a foot in the direction of the steel girder where Lucy is tied. He clips the base of it with his toe, ripping it from the concrete like it’d been planted in Styrofoam, and uses another well-placed kick
to bow it out of shape just enough for Lucy’s hands to slip free. She sags to one side, hands still bound behind her back and ankles tied together with wires tight enough to cut into her flesh.

“What the fuck!” shrieks the guard, who is only just now staggering to her feet. She’s reaching for the knife on her belt and brushing the embedded glass from her bare forearms, a snarl etched into her waifish features. There are green scales on her cheeks and her pupils are slits, teeth long in the front like fangs. Some kind of reptilian Quirk, then—nothing Izuku wants to deal with right now.

Izuku looks at Lucy where she’s slumped on the floor.

He looks at the knife in the guard’s hand.

He looks at the open window behind them.

Don’t think don’t think don’t think

With a grunt of effort and a silent prayer, Izuku lunges forward and snags Lucy around the waist, clutching her to his chest with bruising force as he heaves for all he’s worth and rolls over the jagged edge of the window into open air.

Lucy is warm in his arms and the air is cold against his face as they plummet like rocks to the raw earth below them, raining broken glass like crushed diamonds. The fall rips the air from Izuku’s lungs and the horizon twists and turns and warps, dizzying and fluid before his eyes. Glass stings his cheeks and one of the exposed floors clips Izuku’s shoulder on the way down. Gritting his jaw until his teeth crack, he cries out and reaches blindly.

It’s sheer luck that he manages to catch one of the concrete edges of the fourteenth floor, using every bit of One for All in his veins to redirect their fall with a guttural scream. Izuku tucks Lucy against his chest and tumbles as they swing back through the exposed hole in the skeletal building, being careful to protect her head as they roll to a stop on the cold, unforgiving concrete floor.

It takes a moment for the world to stop spinning and the stars to bleed from his vision like stubborn stains. Every bone in his body aches down to the marrow, every one of his teeth hurts where they sit in his jaw, exposed like raw nerves. He’s bleeding… somewhere. He’s not entirely sure where. Not that it matters.

With great effort, he cracks his eyes open and peers down at the top of Lucy’s head. Her face is tucked against his chest, arms bent at awkward angles while her chafed wrists bleed freely against the dark fabric of his costume. Her hair is dirty and matted with blood at her hairline, and there’s a deep gash in her left cheek. Based on the labored way she’s breathing, she must have broken ribs.

But she’s still breathing, and that’s what matters.

“Hey,” Izuku breathes, reaching up to slip a hand around the back of her neck with gentle strength. He presses a kiss to the crown of her head. “Hey, it’s okay. It’s okay now, I’ve got you. I’m here. I’m here, sweetheart.”

She shudders and leans into his touch, sucking in jagged, sobbing breaths. “Izuku,” she gasps, voice raw and ragged. “Oh my god, Izuku—”

“Hey, hey, breathe for me, Luce,” he whispers against her hair. He feels her pulse thundering irregularly, dangerously. “Babe, I think you’re going into shock. You need to breathe. Come on, breathe with me real quick—in, out. In, out. Yeah, just like that.”

“I didn’t think you’d….” she wheezes, shaking her head back and forth frantically. “They kept
saying you wouldn’t—"

“What, you didn’t think I’d show up?” He huffs out a breathless laugh that hurts somewhere in the vicinity of his lower left ribs. He smiles against her hair, allowing his eyes to drift closed for a brief, blissful moment. “The entire country could be on fire and I’d still come for you, Luce. You gotta know that.”

“But the people on the boats,” she says weakly, looking up through her damp lashes at him. Her tear tracks reflect mercury in the moonlight. “They said they’d kill all of them if—"

“I’ve got the rest of my agency already on the trail,” he assures her, wincing as he carefully sits them up. Lucy whimpers and hisses through her teeth with every movement, and Izuku mutters apologies under his breath as he works to undo her restraints. “NYPD is on its way here, we’ve got the Coast Guard in the Lower Bay doing evac work with a lot of the heroes from Jersey, and you’re safe. Everything is going to be okay now. I promise.”

The second her wrists are free, she slings her arms around Izuku’s shoulders and presses her face to the juncture of his neck and shoulder, entire body trembling like a leaf in the wind as she clings to him for dear life. She shudders and sobs, sucking in air like she’s never breathed a day in her life. Izuku holds her, squeezing her gently so as not to irritate her wounds further. He murmurs comforts and sweet nothings quietly against the translucent shell of her ear, rocking her back and forth as she winds down bit by bit until she’s little more than a limp ragdoll draped over his body.

As the minutes pass, Izuku rubs soothing circles against her shoulder blades, eyes peeled for any movement in the shadows of this level of the building. They’ve been here too long already—they need to move, or else risk recapture. His training plays on a loop in his head, cycling black-and-white images and crisp lettering like the pages of a textbook. Time to move, get to a hospital, get to safety.

“Luce,” Izuku murmurs, tracing shapes into the valley of her spine as she tries to get her breathing under control. “Hey, honey. Listen to me. Are you listening?” She sniffles loudly and nods against his shoulder, hands bunching the fabric of his costume until it stretches. Izuku presses another kiss to her temple. “Baby, I need to get you out of here. Will you let me untie your feet so we can do that?”

She nods again and carefully pulls away, shifting so Izuku can reach her feet where they’re bound. The wires have dug deeply into her skin, the flesh swollen around them. Izuku ends up removing his gloves so he can grip them a little better, snapping them apart with his fingers.

“Can you walk?” he asks her quietly. “If you can’t, that’s okay. I just need to know.”

Skin pale and lips bloodless, she hardens her expression into something determined. “I… can walk. I think.”

“So you know how much blood you’ve lost?”

“Not enough to bother me, I don’t think,” she says, frowning as she thinks. She lifts her chin stubbornly. “I can handle it.”

Izuku feels his heart swell full to bursting. Quickly, he ducks forward and presses a searing kiss to her lips. “That’s my girl,” he whispers, smiling against her mouth. He pulls away and stands up, holding out two hands for her to take. “Come on. Let’s get you out of here.”

Unfortunately, it doesn’t take them long to figure out that Lucy’s swollen, sliced ankles won’t be
getting her far anytime soon. With a bit of finagling, Izuku manages to convince her to hop on his back, arms wrapped around his neck in a delicate piggyback style.

“I feel like I’m in college again,” she mutters in his ear. The tremors in her voice are fainter now, but still present enough to make Izuku sick to his stomach. “Are you going to give me a ride to my next class, O dashing knight in spandex—” she hisses through her teeth and whimpers when Izuku accidentally brushes her ribs with his elbow.

“Sorry, Luce. Just a little longer, I promise.” He adjusts his hold a little bit, shifting her higher on his back. “And for the last time, this costume is not made of spandex,” he mutters, fighting a smile as he approaches the edge of the building. He eyes the drop, bending his knees a little bit in preparation for the landing which will no doubt be rather painful. “It’s a Kevlar-spandex blend. Totally different.”

“Still spandex,” she tells him, setting her chin on his shoulder. He hears the forced humor in her voice, the echoes of something shaken in her tone that presses down on his shoulders until he buckles under the weight. But he doesn’t ask because now isn’t the time.

_Later, _he promises himself. _We’ll talk about it all later. We have all the time in the world now._

Except that they don’t, and Izuku is the last one to know about it. He turns around, hands curled beneath Lucy’s knees where they squeeze his sides as he nears the perilous drop-off—

And that’s when he feels it: a sharp pressure, almost like a solid punch, that sears straight through his shoulder and ignites like invisible hellfire. It steals the air from his lungs and he gasps, doubling over as he loses his hold on Lucy’s legs and drops her straight to the cold floor like deadweight. Staggering, he looks down to see what the problem is.

There’s… a knife. There’s a knife sticking out of his left shoulder, a few inches away where his heart is rabbiting inside his chest. His bleeding, _gushing_ chest.

“Oh,” Izuku murmurs, and crumples to the floor.

The concrete is frigid where it bites through the torn sections of his suit but his blood is hot, hot, _boiling_ as it collects in the hollows of his collarbones and drips down his neck to pool on the floor beneath his head. Distantly, he hears Lucy let out a bloodcurdling scream that reverberates off the glass windows and steel support beams with enough of an echo to sound very far away. Absently, he feels small hands pressing against the wound on either side, sinking the blade in further millimeter by precious millimeter in an attempt to staunch the bleeding. He’d gasp in pain if he had the ability, but right now all he can really do is stare at the worn knife handle protruding from his chest like an idiot because he’s fairly sure his lungs aren’t working anymore.

He sees wide eyes the color of sea glass from Montauk and silver-shine tear tracks and hair that always smells like wildflowers in the morning. Lucy’s saying something to him, he thinks. Her mouth is moving. That means she’s saying something. Right?

He never gets the chance to find out.

_Todoroki Shouto’s heart stops beating at precisely 3:37 in the afternoon on a Saturday._
Nobody knows how the footage is leaking, and nobody can find it in themselves to change the channel or even vocalize their feelings on the subject because they’re all just... frozen. Sidekicks sniffle and analysts abandon their keyboards in favor of sinking to the carpeted floor with their laptops clutched in white-knuckled grips as they watch it all unfold before their very eyes. On the opposite side of the table in the briefing room, Yaoyorozu stares wide-eyed up at the news screens, one hand covering her mouth in mute horror as the grainy recording zooms in closer on the one thing none of them ever, ever wanted to see in this lifetime.

Shouto keeps his hands braced against the tabletop because his knees no longer support his weight. His mouth is dry, throat cracked and bleeding with words he can’t bear to say or even think, much less consider in the same realm as possibilities. He wants to vomit, scream, burn down the rest of the world and hurl himself into the center of the sun because this is what death feels like, surely. To have your soul reaped and rent, crushed beneath the wheel of futility in a show of its own insignificance, suffering in obscurity.

Midoriya Izuku lies in a bloody heap on the concrete floor of some half-built high-rise apartment in Queens while his wife screams, hands stained crimson as she tries to staunch the flow from the wound in his chest with shaking hands. Nobody should see this. Hell, nobody should ever even think of this, and yet here it is, displayed on every screen in the goddamn room like an afternoon special in full color and high definition.

Shouto feels sick.

No.

He feels useless.

[Your call has been forwarded to an automatic voice message system. LUCY ALBRIGHT-MIDORIYA is not available. Please leave your message after the tone, or hang up and try again later.]

Tag, you’re it—uh, y’know, again. We’ve really got to start answering each other’s calls, huh? We suck at this.

Anyway, this is just me calling ‘cause you’re not home yet and I’m a bit worried. I didn’t get dinner yet because I forgot, but I figured since I’m home I’d just wait for you so we could go out together and get it. That way you won’t get mad when I pick something you don’t like—because I always do that. Somehow. I think I’m cursed, honestly.

Well, call me back when you get a minute in between patients! I’m assuming you got called into the hospital last-minute or something, but if you could shoot me a text real quick so I know for sure, that’d be awesome.

I love you, nerd.
When Izuku awakens, it’s to a slight prodding sensation in his side—the toe of a boot perhaps, or someone’s elbow. For a moment, when he opens his eyes, he wonders if he’s back at home, waking up in his bed to start another day with Lucy at his side between their soft sheets—except that the day is night and his ceiling has suddenly been transformed into raw concrete slabs and he’s missing all of his windows and there is definitely nobody next to him.

“Wakey, wakey,” comes a sing-song voice through the haze of pain and grogginess that veils his vision like thick wool. “Looks like someone sure isn’t getting their full eight hours.”

Izuku… knows that voice. Why does he know that voice?

With a sharp gasp, Izuku jackknifes into a sitting position the second it all comes back to him—or tries to, at the very least. White hot pain erupts in his left shoulder and sears him down to his fingertips, burning every nerve ending raw until he sees spots.


With gritted teeth, Izuku clutches at his shoulder and bites back a curse as he drags himself up into a sitting position, nails scrabbling at the concrete for support. “Forgive me if I don’t believe you, Vin,” he manages through his teeth, pretending he can’t feel the hot flow of iron gush between his fingers like a river. “But this feels pretty fucking intentional.”

From across the empty space, Vindicator lets out a bubbly-sounding laugh. Her hair is buzzed close to her scalp and her makeup is smeared into something unrecognizable and horrifying, lips painted pink in a ghastly bubblegum grin. Her clothes don’t quite fit her thin frame, but then again, she’s never seemed to care about that sort of thing before. He sees a flash of silver as a knife slips out of a bloodied gash in her wrist and drops into her palm, sticky with iron and dangerously sharp.

She’s also holding Lucy on her knees, fingers tangled in those flaxen locks as she turns her head this way and that like a puppet.

“Oh, Deku,” Vindicator coos, twirling the newborn blade between her fingers in a flash of tempered steel. Her grin is crooked and stained yellow, dark eyes endless and utterly insane. “You know I’d never kill you. We both know you’re just too much fun.”

Izuku presses against his sounder wound until he sees white. “What…” he wheezes, tipping his head back against the wall behind him. He swallows thickly; everything tastes like metal. “What do you want? Just tell me so we can get on with all of… this. Whatever this is.”

Vindicator tuts in disapproval and yanks Lucy’s hair a bit harder, earning a yelp of pain for her trouble. “Aw, you don’t want to spend time with me?” Her smile sharpens into something lethal. “Who, then? Is it her?” She yanks hard on Lucy’s hair hard enough to tilt her chin up, exposing her neck in a pale column of white.

Slowly, carefully, Vindicator settles the tip of her blade just below Lucy’s jawbone, pressing just enough to create an indent in her skin right above her jugular. Izuku watches, horrified, as a ruby droplet of blood wells up next to the razor edge and begins to trickle down the length of her neck.

Izuku surges forward with a snarl, pitching onto his hands and knees while he struggles to stand up to his full height. His vision swims and he stumble a step or two, but dammit, he’s standing and that’s something.
“Don’t,” he gasps, fingers slipping slightly in the mess of his own blood. “Vin, don’t do it. Don’t hurt her.”

“Oh, but I want to,” Vindicator whines, biting her lip playfully. Her eyes darken imperceptibly. “I really want to.”

“Just tell me what you want already,” he snaps, feeling his knees buckle slightly. He takes half a step closer, clenching his jaw. “Is it me? Because if so, fine. I don’t care. Just don’t hurt her,” he says, jabbing a bloodied finger in Lucy’s direction. “She hasn’t done anything to you. She doesn’t deserve this.”

“But that’s just it, isn’t it, Deku?” Vindicator asks with false sweetness, cocking her head to one side. “Nobody ever deserves this sort of thing. It just happens, and you heroes are always the ones who get to decide who’s worthy. Judge, jury, and executioner—that’s you, isn’t it?”

Izuku bites his tongue. “That’s not—” but Vindicator presses the knife a little harder against Lucy’s neck, earning a steady stream of blood that gradually begins to stain Lucy’s shirt collar. She whimpers and struggles, but Vindicator has a strong hold on Lucy’s hair, keeping her in place on her knees.

“Stop,” Izuku murmurs numbly, staring in horror as the tip of the knife slips beneath Lucy’s pearlescent skin. Fear grips him in its cold fingers and he staggers forward, hands outstretched. “Jesus, stop! Tell me what it is that you want, Vin, and we can talk about it, all right? I promise. Just—just please stop pointing that knife at her. Please.”

Vindicator pauses in her ministrations, mouth pinching into something displeased. She glances up at Izuku through her clumpy lashes, eyes narrowed into slits. “Oh, honey, it’s not something you can give me. I have to take it from you. That’s the whole point.”

“Izuku,” sobs Lucy, head still tilted back at a painful angle. She’s trying to pry Vindicator’s fingers out of her hair, but it’s no use. “Izuku, please, I don’t—“

There’s something cold slipping between his ribs as his heart splinters inside his chest, shatters into a thousand indistinct pieces he’ll never put back together again. He swallows the knot in his throat with an incredible amount of effort. Save people with a smile, he hears, and it sounds an awful lot like All Might.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he says, voice brittle and broken around the edges. He tries for a tight smile. “Just hang on for a few more minutes, okay? I’m going to get you out of this. I promise.”

“Love you,” she hiccups, forcing a smile that looks twice as broken as Izuku feels. “I—I love you so much. I’m—“

“I love you too,” he breathes, dropping to his knees as the room begins to spin beneath him. He’s so cold. “But we’re gonna be okay, we’re gonna get out of this and—“

Vindicator makes a disgusted gagging sound, dry heaving dramatically with her pierced tongue sticking way out. She rolls her eyes and twirls her knife in a blur of silver and scarlet, not even flinching when she slices up her own fingers. “Jeez, you two are mushy. Like, nineties rom-com mushy. I’d kill her right now if I wanted to, honestly.”

Izuku’s stomach turns inside out, knotted into something unrecognizable. “D-Don’t, god, please. Take me, not her. Take me, all right?”

“As usual, you’re missing the point. The big picture, if you will,” Vindicator sighs, grinning evilly.
She points at Izuku with her knife emphatically, blade glittering wickedly in the moonlight. “You’re New York City’s white knight and you have blood on your hands whether you admit it or not. Blood that everyone just… ignores. They ignore it because you’re handsome, because you always save the day. Because you actually pretend to give a shit.”

“She, hang on,” Izuku tells her frantically, eyes scanning the perimeter for a window of opportunity, no matter how small. “Just hang on for a few more seconds, I’m thinking—"

“The Symbol of Peace has a dark side somewhere underneath all those freckles,” Vindicator continues, ignoring both of them. “And I want to see it. I want everyone to see it.” She cocks her head and smiles sweetly, fingers twisting into Lucy’s hair relentlessly, and she glances over toward a small mounted camera perched on an outcropping of concrete. Its lens glints in the darkness.

Oh.

Teeth gritted, hair matted and tangled, Lucy lets out a shuddering, pained sob that tears Izuku’s attention back to her. “Please, don’t, I’m—

But Vindicator cuts her off, yanking her backwards so hard she cries out. Vindicator leans down close to Lucy’s ear, smiling as she keeps her crazed eyes on Izuku from across the room while she stage-whispers, “Your husband and I have been playing this game for a while now, you know? We’re coming up on our three-year anniversary, actually. Isn’t that exciting?”

Izuku stares, nauseated as the tip of the knife inches closer and closer to Lucy’s throat. Desperately, he glances down at the knife handle sticking out of his own shoulder. An idea begins to form, small and flimsy—but it’s something.

“Has it really been three years?” he asks desperately, shaking his head to clear his vision of spots. He’s been bleeding for too long at this point, but as long as the knife is still in his body, he should stay conscious long enough to manage. Swallowing thickly, he staggers back to his feet, holding Vindicator’s gaze with unyielding attention. “We should c-celebrate, huh? Three—” he gasps, fingers slipping on the wetness of his wound. “Three years is… a lot of time. Definitely calls for something.”

Vindicator straightens back up, knife dropping from Lucy’s neck to dangle at her side in a loose hold. The psychopath smiles, eyes bright. “You really mean it?”

“More than anything,” he grits. “Let’s… do something. To commemorate it.”

Start with everything you know about that situation, Izuku. Don’t leave anything out.

He’s not sure he has enough energy to do that right now. Focus on the distraction, get her to drop her guard, grab Lucy, incapacitate Vindicator. That’s the only thing going through his mind right now. Distraction, distraction, distraction.

He sees the edge of the floor a few feet behind Vindicator’s feet, the night sky outlining her wiry frame in stars and blue-black nighttime. Lucy is just as close to that edge. The knife in his chest cuts deep, blade brushing bone with every movement, and he bites through his cheek to hold back a grimace of pain. He really hopes he survives this, but if he doesn’t…

Well, he doesn’t survive. Lucy will, and that’s all right with him. He just has to hold on a little while longer.

“Sweetheart?” His voice breaks on the second syllable. “Luce, I’m going to get you out of this. Okay? Babe, look at me—I’m going to save you.”
Head tilted back at a painful angle, she peeks at him out of the corner of her wet, bleary eyes. He channels everything he has into getting the silent message across, hoping and praying that she understand what he wants from her.

Vindicator only giggles maniacally, knife blade spinning wildly between her bony fingers. “Secret messages, huh? Exciting. I love secrets.”

Izuku smiles sadly at Lucy, ignoring Vindicator for all he’s worth. Absently, he grabs the handle of the knife in his chest, feeling the tears that slip down his face one by one. Lucy’s eyes widen in horror and she struggles in Vindicator’s grasp, wildly shaking her head back and forth when she realizes. ‘No, no, no,’ she screams at him silently. ‘Don’t you dare, I will never forgive you—’

“I love you,” he tells her brokenly, and then he moves.

Green lighting skitters up and down his legs as he bends his knees and pours every ounce of power he has into lunging forward. Wind whistles and screams, time bends in half, and Izuku reaches out with a bloodied hand to break Vindicator’s arm as easily as snapping a toothpick. In her surprise, she releases her grip on Lucy’s hair just enough for Izuku to flick his finger at his wife, sending her tumbling in the other direction like a ragdoll toward the center of the room—bruised and battered, but safe. He almost chances a weak smile at his luck.

But Vindicator’s crazed laughter doesn’t cease for a second. He hears the blade singing through the air before he sees it as Vindicator snaps her wrist and releases the knife at full speed in his direction. With another burst of power, he dodges the knife, feeling it graze the ends of his hair as he rolls to the side.

And with the final vestiges of his strength, he tears the knife out of his shoulder with a roar and jams it between Vindicator’s ribs with a sickening squelch that’s almost as loud as her laughter.

The world stops turning. Izuku stops breathing. He hears the whir of car engines in the distance and incoming sirens as his backup arrives fourteen stories below them.

And through it all, Vindicator laughs.

“Oh, Deku,” she cackles, hands scrabbling at the gaping wound in her side. She grins down at him, teeth stained crimson and glistening. “You always play your part so beautifully.”

She falls, twitching, to the ground. She does not move again.

All at once, Izuku lets out a gasping breath and crumples to the ground in a heap of numb, shaking limbs. Hot blood spreads out across his costume in a black stain, gushing and surging in time with his racing heartbeat, and he shivers, suddenly feeling impossibly cold in the nighttime air. He sucks in oxygen and shudders. The ceiling glows red and blue with the sirens from the ground, and he hears shouting in the distance.

Black clouds the edges of his vision. He blinks it away, shaking his head as he presses the flat of his palm to the wound in his shoulder. Blood seeps between his fingers and down his wrist. Lucy, where is Lucy—

“H-Honey?” he calls out, groaning as he attempts to roll over onto his hands and knees. He runs his tongue over his teeth and spits on the ground, not bothering to look if his saliva is stained scarlet or not because it doesn’t fucking matter. With great difficulty, he staggers to his feet and looks out into the main part of the room. “Luce, are you—?”

His heart stops dead in his chest.
Lucy Albright is splayed out on the concrete, fingers trembling and chest convulsing as she whimpers and chokes on her own blood. The knife is lodged in her stomach all the way to the hilt, her pale hands pressing against the wound as best she can, but the pool of red-black death beneath her body is growing with every passing second and it’s too much—

“No,” he says, voice small and impossibly hollow. “No, no, no, this isn’t—” he chokes. Izuku’s heart bottoms out in his stomach and he stumbles to his knees, landing hard. “You’re… you’re supposed to be fine,” he babbles senselessly. “You’re okay. This is… no. You’re supposed to be fine.”

With numb hands, he drags himself forward, smearing crimson across the concrete in his wake. Lucy watches him with eyes as wide as dinner plates, pupils dilated in her panic so much that the bottle-green color of her irises disappears almost entirely. She lets out a wet-sounding cough that paints her lips with a ruby sheen that almost looks black in the darkness.

He crawls alongside her, pushing himself up onto his elbows with a cry of pained effort. If he’s still bleeding, he doesn’t notice and doesn’t care. How could he?

“Lucy,” he whispers, utterly shattered. He looks at the gaping wound in her stomach and fights the urge to vomit and extinguish the stars and scream. “Luce, hey, you’re gonna be okay, I’m here. I’ve got you. It’s gonna be fine, we’re both going to be fine.”

“I’m sorry,” she gurgles, skin pale and shoulders quaking with the effort of each blood-wet breath. “M’so sorry—”

“Shh,” Izuku tells her, reaching up to cup her cheeks between his bloodstained gloves. He traces her cheekbones with his thumbs, memorizing her face down to the minutiae—the curve of her eyelashes, the specific angle of her nose, the perfect bow of her upper lip. He smiles, ignoring the tears on his own face for her sake. “Hey, it’s not your fault. It’s mine, I’m—” he breaks off on a dry-sounding sob that rips him apart inside. “God, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for this… any of this to happen.”

“Hurts,” she cries, leaning into his touch. “Please, Izuku, I-I…”

“Don’t talk, baby, you shouldn’t talk, okay? Please, just—” he swallows and releases out a gasping sob that feels like his own dying breath. Izuku looks around frantically, searching for a staircase, the sound of reinforcements coming for them, anything.

But there’s nothing.

Nothing at all.

He turns back to Lucy and smiles, expression brittle and ready to break. He presses a kiss to her forehead and squeezes his eyes shut, wishing he’d never dodged that knife. “I love you, I love you, I love you so much, you’re going to be okay,” he repeats, murmuring nonsense against her hairline as he waits and waits for somebody to come and save them. “We’re going to make it, but you have to stay awake, okay? Stay awake, Luce, come on! Don’t go to sleep.”

Gradually, her breaths become shallower as the pool of blood beneath her body spreads. She gasps and chokes, looking up at Izuku’s face with cold fear etched into her expression. Her eyelids begin to drift shut. Izuku panics.

“Don’t!” he shouts, shaking her slightly as his voice goes shrill with panic. He’s crying and bleeding and she’s dying and there’s nothing he can do about it. “Come on, don’t do this, Lucy.
Stay with me, dammit, stay with me!"

“Love you,” she exhales, so quiet that he almost misses it. His heart shatters as she reaches up weakly to touch his face. “Love you… s-so much. So… much.”

“Don’t say that,” he begs, tears blurring his vision. He sobs, pressing his forehead against hers as he cries and aches for something he can’t even begin to articulate. “Please don’t, Luce, I can’t—I can’t do this without you. Please, don’t leave me. Just stay awake a little longer, I promise, they’re coming and they’re gonna help us, okay? Just stay awake!”

He pulls back, words spilling off his tongue, prepared to carry her out of here and into a hospital if it kills him because fuck, he is not going to lose his wife in a construction site in Queens because she deserves better. This is all his fault and he has to save her, dammit, and that’s exactly what he’s going to—

Lucy Albright is staring up at the ceiling, expression slack and unblinking. Sea-glass green dulled to grey, skin pale and ashen.

Heart, still.

Life, extinguished.

And Izuku screams.

(Somewhere in the world, the sun rises in the east—but it does not rise in New York City.)

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr | Twitter | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist
In the aftermath, everything is different.

Word spreads like wildfire for weeks after the events of New York City. News reports tumble over into talk shows, talk shows devolve into lengthy blog posts and threaded discussion boards, and discussion boards become conversations overheard in every feasible part of the country. Across the sea, politicians squabble over border restrictions until they’re blue in the mouth, taking stabs at one another like children on a playground; Internet forums swell with activity and conspiracy theories so outlandish that the International Hero Association calls for a temporary ceasefire; vlogs of Swiss-cheese opinions go viral and trend for weeks on end. It’s all one giant avalanche of half-truths and hissed questions of, “Hey, did you hear about the Symbol of Peace?” that never seems to end, and Shouto doesn’t know what to fucking do about any of it.

Against all odds, however, Japan continues to crawl forward on its belly, soldiering on despite the numbness that’s seemingly overtaken all of them from fingertips to toes. Shouto sees his country’s sapped spirit in the drooped line of civilians’ shoulders, in the sudden surge of villain activity that nobody seems to be able to stop or predict. He hears it in the hushed murmurs that float around his agency—whispers of “Now what?” and “What are our orders?” He feels it all in his bones, deep and echoing like the aftershocks of an earthquake that never really happened to anyone in the world except Midoriya.

It’s been three weeks. Three weeks since Lucy Albright was murdered on international television. Eighteen days since her funeral, which Shouto had been unable to attend due to the resurgence of organized crime in Tokyo. Fifteen days since Midoriya Izuku submitted his formal resignation to the Hero Association of New York without so much as a statement to the press or a tweet in acknowledgement of his untimely retirement and subsequent demotion.

Two weeks since Midoriya disappeared from America without a trace.

Two weeks since Todoroki Shouto became the Number One Hero.

He’s hated every single second of it.

May 29th, 2025

By the time Shouto stumbles back into his apartment, it’s nearing nine o’clock and the sun has long since dipped below the city skyline. Slamming the door behind him, he sinks against the smooth wood and winces, feeling his bruised jaw ache beneath his skin as the gash through his brow pulls uncomfortably. He’s sore and burned and really fucking hungry, honestly, but all he wants is to fall into bed and sleep for the next fifteen years of his life because he’s been on the clock since six this morning. Eating can wait for a while. So can bandages, for that matter.

With a pained groan, Shouto pushes off the door and kicks his boots off, fumbling with the bent zippers as he drops them in a soot-stained heap on his way into the main part of his flat. He sheds
one glove as he passes his kitchen and pulls the other one off with his teeth, tossing both on the countertop of the kitchen island as he passes into the living room.

He makes a beeline for his loft as soon as the stairs come into view around the corner. He can see the edge of his bed over the lip of his loft, covers askew from his hurried exit this morning and flannel pajamas pants flung over the railing in rather spectacular fashion, but he’s too tired to be bothered with the sloppiness of it all. With a soft, pained sigh, he takes the first step—

A lamp in the living room clicks on.

Hackles rising and shoulders tensing, Shouto spins, right hand shooting outward as ice crystals materialize along his forearm like blue-white shards of glittering glass. He scans the perimeter automatically, noting quick exits and hiding places.

“Who the hell—?” he begins, but the words die in his throat as soon as he sees the man sitting in his living room chair.

His arms are crossed over his chest and a pair of black-framed glasses slip lower and lower on his nose with every heartbeat. His hair’s messy tonight and he’s wearing a collared shirt with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows, slim trousers accentuating his long legs where they cross over his knee. A tweed jacket is folded neatly over his lap. He’s watching Shouto with narrowed eyes and a delicately arched brow, lips pursed. The shadows cut sharply across the planes of his face.

Not an intruder, then.

“Keiji,” Shouto breathes, dropping his arm as he allows his ice to evaporate into soft curls of steam that tickle his skin. He runs a hand over his face. “You scared me.”

Keiji hums lowly. “Sorry. I figured you saw my message from earlier.” He looks Shouto up and down appraisingly, brows furrowing in faint concern when he notices the way Shouto’s arm rests closely against his injured side. “Rough day?”

Shouto shrugs, barely biting back a wince. He turns and treks up the stairs to his loft, saying over his shoulder, “That’s one way of putting it, yes.”

Keiji bites his lower lip, hesitating. “Need any help?”

“No, I got it.” Shouto waves him off, reaching tenderly for the clasp at the throat of his costume. He unzips the his suit slowly, being careful not to pull too much on his strained ligaments as he slides to zipper down to his navel. “Minor scrapes and bruises today. I don’t think anything’s broken.”

“Well, that must be a nice change,” Keiji says, voice tinged with morbid amusement. “Antiseptic?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

“Well, that must be a nice change,” Keiji says, voice tinged with morbid amusement. “Antiseptic?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

“Not at all.” There’s a shuffle below as Keiji gets up from his chair and crosses the open floor toward the bathroom. Light spills past the doorway, casting long shadows and pale golden light against the raw brick walls of Shouto’s apartment.

Shouto sucks in a sharp breath through his teeth when he steps out of his costume, tossing it in the corner near his hamper as a reminder to wash it in the morning. He’s still wearing his black compression bodysuit—he’s a little bit scared to peel it off and see which colors have stained his skin today. Hissing, he reaches up and fumbles for the zipper at the back of his neck. His shoulder protests angrily, flaring up with white-hot pain as his ligaments stretch and burn around the joint.
Footsteps behind him, coming up the stairs. “Here, let me,” Keiji says softly, setting the bottle of antiseptic down on top of the nearby dresser. Shouto relaxes when he feels cool fingers at the back of his neck, squeezing the juncture of his neck and shoulder with reassuring firmness as the zipper descends down to the small of his back.

There’s a sharp breath as air hits the sweat-dampened skin between his shoulder blades. “Oh my god, Shouto—”

“Don’t say it,” he cuts off gently, slipping out of Keiji’s hold to peel himself out of the bodysuit. He sees the angry bruises that paint the canvas of his skin in bold brushstrokes of mauve and navy, but he tries to pretend that he can’t. With a wince, he hurls the bodysuit aside and sinks down onto the edge of his bed in nothing more than his boxer briefs, gritting his teeth in pain. “This… isn’t so bad, actually. I was expecting worse.”

Keiji sighs softly, reaching over for the bottle of antiseptic and cotton balls before handing it off. Shouto takes them with a murmured thank you. Keiji sinks down onto the edge of the bed next to him, fingers digging into his knees.

“You can’t keep doing this to yourself,” Keiji says quietly, eyes glued to a particularly nasty abrasion on Shouto’s left pectoral. “You’re going to get yourself killed one of these days.”

“I was in danger of that even when I was Number Two,” he points out, voice low as his hands stay busy. He glances sidelong, a few strands of red hair falling into his lashes. “I told you this would happen when we started dating. You promised—”

“I know, I know. You don’t have to remind me.”

“I’m just saying, if it’s too much to handle, I wouldn’t hold it against you.”

Keiji lets out a low hum, biting the inside of his cheek. “Hey, I knew what I was signing up for when we started this whole thing,” he says softly, tracing a knuckle against a patch of unmarked skin on Shouto’s thigh with aching tenderness. “I’m just… worried. That’s all. Trust me, if I was going to break up with you, it’d be for ditching dinner for the second time this week, not this.”

There’s a note of teasing in his voice that ekes a faint half-smile out of Shouto—he’s always been the funny one between the two of them—but then Keiji’s words really sink in and Shouto’s smile disappears in a flash. Horror crests in his stomach like a tidal wave as alarm bells ring, red flags flapping violently in the wind.

“Oh my god,” he exhales. “Did I—?”

Keiji smiles sadly, eyes crinkling at the edges. “I went ahead and switched our reservation to next week. Does Tuesday work?”

With a groan, Shouto presses the heels of his hands against his eye sockets and drops back onto the bed like deadweight. He wishes his messy sheets would swallow him whole, twist around his neck and squeeze the life out of him because that’s what he deserves right now, Jesus.

“I thought it was tomorrow,” he mumbles miserably, carding his fingers through the tangles in his hair until it hurts. He rolls over, burying his face into one of his pillows to hide his twisted expression. “I’m so sorry. You should’ve called, said something—I don’t know. Anything. I would’ve come if I’d known.”

“Hey, it’s all right,” Keiji reassures him, leaning over to press a kiss to an unbruised part of his shoulder blade. He smiles against Shouto’s skin, fingers tracing shapes into the small of his back.
near the waistband of his boxer briefs. “I mean, it does suck, but whatever. I saw the news, figured out what was going on. I know things are different now that you’re Number One. You’ve got bigger stuff to worry about these days than dinner plans with me.”

“Still should’ve remembered,” he mutters.

“Maybe. But at least you’re here now.”

“And alive,” Shouto points out.

Keiji huffs a laugh that tickles the back of his neck. “Yeah,” he murmurs warmly. “Alive. That’s a pretty important part of all this.”

Shouto lets out a sigh through the stuffing in his pillow, feeling his heart unclench bit by bit. While they haven’t been dating for very long, three months is a little longer than most of his relationships in the last few years, and Shouto would be remiss to lose this one because of that goddamn promotion. He likes Keiji, even if they don’t get to see each other very often anymore. It’s still more than he’s had in a while, and he’s okay with that. He likes the company.

Shouto goes to roll back over and apologize again—for his forgetfulness, for making Keiji worry, and for whatever else that might require an apology because surely there’s something else he can’t think of at the moment—but he freezes up when he feels the scrape of teeth across the skin of his neck and the gentle pressure of fingers in the dip of his spine. His breath stutters, shudders, and hisses out through his teeth in a paper-thin stream. Immediately, all of the pain in his body shifts deeper into the shadows, replaced tenfold with a blistering heat that spreads across his damaged skin like brushfire.

“We could stay in tonight, if you want,” Keiji murmurs against Shouto’s skin, voice low with promise. “Order dinner. Catch up a little.”


“Mm, sorry, what was that?” His fingers dip beneath the waistband of Shouto’s boxer briefs for a perilous second, causing Shouto to swear and jolt in surprise. “Can’t quite hear you through that pillow.”

“Yes, Keiji, Jesus,” he gasps, roughly rolling over and off the edge of the bed in a clumsy heap of searing limbs. He lands on his hands and knees, scrambling to his feet with lungs straining for air they can’t seem to find. He feels the corner of his dresser bite into his lower back; he leans into the sensation.

Keiji props himself up on his elbows on the bed, looking rather pleased with himself as he gives Shouto a very intentional, very scandalous once-over on the far side of the loft. His eyes are dark and his hair is tousled, and Shouto doesn’t think he’s ever seen him look so handsome before in his life. God dammit.

Shouto narrows his eyes at Keiji and points a finger at him. “Stop it. You know I can’t think when you do that.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” Keiji says, peering over the rim of his glasses dangerously. He bites his lower lip. “And I’ll thank you to remember that I can’t think when you look like that. It’s only fair.”

Shouto laughs. “What, bruised halfway to hell?”
Shouto glances down at the scrapes, bruises, and burns that litter his skin in a patchwork quilt, overlaid with old scars and puckered gunshot wounds that glow silver like twisted constellations. He raises an eyebrow. “Right,” he says flatly. Reaching over, he grabs a towel off a hook on the wall and slings it over his shoulder, pointing at the stairs descending from his loft. “Look, I’m going to take a shower. Why don’t you order some dinner and we’ll see how long I manage to stay awake, all right? I’m…” he trails, shifting his weight with a wince. “I’m not sure how much fun I’m going to be tonight.”

Keiji’s face instantly softens, expression bleeding into something concerned and caring. A smile curves his mouth sweetly. “That’s fine, love. I understand.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No need for apologies.” Keiji slips off the bed and stands up, crossing the loft to stand in front of Shouto. His warm hands come to rest on Shouto’s hips in strategic positions so as to cause the least amount of pain possible. He leans up to steal a quick, chaste kiss. “Can I at least join you for the shower? I promise I’ll keep my hands to myself.” A pause. Then, as an afterthought, “Mostly.”

Shouto exhales a soft laugh. “I absolutely don’t believe you.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t either.”

Shouto’s lips quirk up on one side and he rolls his eyes toward the ceiling. Ridiculous. He drops a kiss on Keiji’s cheek and nods toward the kitchen over the edge of the loft. “Order dinner for us, all right? I won’t be long, promise.”

Reluctantly, Keiji drops his hands from Shouto’s hips and pushes his glasses up his nose, smiling softly. “Okay, okay. But I’ll hold you to it.”

And with that, he turns and descends the stairs, already dialing the number for that noodle place downtown that Shouto loves so much. His voice is hushed and soft-spoken, words measured and chosen carefully.

The feeling in Shouto’s heart is… weird. Fluttery, but not weightless.

Really weird.

Putting the thought out of his mind, Shouto limps his way into his bathroom and locks the door behind him—he honestly wouldn’t put it past Keiji to sneak in and join Shouto for his shower anyway. The mirror tells him things about his body he’d rather not know if he wants to sleep at all tonight, so he drops his gaze to the tile floor and keeps it fixated there until the spray is steaming, just the way he likes it.

And the second he steps beneath the water, he crumples.

Shouto plummets and lands hard, knees giving way like they were never meant to hold weight in the first place. The spray sluices down his back and seeps into the tears in his skin, stinging like fiery nettles as all manner of dirt and grime is flushed from his system. The water turns pink before it swirls down the drain. Shouto can’t stop staring at the finespun ribbons of blood in the water—his blood, he realizes numbly. The blood he never seems to have enough of these days.

Not for the first time since April 22nd, Shouto wonders how Midoriya did it. How he managed to make being the Number One Hero look so goddamn easy, like saving the world was nothing more
than a walk in the park and greeting Death on the daily wasn’t terrifying every single time. How did he smile? How did he bring hope and light and truth to people who never wanted it and surely didn’t deserve it? How did he do any of it without losing his fucking mind?

Nobody knows where Midoriya is right now. Some speculate that he’s living with Lucy’s family out in Colorado, parsing through her estate and taking a break to grieve. Others think he’s gone into hiding to avoid the media scrutiny. Some call him a coward. Others call him a failure. Most, however, call him a hero—a hero who saved the city, took down a terrorist, and lost everything in the process.

He’s the Symbol of Peace the world needs now more than ever, but he’s the Symbol of Peace no one can find. Shouto wouldn’t be able to fill those shoes even if he tried.

Overhead, the showerhead sputters, jarring him from his thoughts. Automatically, Shouto tenses up and ducks his head between his knees, hearing the echo of gunshots in the irregular spray and seeing the white-hot flash of gunpowder with every aftershock of his heart. He clenches his teeth until they crack and shift in his jaw, fingers digging into the bruises on his legs with white-knuckled strength.

He sees an explosion painted on the backs of his eyelids and there’s a black hole of nothingness and he feels gravity as it shifts, no, please, this can’t be how it ends—

Gasping, Shouto surges forward and twists the shower handle sharply to the right, cutting the water off abruptly. He’s shivering, trembling from head to toe, fingers curled around damp, polished metal handle as his chest heaves. He’s never felt warmer in his life.

There’s a knock on the bathroom door. “Shouto?” Keiji asks, voice muffled through the wood. “Hey, you doing okay in there? Dinner will be here soon.”

Fingers trembling, Shouto releases his death grip on the shower handle and sinks against the cold tile wall, head falling back with a dull thunk that should hurt more than it does. He fights to control his heart rate. “Yeah,” he croaks weakly. “Yeah, I’m fine. Be out in a minute.”

“Okay. I’ll be in the kitchen.”

And with the sound of retreating footsteps ricocheting around in his skull, Shouto repeats the words, I’m fine, I’m fine, I’m fine, on a loop until he actually starts to believe it. He’s fine. He’s always been fine. Hasn’t he? He is Todoroki Shouto, and he has always been fine.

You say that a lot. Have you noticed?

I say it because I mean it.

Every time?

With a shuddering exhale, Shouto picks himself up off the floor of his shower and stumbles out in a tangle of numb limbs and racing thoughts. He hopes his medication will be enough to help him sleep tonight, but after a day like today, he probably won’t be so lucky. Shouto secures wraps a towel around his hips and pushes out of the bathroom in a billow of steam. His skin sizzles, hair pushed back from his forehead in a wet tangle as he reaches for a pair of sweatpants and a soft t-shirt from his dresser.

“I ordered your usual,” Keiji calls up from the living room. He’s tapping something out on his phone, eyes glued to the screen. “Hope that’s okay.”
“That’s fine,” Shouto replies, slipping into the sweatpants and shirt with a pleased sigh. He shakes his hair out and runs his fingers through the strands, not bothering to really comb it because at this point, he doesn’t care. He hangs his towel up and goes for his drawer of fuzzy socks—

His phone buzzes on his nightstand.

Shouto’s hand stops dead in midair, fingers stiff as he stares at his glowing lock screen. The number calling him is unknown—it’s a Japanese area code, and a local one, at that, but it’s labeled as “unlisted,” whatever that means. It’s almost ten o’clock. Who would be calling him at this hour?

Biting his lip, Shouto hesitantly reaches over to answer it—but his cell stops buzzing just as his fingers touch the screen.

I missed call, the notification reads.

Wrong number, he assumes automatically, except that that doesn’t make sense. Nobody accidentally calls the cell phone of the Number One Hero in the world. His number’s protected by the government, locked tight for personal and professional reasons, most of which have to do with his safety. Anyone trying to call him would have to know that they’re calling him and not somebody else. Right?

With a frown, Shouto picks up his phone and swipes a finger across the screen. The number stares up at him in crisp blue-white font, taunting him.

Then it starts to ring again. It’s the same number, blinking angrily up into his face.

Shouto doesn’t think before he answers the call. “Hello?” he asks carefully, keeping his voice low. If it is a villain or somebody looking to hunt him down—

A shuddering, broken sob crackles through the phone line in a burst of static. “Hello, yes, is this Todoroki Shouto?” The voice is female, small, and hard to hear. She sounds like she’s crying. “Oh, god, please tell me my information isn’t outdated. I really need to speak to—”

“How did you get this number?” he demands abruptly, brows slashing lowly on his face. His patience wears thinner with each passing second. For all he knows, this could be a distraction by the League to pinpoint his location through his phone signal. “If you don’t tell me right now, I will hang up and—”

“Midoriya Inko!” she blurts, sounding shrill and panicked. “It’s Midoriya Inko, I swear!”

And Shouto just… goes numb.

He is frozen, rooted to the spot in the middle of his loft. His throat is dry and his eyes are wide as saucers, staring out at absolutely nothing as the implication sinks in with every heartbeat. Midoriya Inko, he repeats numbly in his head. Midoriya Inko, Midoriya Inko, Midoriya Inko. Now that he has a name to go with the panicked, water-clogged voice, everything makes a whole lot more sense.

She’s babbling on the other end of the line, words verging on indecipherable through her sobbing
breaths. “I’m Izuku’s mother, dear, I promise. I-I can even prove it to you! You came to my home in December with your niece so you could spend some time with my son, remember? And in high school, you cut your finger on a cheese grater in my kitchen when you and Izuku tried to make —”

“Oh my god,” Shouto exhales, raking his fingers though his hair as oxygen drains from his lungs. He shakes his head, bewildered. “Midoriya-san? How… how did you even get this number? I’m unlisted.”

“Izuku gave me your number the night before you boys went to that convention in Tokyo when you were seventeen,” she explains hurriedly. “I didn’t remember I even had it until just now.”

Shouto sinks down onto the edge of his bed, still stunned beyond all belief. His heart… might not be beating right now. He’s not entirely sure. “Oh,” he says dumbly after a moment, the word stiff and awkward. “I, uh. I had no idea.”

“I’m so sorry this is late,” she says again, voice wobbling perilously. “But I really, really need your help. You’re the only one I can think of who would be able to help me, and I’m… I’m so scared, Shouto.” Her voice breaks on his name. “Please.”

“Of course, yes, anything. Whatever you need, Midoriya-san,” he tells her, standing up to grab his sneakers from the closet and a zip hoodie. “I’ll help however I can. Just tell me what’s going on. Start from the beginning.”

He’s expecting a break-in, a street crime in the city, a lost cat stuck in a tree—literally anything except what she actually says.

“It’s Izuku,” she hiccups in a voice so small it breaks Shouto apart. “He’s gone. I got home this evening and he was just… gone.”

The rest of the world disappears.

Shouto opens his mouth to speak, to ask what the hell she’s talking about, but nothing passes his lips. He’s frozen, stock-still in the face of something he’s suspected for the last few weeks but never really wanted to know because of what it would mean.

“he’s here he’s in Japan I knew it I knew it oh my god

“I…” He wets his lips, trying to calm his racing pulse. “I had no idea he was even in the country.”

Inko snifflies and mumbles an affirmative. “He arrived a few weeks after… well, after what happened. He’s been staying with me, keeping his head down. Didn’t want anyone to know. You understand, of course.”

Shouto nods numbly. “Yeah. Yeah, that— uh, makes sense. Does the Hero Association at least know he’s here?”

“I don’t know if he told them when he crossed the border. He—” here, she hesitates. Shouto feels his spine go rigid with her silence, and he silently begins to pray. “He hasn’t exactly been talking much at all since he got home. Izuku’s… not in a very good place right now. Since everything happened.”

“And now he’s missing.” Shouto takes a deep breath and tries not to vomit, feeling dizzy under the weight of it all. A million things are racing through his mind, none of them good. “Shit. Do you have any idea where he’d go, who he’d try to find? I can put out an APB for him, see if my agency
can come up with anything, but I’m not sure—"

“I already made the call to all agencies in the area,” she says shakily. “I also checked with All Might, Izuku’s former teachers, the police, everyone. Since you’re one of his only classmates still working in Japan, I had hoped you’d know where he is. You two have always been so close.”

*Not always,* Shouto thinks, grimacing at the bitter taste in his mouth. It’s probably best not to tell her that.

“I haven’t seen him,” he says instead, pulling on the ends of his hair in frustration. He wants to put his fist through drywall, burn a building, *something,* but he settles for pinching the bridge of his nose and squeezing his eyes shut instead. “I had no idea he was even nearby until you called, honest. I have no answers for you, Midoriya-san. I’m sorry.”

She hiccups, and the sound shatters Shouto down to his core. “D-Do you have any idea where he’d go, then? Please, sweetheart, I’ll take anything you can give me.”

Shouto cracks open one eye, glancing down below into his living room where Keiji is lounging in the chair, looking up at him with concern etched into his angular features. Shouto watches as Keiji cocks his head to one side.

‘Everything okay?’ he mouths, brows furrowed.

No. Nothing is okay. Shouto doesn’t remember the last time things were ever okay in the first place.

A soft sigh escapes his nose. He glances out the window, noting the silvery stars that dot the sky like diamonds.

“I might know a place,” he tells Inko softly.

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When Shouto arrives at the rock quarry just outside the city, the first thing he notices is that the chain link fence has been repaired.

There used to be a large, teenager-sized hole near the bottom of the fence, easily hidden by the underbrush of the forest that touches the southern side of the flooded facility, but the hole has long since been replaced with fresh fencing topped with curled razor wire that glints in the moonlight. A “NO TRESPASSING” sign has been posted as well, citing danger and misdemeanor charges and a million other punishments that Shouto doubts have had very much impact on the activity in this place. A clumsily-painted cock punctuates the warnings in bold strokes. How charming.

Taking a deep breath, Shouto stuffs his hands in the pocket of his hoodie and approaches the fence, building a staircase of solid ice with every single step he takes. He crests the top of the fence easily, breath curling past his lips in wisps of milky-white vapor, then skids the rest of the way down on the heels of his sneakers. He doesn’t break stride, heading straight for the tallest outcropping in the quarry.

He tells himself he’s insane. He tells himself that there’s *no way* Midoriya could be here. There’s just no possible chance. Of all the places Midoriya could’ve disappeared to, coming here would probably be on the bottom of his list. Right?
Still, Shouto marches forward, logic be damned. His muscles recall the precise distance between footholds as he scales the steep hill, hair falling into his eyes in a half-dried curtain of white waves and scarlet tangles. He recognizes a few of the rail-thin trees that dot the slope and an oddly-shaped stone that Midoriya used to say looked sort of like Cementoss’ face. Now, the rock is covered in a thick coating of moss and pale green lichen that ruins the aesthetic a little bit, but Shouto has to admit that the overall shape has really changed much. It does look like Cementoss—sort of, at least. If you squint.

Shale stones loosen and roll down the slope with every step he takes. He’s almost at the top now. His mind keeps repeating, ‘no way, there’s no fucking way he’s here, just go to the agency and help with the search,’ but he ignores it all. There’s a twist in his gut that feels an awful lot like nausea with a splash of intuition on the side, and he’s going with it for now. Just until he’s sure, at least.

He’s gritting his teeth, pulling himself up the side of the hill despite the aching in his joints from patrol today. Just a little farther, then he can turn around and get out of this place that reeks of too many memories and the faint sickly-sweetness of summer nights spent under the stars. He reaches for the top edge, hauling himself over the lip with a grunt.

Midoriya Izuku is perched on the edge of the outcropping that overlooks the vast, impossibly deep lake in the center of the quarry where it glimmers like glass in the starlight. His knees are pulled up to his chest, arms crossed over his knees with his face tilted up toward the night sky as he searches for constellations and answers he’ll likely never find.

“My mom called you,” Midoriya murmurs, voice low and rough. He doesn’t turn around, doesn’t even twitch. “Didn’t she?”

Shouto stuffs his hands back in the pocket of his hoodie. “She did,” he replies carefully, taking a few tentative steps toward Midoriya. His shoes crunch noisily in the stillness of the late hour. “She’s really worried about you, you know.”

“She’s always worried about me,” he says, voice low and faintly bitter.

“She has good reason to be.” Shouto kicks around some gravel in the empty spot next to Midoriya. “Mind if I join you?”

There’s a pause. Shouto holds his breath.

“Do what you want,” Midoriya eventually replies, gesturing vaguely.

Shouto sits, hanging his legs over the edge in the open air and leaning back heavily on his hands. The ground is just as uncomfortable as it was eight years ago, despite the creeping of vegetation that’s begin to overtake the outcropping, but it’s not horrible by any means. They sit side-by-side, drenched in heavy silence that’s only broken up by the never-ending cacophony of cicadas and the whisper of wind in their hair.

“How’d you know it was me?” Shouto asks at one point, flicking a stone off the edge of the outcropping. It lands in the lake below with an inaudible plop, disturbing the glasslike surface of the still lake with mesmerizing ripples.

Midoriya shrugs. “Never brought anybody else here,” he mutters. “It was either you or a random teenager looking for a quiet place to get high. Fifty-fifty shot, really.” He glances over tiredly. “How’d you know I was here?”
“Lucky guess,” Shouto answers vaguely.

Midoriya hums. “Pretty damn lucky.”

“I suppose.”

Silence surges, overtakes the both of them for several painstaking heartbeats. Shouto notes blue-and-orange graffiti on the far side of the quarry near the shore of the lake, colors faded and partly sand-blasted away. Forgotten, just like the rest of this place. Locked in time and left to rot. He wonders how long ago it was placed there. Eight years? Six months? Last week?

At his side, Midoriya lets out a shuddering breath that twists Shouto’s stomach into knots. He sees the exhaustion in the lines around Midoriya’s dull green eyes, the gut-wrenching loss in the curve of his unsmiling mouth. He sees the shadows behind Midoriya’s gaze that never used to be there. He sees it all and wishes he couldn’t because ignorance has always been more comfortable than whatever this is.

Shouto lets out a slow breath and bites his lip, dropping his line of sight to the loose shale stones between his knees. “Hey, I’m sorr—"

“Don’t,” Izuku cuts him off sharply. His voice is brittle around the edges, cored with solid iron. He clenches his fists tightly. “Just don’t, all right? I get that shit from everyone else. I don’t need it from you.”

Shouto digs his nails into the dirt, feeling his lungs constrict uncomfortably. “All right,” he says, voice hushed.

“I—” but the words suddenly die on Midoriya’s lips, all poisoned and bitter. He sighs, rubbing a hand over his face as his shoulders droop like all the air’s been let out of his system at once. Shouto stays very still, watching and waiting.

“Sorry,” Midoriya murmurs after a moment, shaking his head back and forth. He looks exhausted, eyes ringed in darkness. “I didn’t mean…"

“It’s okay,” Shouto tells him—because it is. It really, really is.

Midoriya shakes his head, refusing to accept it. “No, it’s not,” he insists. “It’s not okay. I’m sorry, all right? It’s… I don’t know.” With a grimace, Izuku reaches down and grabs a smooth stone off the ground, hurling it into the lake with a flick of his wrist and a spark of green electricity. It lands a hundred meters away, disappearing below the stygian depths of the lake with an impressive splash. “Nobody seems to know how to say anything else these days.”

Shouto hums noncommittally, reaching for another nearby stone. He turns it over in his fingers, noting all the scuffs and smooth edges, the damp earth that clings to it like a second skin.

“After my father died, people didn’t stop offering condolences for almost two years,” he says quietly, remembering the funeral and all that came after it. He sees a lot of faceless people dressed in black and even more reporters with their flashing cameras and poignant questions. “I’d tell you it gets more tolerable as time passes, but then I’d be lying. And I didn’t even like the bastard all that much.”

“But he was still your father,” Izuku murmurs, voice soft.

Shouto closes his fingers around the smooth stone, ignoring the protests from his bruised joints and jammed thumb. “Yeah,” he says quietly after a moment. “Yeah, he was.”
With a grunt, Shouto hurls the stone into the lake, eyes following its path all the way down until it hits the water. Midoriya is quiet, watching the ripples as they spread across the surface of the lake from edge to edge.

“Do you miss him?” Izuku asks, eyes glassy and unseeing as he looks out over the dark horizon. “Your father, I mean.”

It’s a question he’s never really been asked before. A question he’s never had to answer until now.

“Every day,” he whispers.

They devolve into silence, comfortable and warm like a fleece blanket. The nighttime air is chilly where it hits their skin, but Shouto keeps his left side at a healthy temperature for the both of them that makes it all a little more tolerable. A hundred feet below, the lake opens up like a bottomless crater that could swallow them whole, given the chance—it’s a monstrous maw of black nothingness, glittering and infinite. It’s not completely unlike the black hole they both saw in Geneva six months ago, now that Shouto thinks about it.

It feels like it’s been a lot longer than that.
Such Deliberate Disguises, pt. 1

Chapter Summary

August 2025 (it's been eight years since the start of this whole thing, wow)

Izuku: 27 years old
Shouto: 26 years old

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the second stage of Izuku's grieving process: ANGER.

Warning: some of Izuku and Shouto's dialogue could be misconstrued as being "out of character" to some readers, I suppose. Just keep in mind that that's the whole frigging point. Izuku isn't all right at this stage of his life, and Shouto is just super tired and cranky because he's feeling the effects of his job and lifestyle. They have their reasons. Trust me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shouto stops sleeping sometime in July.

There’s nothing momentous or revolutionary about his insomnia, all things considered. This sort of thing has happened before—after Kamino Ward, Shouto didn’t sleep well for a solid week, and every time he saw All For One’s face splashed on the news, he stifled a shudder—but his sleepless bouts have never lasted more than a few weeks at a time before his circadian rhythms pulled him back to the fold with clawed, needy fingers. When he became a professional hero, things got a little worse, but he found his sleep schedule among the rubble eventually. It just took a little longer than expected.

Being the Number One Hero is… different.

His nightmares are more vivid now, painted in striking shades of scarlet with sharp, ebony shadows and a nauseating weightlessness that makes him shiver. He sees disaster zones in Tokyo and the remnants of public shootings in Hokkaido, human trafficking rings from Nagoya and terrorism in Osaka. Illegal trade deals, murders, muggings, gang wars, villain work, hostage situations—it all plays on a loop, etched into his eyelids until it’s the only thing he can see. Night by night, snapshots of his work life bleed through the cracks in his façade to stain the soles of his shoes with their oversaturated horrors, and nothing Shouto tries staunches the flow well enough for him to find peace.

So he stops sleeping. It’s the logical solution, really, and not one he’s wholly happy with, but it’ll work for now. If he’s lucky, he’ll nab an hour or two past midnight before he inevitably rolls out of bed, sweating and shaking and seeing things he shouldn't be seeing. His fingers tremble as he flips on lamps to fill every square inch of his loft with light that chases away the demons, and he busies himself with menial tasks until morning finds him. Some nights he cleans his apartment,
vacuuming and dusting while the stars scrutinize him through his windows. Other nights he’ll go for runs until his muscles burn and his mind is empty, wearing himself out just enough to earn that half-hour of sleep he needs so desperately before he goes out for patrol at dawn.

Shouto knows he’s running on fumes, but at least he’s not dreaming. It’s an acceptable solution. For now.

August 2, 2025

When the call comes, Shouto is lying in bed with his fingers laced together over his chest, staring up at the ceiling as the first rays of daylight paint the bricks of his apartment red-gold. There’s a warm, heavy arm slung across the scarred expanse of his torso and a leg hiked over his hip, feet tangled in the sheets as Keiji sleeps soundly, clinging to Shouto’s cold side like his life depends on it. The city hums outside and the birds fly past his windows in amorphous flocks of tangible song, and somewhere in his apartment, a faucet drips in time with his steady heartbeat.

There’s nothing particularly special about today, other than the fact that it’s a Tuesday and Shouto’s overdue for a trip to the farmer’s market. He’s looking forward to this day off; he hasn’t had one in weeks, and his bruised and battered body is in dire need of a 24-hour respite. Who knows? Maybe he’ll even get the chance to nap for an hour today. He’d be lying if he said the mere thought didn’t thrill him.

With an unintelligible murmur, Keiji sighs softly and snuggles a little closer, hiding his face in the crook of Shouto’s neck with a pleased hum. He eyes his alarm clock—5:38 AM, it reads. Shouto has been awake for thirty-two hours so far. Not great, but still not the longest he’s stayed up. Today will… probably be fine.

But then his phone rings, and all thoughts of possible rest go out the window in a second.

Shouto recognizes the ringtone. He lets his eyes drift shut slowly, doing his best to block out the incessant noise. Maybe he can claim ignorance, tell Momo his phone died overnight or something. (She’d never buy it though. Shouto always keeps his phone charged.) Reluctantly, Shouto lifts Keiji’s arm and untangles their legs, slipping out of bed with as much stealth as he can manage. Keiji’s expression twists adorably, arms blindly reaching out toward the empty side of the bed in search of Shouto’s body—he’s always been a clingy sleeper. Carefully, Shouto nudges his pillow toward Keiji’s limp hand, smiling slightly when he unknowingly accepts the offering and hugs it to his chest.

Turning back to his nightstand, Shouto pulls his phone off the charger and swoops down to grab his discarded pair of boxer briefs from last night, pulling them on hurriedly as he answers the call with a soft sigh. “Shouto speaking.”

“Good, you’re awake,” says Momo with no preamble. She sounds relieved. “We need you to come in for something really quick. There’s a situation downtown in the financial district.”

Tiptoeing down the steps of his loft, Shouto crosses into the kitchen. “All right, first of all,” he starts, voice hushed, “this is my day off. My only day off. Second, do you have any idea what time it is?”
I’m aware that today is Tuesday and that it’s rather early, yes. But this is important.” She makes a dismissive noise. “You’ll have to hit the farmer’s market later this afternoon. It’s not a big deal.”

“You’re a madwoman.”

“No, I’m efficient.”

“I see no difference.”

He practically hears her roll her eyes toward the ceiling. “Oh, for the love of god.” Clearing her throat, she says a little louder, “Look, we both know you weren’t sleeping, so don’t try that with me.”

Shouto huffs indignantly, opening the fridge to grab the orange juice. “Well, I could’ve been sleeping.” He turns to the island and kicks the fridge door closed behind him. “It’s the principle of the thing.”

She hums, distracted. “Seeing as you obviously weren’t sleeping and that we’ll pay you ridiculous amounts of overtime for this, I’m going to need you to meet me downtown for something in about —oh, say fifteen minutes.” He hears some shuffling papers in the background of the call. “This shouldn’t take long if the reports I’m getting are correct. A simple smash-and-grab, that’s all.”

Shouto scowls. “If it’s so simple, why don’t you do it? Or, I don’t know—” he shrugs “—any of the other heroes at the agency? It’s not like I’m the only one in town right now.”

“We need your face there for the press,” she explains, as if this is supposed to make him feel better somehow. “Also, you have better maneuverability than I do in tight spots. We’re going to need that. From what I understand, the villain’s got himself barricaded on the twenty-fifth floor of the Yamazaki building and first responders haven’t been able to get him out yet. So they called us.”

Shouto takes a sip of his orange juice, leaning a hip against the kitchen island. “I bet they’re happy about that.”

“You know they’re not. So can you come in? I swear I’ll let you go home after that.”

Shouto bites the inside of his cheek, eyeing his costume where it’s laid over the drying rack by the far window. Upstairs, Keiji sleeps peacefully, still holding onto that pillow like he can squeeze the feathers through the threads.

A simple smash-and-grab.

He certainly hopes that’s all it is.

Five hours later finds Todoroki Shouto in the back of an armored surveillance van while six support members attempt to hack the security system of Yamazaki Enterprises for the third time that hour. Yaoyorozu is standing by, barking orders into an earpiece while she types rapidly on her tablet, stress etched into the lines around her mouth and eyes. Meanwhile, the disgruntled first responders all mill about the cordoned off parkway that spans the front of the massive skyscraper, rifles at the ready in case of any sudden developments. It’s the worst part of any hostage situation: waiting.
At this point, Shouto is very aware that he has missed both the farmer’s market and the departure of his boyfriend from his apartment. He’s also very aware of the seven innocent civilians trapped on the twenty-fifth floor of that building with a possibly-insane villain roaming the hallways freely with a gun and an unknown Quirk.

Shouto is… incredibly fucking tired.

Sighing heavily, he leans back on the bench in the back of the surveillance van and closes his heavy eyelids for one precious, mind-numbing second. He hears the clack of keyboards and the nervous murmurs of SWAT teams and the police, as well as the clipped, stressed tone that Momo’s been using for the last four and a half hours straight. They’re all on edge, unsure of how to proceed—breach the doors and risk the hostages, or parse through demands and watch the civilians’ chances slowly dwindle with every passing second of inaction? It’s the worst kind of puzzle.

Suddenly, someone sits down next to him on the bench. He doesn’t have to open his eyes to know it’s Momo, her shoulders no longer slumped under the weight of futility.

“Update?” Shouto mumbles, feeling exhaustion rip at his limbs one by one.

She shrugs, elbow brushing his. “Snipers say he’s still on the twenty-fifth floor. No clear shots. He’s holed up in quality assurance with the hostages, but they don’t think he’s hurt any of them.”

He nods, humming quietly. “Any demands yet?”

“Oh, just the usual stuff.” She smirks and counts them on her fingers, listing, “A helicopter on the roof, immunity for the crime, a cell phone, some food and water—that sort of thing.”

Shouto cracks one eye open and glances sidelong. He arches an eyebrow. “Well, he’s not very smart, now is he?”

“Dumb as a post,” she agrees, laughing softly. She gestures vaguely to a nearby table where Shouto sees a pile of assorted technology. “I already created the cell phone and the tracker for the SD card, but the helicopter is going to take some time to find.” She shrugs. “Either way, we’ll have him whenever he lands. Open and shut case, as far as I’m concerned.”

Shouto sighs long-sufferingly and presses his thumb and forefinger against his eyes until he sees spots. “So you’re not sending me in? I could’ve stayed in bed this morning?”

She grimaces, nodding. “Looks that way, yes.”

Shouto closes his eyes. “Wonderful.”

“I’m sorry.” She sounds sincere. “I didn’t mean to ruin your day.”

He waves her off, brows knitting together. “S’fine,” he mumbles. “Easy money. I’ll just sic Keiji on you and we’ll call it even, all right?”

She bumps his shoulder, laughing slightly. Shouto chances a small half-smile of amusement. With the situation mostly contained, perhaps he can swing by the southern part of the city and hit the fish markets to make up for this morning’s missed opportunity. He sees a pot of ginger tea and Sudoku in his future, as well. He’s had worse days, he supposes.

But then he feels it—faint, little more than a buzzing in his inner ear.
A tremor.

Shouto tenses, eyes snapping wide as every sense goes on full alert. The support analysts pause between keystrokes, fingers hovering over crisp block lettering. Momo must’ve felt it, too. She’s frowning in confusion, glancing out the open doors of the van into the empty, sunlit street with narrowed, calculating eyes. None of them dare to breathe. Even the police officers outside have paused in their steps, several of them glancing upward into the sky with confused expressions.

They wait one second, two seconds, three.

Five.

Ten.

There. Another tremor, this one more noticeable than before. It rattles up through the soles of Shouto’s shoes, reverberating in his chest like the thrum of a heavy bass. In a split-second, he jumps to his feet and storms out of the van, hopping down to the pavement with eyes peeled as he searches the skies and scans the buildings for any hints of trouble. There’s a weight in the pit of his stomach, bitter and black like lead. He’s suddenly not very tired at all.

He hears it before he sees it—a faint whistling, like a bullet slicing through the air with enough force to break the sound barrier in an eardrum-shattering boom as it approaches, bouncing from building to building faster than Shouto can track it.

Blood surges. Heartbeats stutter. Shouto barely has time to open his mouth and shout, “Everybody get down!” before the dark shape makes a beeline for the city street. He throws up a thick barrier of ice in front of as many officers and paramedics as he can see, squeezing his eyes shut just as the dark figure makes impact in the dead-center of the street with all the force of a small bomb. The ground shakes, concrete cracks in a spiderwebbed circle surrounding the point of impact. Shouto bends his knees to keep his balance and staggers as a deafening gust of air threatens to blow him over.

And just as quickly as it came about, the wind dies down into a dismal breeze befitting late July in Japan. The dust settles and gun safeties flip off by the dozens as SWAT members and police officers all aim their weapons at the crouched figure in the middle of the street. Whispers abound, orders are shouted. Blood roars and heartbeats thunder. Instinctively, Shouto bares his teeth and ignites his left arm, storming forward to figure out just who the hell—

In the center of the street, Midoriya Izuku straightens up, dusting off the knees of his viridian suit as his facemask gleams in the late morning sunlight. His hair is windswept and he looks every inch the Number One Hero he did that fateful night in late April, complete with sleek, dark accents on his costume and unsmiling eyes that have never looked emptier than they do now.

Shouto’s stomach drops. His left arm sputters, goes out like a weak-wicked candle, and he stumbles to a stop twenty feet from Midoriya. He blinks once, convinced he isn’t seeing what he’s actually seeing because there’s no way, right? But everything about him—from the way he walks to the particular pattern of freckles on his cheeks—reeks of familiarity and utter, tangible realness.

Behind him, the police officers slowly begin to come to the same conclusion. Guns are reluctantly lowered and holstered, but some remain at the ready in uncertain hands. Fearful eyes glance from left to right, waiting for orders that refuse to come. Some look shocked, others look confused. Most are frozen, stock-still in the face of a legend they’ve only ever heard about but rarely seen.

Shouto stares, dumbstruck, as Midoriya reaches up and pulls his mask down to hang loosely
around his neck. His mouth is pressed into a thin line and he looks ten times more exhausted than Shouto feels, but there’s a grim determination to the way he stalks forward, slipping through the crowd of flabbergasted first responders as if they’re little more than specters. Some stare wide-eyed and whisper as he passes. (“Is that Deku?” “I thought he’d never come back!”)

He parts the crowd effortlessly and comes to a stop in front of Shouto, meeting his gaze with a defiantly-lifted chin. Up close, Shouto can make out the shadowed recesses in his eyes, the downward curve to his lips, and the patched part of his costume where Vindicator’s knife ripped through his shoulder two months ago. The uneven threads stare at Shouto, mocking him.

Reminding him.

Everything about this is wrong. So very, very wrong.

“Hey,” Midoriya finally murmurs. His voice is quiet and subdued, eyes ringed with fatigue. “Heard what’s going on. Thought I could—”

“Why are you here?”

Midoriya’s lips part, brows lifting in surprise at Shouto’s question. Then, they furrow deeply in confusion. “I was in the neighborhood and I heard the distress call, so I figured I’d drop by. I’m here to help out.”

“No,” Shouto blurts automatically.

Midoriya’s eyebrows fly up into his hairline. “’No?’” he repeats incredulously. “What do you mean no?”

“I mean no, you cannot help us.” Shouto gestures two hundred meters away toward the edge of the civilian perimeter, clenching his jaw against the urge to stuff every word back into his own mouth. “Legally speaking, you shouldn’t even be here at all. Go home, Midoriya.”

Green eyes narrow in irritation, sparking with something other than dull emptiness for the first time in a while. “Look, dude, if you have a problem—”

“I have a problem with your lack of credentials, yes.” Shouto grits his teeth, hating how bitter the words taste on his own tongue, but he knows he has to say them. “It’s—it’s not personal, all right? Trust me. I’m trying to save you a lot of hassle in legal fees, so just leave now and I won’t say another thing about it.”

“He has a point,” comes Momo’s voice from over Shouto’s shoulder. She approaches, tablet in hand with earpiece glowing blue, and gives Midoriya a soft smile that makes her eyes crinkle warmly. She bows. “Hello, Midoriya. It’s so good to see you again.”

His expression tightens at the bow, but he tries for a smile nonetheless. “Oh. Hey, Yaoyorozu. How’ve you been?”

“Keeping busy, that’s for sure,” she replies sweetly, waving her tablet in the air. Her expression smooths out into something a little more professional and she begins swiping through pages of legal documents. “But as I was saying, Shouto makes an excellent point,” she says, turning her tablet around and pointing to a section of fine print. “According to the International Hero Accords, strand two, subsection eight, clause thirty-seven, a hero must be under direct supervision of a licensed hero agency or a singular, registered patron hero to be considered for approval for active duty. Any hero work without IHA approval constitutes vigilantism.”

Sighing, Izuku reaches up and pinches the bridge of his nose as if fending off a headache. He
mutter something under his breath in English that Shouto doesn’t quite catch. “Guys, I know what the Accords say about vigilantism. We all took the same classes.”

Momo nods primly. “So you understand then that we can’t let you—”

“The Accords also say that heroes who’ve been licensed under an agency for a minimum of five years are allowed to work independently for a provisional period, pending IHA approval,” he adds, slipping his fingers into one of the pouches on his belt to pull out a neatly-folded piece of paper which he hands to Shouto. “I have that approval.”

Shouto unfolds it quickly, revealing the IHA seal with a bunch of other official-looking information that sort of goes over his head entirely. Maybe if he were more awake, he’d be able to understand it better. But he isn’t, so he doesn’t, and he does not care. Shouto’s tired, but he’s not blind. He sees the way Midoriya’s feet tap nervously, the way he keeps shifting his weight. He’s antsy, and this is a hostage situation. He shouldn’t be here, regardless of legal clearance.

Shouto wordlessly hands the paper off to Momo, who begins scanning the crisp type rapidly. While she mutters the words to herself, Shouto meets Midoriya’s eyes over her ponytail and simply examines the former Number One Hero like a man trying to put two puzzle pieces together that don’t quite fit. There’s something slightly... off about him that Shouto can’t quite put his finger on. Whatever it is, it slips beneath Shouto’s skin and lodges somewhere deep and uncomfortable, reminding him that this is the man who recently lost half of his entire world in the small span of two hours. He’s standing tall, bleeding from invisible wounds. Pretending that he’s fine.

He’s not fine. Shouto knows that much.

After a moment, Momo lets out a pleased hum, folding the paper before she hands it back to Midoriya. “Interesting,” she says thoughtfully, tapping her chin. “I suppose I’ve just never seen this sort of thing done before.”

“Am I good to go, then?” Midoriya asks impatiently. He stuffs the paper back in his belt. “’Cause if we have hostages and a possible active shooter in that building, then this is a time-sensitive situation.”

Momo nods and purses her lips in thought, eyebrows knitting in a frown. She looks Midoriya up and down carefully, weighing her options.

Then she turns to Shouto.

“It’s your call,” she tells him crisply, expression tight. “As ranking hero, you’re running point on this one.” But I think you should send him home.

He hears her silent words loud and clear, and Shouto has to clench his jaw to keep from sagging in relief or cheering or something because he sure as hell feels pretty vindicated right about now. Instead of doing that, however, he nods carefully. With that, she turns on her heel and marches back toward the surveillance van, chattering into her earpiece as she coordinates the villain’s demands.

With arms crossed over his chest, Shouto turns to Midoriya and tries not to feel sick as he prepares to deliver the killing blow.

“Midoriya, IHA approval or no, I…” he starts quietly, measuredly. The words twist his stomach into knots. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think you’re fit for duty yet. Not until you’ve had a psych eval and some counseling, at least. We, uh. We won’t be requiring your services today.”
It takes Midoriya a moment to absorb the words. He blinks slowly, then recoils half an inch as Shouto’s meaning sets in. He stares, dumbstruck, as Shouto straightens his shoulders and forms an effective wall between him and the Yamazaki building. The crestfallen expression on his face carves deeply into Shouto’s heart like serrated steel blades.

“Are—“ Midoriya starts, then swallows. “Are you serious? Like, are you actually serious right now?”

“I’m very serious.” I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. “I don’t think you’re in a good headspace right now and that might cloud your judgment.” I don’t want you to lose yourself again. Please.

“My judgment is sound,” he argues, scowling. “I don’t need a psych eval to prove that to you or to anybody.”

“You do, actually.” Shouto rubs the back of his neck. “It’s standard protocol for our agency. After something traumatic, you need to have a standard psych eval and six weeks of basic counseling in order to—”

“I don’t work for your agency.” His eyes are narrowed, jaw clenched. “I work for myself and the IHA. You have no jurisdiction over me.”

“Maybe not officially,” he says carefully, “but as Number One Hero on this scene, I have certain —”

“I think I know what comes with that position better than you do,” Izuku snaps.

Anger radiates off the former hero in waves, but Shouto doesn’t flinch in the face of it, choosing instead to stare Midoriya down with as much intensity as he can muster in his exhausted state. Irritation plucks at his heartstrings, the notes reverberating sourly and off-key in his chest. “My decision is final, Midoriya,” he says solemnly. “Go home.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll have you escorted past the perimeter.”

He scoffs. “I’d like to see you try.”

Shouto grits his teeth and eyes the police officers around them as well as the civilians gathered to catch a glimpse of the great hero Deku, finally emerged from his hiding place after weeks—the prodigal son, returned to his people. He rakes a hand through his hair in frustration, aggravation and exasperation bubbling up the back of his throat like stinging acid.

“Midoriya,” he begs, please stand back. Let us do our jobs, okay? We have the situation handled already. Just… trust me.” Noting a few police officers watching them closely, Shouto lowers his voice even further into something almost inaudible, leaning in close. He murmurs, “Listen to me, you are not fine right now. Not at all. You’re emotional and you need to take a walk before you do something stupid. Please.”

“I’m a hero, same as you,” Izuku rejoins bitterly. He jabs a finger at the people standing near the perimeter of the city block, face pinched. “I have a civil obligation to be here, protecting them no matter the cost. And the way I see it, the more time you spend arguing with me, the more likely those hostages up there are going to die.”

“They’re not going to die!” he insists, clenching his fists. “We’ve negotiated with the villain, all right? We’re going to let him go so we can—“
“You what?” Izuku’s expression is thunderous, all hard edges and deep shadows that look infinite in their depth. He pulls back from Shouto, disgust and dismay and a million awful things reflected in his eyes. “You’re letting the bastard get away with this?”

He wishes he could tear his own hair out by the root. “If you’ll stop interrupting me and listen for two goddamn seconds, I can explain a little bit.”

Midoriya only laughs hollowly, looking Shouto up and down slowly with incredulous horror. “You know what, I think I’ve got a pretty clear picture of what’s happening here. Thanks though.”

Shouto grinds his teeth to dust. “Oh, do you now?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Then by all means, enlighten me.”

Izuku holds up one finger, face twisted into a sneer that renders him completely unrecognizable. “Okay, first off, fuck your condescending attitude. It got old a long time ago. And second, if you aren’t going to do your job, then I—”

Somewhere overhead, a gunshot cracks through the air like electricity. In an instant, noise explodes into existence around them both like an unexpected firework. Every police officer within the perimeter ducks into cover behind their cars and bulletproof barriers and a flock of pigeons takes off from the sidewalk in front of the building in a flutter of feathers and soft squawks. Civilians duck and scream while holding their phones up to capture what’s going on, and Shouto can hear Momo’s voice over the commotion, shouting orders to everyone involved.

Midoriya, however, has his gaze aimed upward toward the windows that mark the twenty-fifth floor of the building. The set of his jaw is grim and his expression is calculating.

Shouto sees the green sparks skitter across his skin, and immediately his eyes widen. “Izuku, don’t—”

But it’s too late. In less time than it takes to blink, Midoriya bends his knees and takes off like a shot, flying up, up, up and shattering the window of the twenty-fifth floor in a burst of glittering, lethal glass. Shouto swears loudly and thrusts out his right hand, calling upon his ice to shield the first responders unlucky enough to be beneath the broken window. His left arm ignites in a white-hot fury that tickles his face.

“Shouto!” Yaoyorozu yells over the commotion. “Get—”

He waves her off as he sprints toward the building, jumping onto a ramp of ice that sends him skyward. “I know, I know, I’m going!”

“But careful!”

‘Of which one?’ he wants to ask, but refrains. Barely.

Ice crystals form, shatter, and reform underneath his boots as he arcs gracefully through the air, arms outstretched to either side for balance. He passes the tenth, fifteenth, twentieth floors, hair swept out of his face and jaw clenched. If Midoriya hadn’t interfered, this job would’ve been—

Another deafening smash. Overhead, another window has broken, but this time from the inside out. Shouto watches in slow-motion as the body of someone twists through the air like a flailing ragdoll, plummeting toward the ground. Shouto’s ice falters in his surprise, and he doesn’t think
before his body reacts—he simply drops off his ramp like deadweight and reaches, frost leaping from his fingertips as he free-falls in pursuit of whoever just got shoved out the window so unceremoniously.

Wind screaming, gravity clawing at his coattails, anger more tangible than it’s ever been before. It’s too fast, everything is too fast and too loud and and and. Shouto flexes his hand as the concrete races toward him in an endless expanse of dull greyness, yanking moisture from the air at the last second to create a pillar to catch the falling person fifteen feet off the ground. Whoever he is, he lands hard and the ice swallows him up to the neck to soften the impact a little bit. Hopefully.

Shouto, on the other hand, kicks out a leg and builds himself a jagged ramp of ice that slams into his left side hard, jarring his teeth inside his skull as he slides down toward the concrete in a tangle of bruised limbs. The world spins endlessly, even long after he’s stopped rolling and come to a stop in the center of the parkway.

He hurts— well, pretty much everywhere.

He’s also angry.

Anger is largely a foreign concept for Shouto, at least as far as Midoriya is involved. He’s felt anger toward his father before—blind, burning hatred so black you could choke on it, the urge to hit back and repay every strike ten times over. He’s felt anger toward villains and the League all his life, contempt for criminals with no remorse, and even blind rage toward Natsuo that one time he ate all the soba at mom’s house. (That asshole knew what he was doing.)

Wanting to punch Midoriya in the face, however, is a new fucking experience.

With a groan, Shouto rolls over onto his hands and knees and spits blood on the ground, wincing as every movement aggravates his injuries more. His breaths are short and shallow and every heartbeat hurts, but his rage burns brighter than a blazing bonfire and he has to fix this, dammit. Whatever this is. All Shouto knows is that everything about today feels wrong and none of this was ever supposed to happen. A simple smash-and-grab, simple, simple, simple.

Well, it’s not so simple now, is it?

Shouto staggers to his feet, He squints up at the column of ice he constructed to catch the person—and sure enough, the guy half-sealed in ice fits the description for the villain Momo had given him this morning. The villain squirms and struggles, eyeing Shouto and the mob of police officers approaching with horrified eyes, but his sheet-white face of true fear only comes out the second Midoriya lands on the pavement next to him with an earth-shattering boom.

Now, there are a lot of things Shouto should do at this current juncture. He should give his statement to the police and fill out his paperwork before he goes home for the evening like a diligent, hardworking hero. He should stay to receive some simple medical attention so he can get back on his feet faster. He should help the police incarcerate the villain for his crimes and provide a proper security escort to the prison like he always does. He should do all of that, really.

But what he does instead is storm across the empty street to shove the illustrious hero Deku with all his strength.

“Are you insane?” he grits out, ignoring the pained hiss Izuku lets out between his teeth when Shouto’s hand skims a little too close to the shoulder where he was stabbed. “What the hell was that, Midoriya?”
Izuku bares his teeth and breaks Shouto’s touch, pushing his arms away roughly. “Does it matter? It worked, didn’t it? All the hostages are safe.”

“You blatantly ignored protocol! You can’t just barge in like that and—“

“And do what?” he snaps, glaring sharply. He jabs a finger up at the broken side of the building. “Lose a hostage or two? Because that’s what was going to happen if you waited any longer.”

“We had a plan,” he growls.

“Plans get people killed,” Izuku counters, stepping forward menacingly. The muscle in his jaw flutters and he looks like six solid feet of muscle mass, but Shouto doesn’t flinch as Izuku takes a half-step closer. “Protocol gets people killed. And isn’t our job to keep them alive? To keep them safe?”

Shouto shakes his head back and forth slowly, eyes narrowed into slits. “You don’t believe that. Plans are how you operate. Always have, always will.”

“Don’t act like you know me, Shouto.”

“I used to.”

That gives Izuku pause. He stops, expression shuttering into something unreadable and lips forming soundless half-words and utterances Shouto could never hope to understand. He’s standing close enough for Shouto to make out the individual freckles that dot the bridge of his nose and the way his eyes actually have a bit of gold in them, like a sunburst centered with the purest onyx in the universe.

_Eyes like a summer’s day_, Shouto used to think once upon a time, back when things were soft around the edges and nothing in the world could hurt them. _With a smile sewn from sunlight._

Except Izuku isn’t smiling now. Gradually, gold dulls to amber, and his expression settles into stone. He glares up at Shouto, teeth clenching over and over again. Slowly, deliberately, he lifts his hands and places them against Shouto’s chest, pressing lightly against his pectoral muscles through the breathable material of his costume.

“Move,” Izuku says lowly, dangerously. “Or be moved. I won’t ask twice.”

And Shouto _burns_, but for all the wrong reasons. He’s mad, he’s exhausted, and every inch of his body aches with thirteen different flavors of pain, but most of all, he’s _determined_. He stands firm, refusing to budge against the pressure on his chest, and slowly, he shakes his head back and forth.

“I don’t believe you,” he whispers.

Izuku bares his teeth and shoves a little harder this time, forcing Shouto back a half step. “Shouto, I’m warning you. Stay out of my way. There are still civilians up there who need my help.”

“And I’m warning _you_,” he fires back, voice deadly with its precision. He shoves Midoriya hands away roughly. “You’re way out of line. Stop now and I won’t say another thing about it, but if you keep this up—”

“You’ll what, detain me?” He snorts incredulously, eyes narrowing. “Give it your best shot.”

“I don’t want to, but I will if I have to. Don’t force my hand.”
“Don’t force mine, either.”

“Izuku—”

“Why do you care so much all of a sudden, huh?” Izuku snaps. “I lose one person on the field of battle and suddenly everybody thinks they have a right to give a shit about me. I didn’t want your pity last month, and I really don’t want it now. Just let me do my job and stay out of my way!”

“Lucy wasn’t just a person and you know it. God, listen to yourself right now, for— for five seconds,” Shouto begs, fighting the rage that bubbles beneath his skin. He feels himself losing control of the situation faster than he can process it. Swallowing, he places a hand on Izuku’s shoulder and holds on tightly as if he can be the one to anchor them both to Earth. “You’re not okay. You’re just… not. All right? You’re lashing out and you’re not acting like yourself. You need to take a step back from all this and go home before you do something you’ll regret—”

“Do not touch me.”

The first punch of their fight isn’t exactly a punch when Shouto really thinks about it. If he had to classify it, it’d likely just be an unintentionally super-powered shove on Midoriya’s part that just so happens to send Shouto skidding halfway across the street, arms wheeling for balance with every passing meter. He gradually slides to a stop near the curb, noting just how much space separates them now.

Anger, he realizes calmly, is not such a foreign feeling after all. Rather, it feels a lot like coming home.

Blood boiling and blue flames sputtering from his fingertips and eyelashes, Shouto plants his feet and takes a deep breath, rolling his sore shoulders. He may be exhausted and spent, but he has enough juice left to give Midoriya a hard time. Admittedly, he hasn’t won a sparring match against Midoriya since their third year of high school, but he’s feeling lucky today.

Luck and anger—a great combination. He’ll work with what he has.

With a snarl and a silent prayer, Shouto bends his knees and takes off, using his ice to push his steps just a little bit farther with each stride. Somehow, he manages to surprise Midoriya—maybe he wasn’t expecting a quick retaliation, or he was betting on dealing with Patient and Awake Todoroki Shouto, not Tired and Really Fucking Pissed Todoroki Shouto. Either way, Shouto doesn’t hesitate to reach out, snagging the front of Izuku’s costume with both hands before he hauls off and flips him around with a grunt, sending Izuku careening to the opposite side of the street—and well away from any pedestrians and first responders in the area.

Izuku twists in midair and lands on his feet, palms and feet dragging against the concrete to slow himself in a low crouch. He looks up, eyes burning with anger and teeth bared in a feral grimace. Green lighting highlights the shadows beneath his eyes.

“You sure you wanna do this?” Izuku calls out, straightening up and dusting himself off. He cracks his neck and rolls his shoulders, settling into a defensive stance. “You won’t win. You know that, right?”

“I’ll take my chances,” Shouto replies, igniting his left arm in orange-and-blue flames that tickle his skin comfortably.

Izuku bolts. He darts forward faster than a bullet, little more than a streak of green and an afterimage of electricity in the shape of a man. Shouto feels the wind rise around him and he
automatically sidesteps, feeling the gentle graze of a heel in the space where his head previously was. He sprouts ice crystal after ice crystal in Izuku’s path, but he smashes through each one with frustrating ease on his approach. His fire roars and sucks the air from his lungs in a dry heatwave that blows his hair back from his face in a rush. And within the commotion, the rest of the world disappears from view.

The first kick connects with his already-bruised ribs, followed shortly thereafter by a swift punch to the jaw that… Shouto might actually sort of deserve. Just a little bit, at least. His teeth shift painfully in his mouth under the impact and he hisses as the inside of his cheek splits open in a rush of white-hot iron. Before the next punch can connect, however, Shouto rolls out of the way and ices Midoriya up to his knees to stop him short in the midst of a right flanking maneuver.

Shouto doesn’t waste the opportunity to crack an elbow against Midoriya’s nose and tackle him to the ground, pulling up a foot to pin one of his wrists to the concrete while his other knee presses into Izuku’s stomach. Izuku snarls and bucks his hips to the side, every vein in his face glowing like molten metal under his tanned skin as he flips Shouto off to the side and scrambles to his feet, slipping his arms around Shouto’s neck in a horribly familiar choke hold. Thinking fast, Shouto engulfs his left side in flames hot enough to force them both backwards with the sudden burst of rapidly-expanding heat. They twist together, feet lifting a few inches off the ground in the blast, and Izuku’s hold loosens just enough for Shouto to slip out. He tucks and turns around in midair, landing lightly on his toes before coming back for another round.

It’s knee-jerk, all instinct. They clash again and again with elbows, fists, and flames alike. It’s all lunge, punch, block, take the hits you can afford so you can save your energy to avoid the ones you can’t. Shouto finds himself falling into old rhythms, avoiding hits that aren’t there and blocking new ones he doesn’t expect, biting back his hisses of pain every time something slips through his defenses. In the distance, he hears shouting and orders from Yaoyorozu, but he can’t spare an ounce of attention or else risk losing this fight.

He doesn’t have to win—he just can’t lose. Endurance is the name of the game here, and while Shouto can never hope to outmatch Izuku in physical strength, he’s much better at exploiting weaknesses whenever he sees them.

The concrete and rubble digs into his back as he blocks punch after punch with his forearms, retaliating with bursts of flame and ice-covered elbow swipes when he can. Izuku is bleeding from the corner of his mouth, white teeth stained pale pink, but he keeps his focus singular. Every second lasts a lifetime with Izuku pinning him to the concrete like this, weight pressed uncomfortably against Shouto’s stomach and crushing his ribs. Shouto knows he won’t hold out much longer. He has to find a way out of this position—and fast.

Izuku’s face is twisted, grimace warped into something tremulous and translucent. He’s breathing hard, throwing his whole weight into every single punch, but they’re beginning to slow in frequency. He’s tired, or running out of spirit, at least.

“Just… wanted to—” he gasps for air, landing another solid hit against Shouto’s jaw with a sickening crack “—help.”

Shouto blocks a punch and returns with the sharp snap of a forearm over Izuku’s chin that stuns him for half a second. “You’re not—goddammit,” he chokes, feeling the blood in his mouth begin to flow a little faster than before. He spits off to the side. “You’re not okay, you’re not… okay. Not at all. Just—fuck, Izuku—admit it to yourself.”

“I’m fine,” he exhales, throwing his entire shoulder into a particularly jarring punch to Shouto’s bruised cheekbone. He sees stars in shades of black, purple, and orange as they explode like
fireworks behind his eyelids. Izuku has one hand braced against Shouto’s sternum, the other one slowly doling out punches that feel a little weaker with each iteration. “I’m… fine.”

That’s when Shouto sees it—out of the corner of his swollen, star-flooded eye, he spots the irregularity in the weft of Izuku’s costume, right over the front of his left shoulder, about an inch below his collarbone. The threads are a half-tone off in their greenness and sloppily done—homespun, not professional work, clearly. Maybe Izuku sewed it shut himself. Or maybe his mother did it for him without asking after he came home from the States.

Still, it’s an opening. Shouto is shameless enough to take it.

He feels his consciousness slipping. He’s exhausted and sore and bloody and beaten to a pulp, but he has willpower enough to fill an ocean, with more the spare. Gritting his bloodstained, sore teeth, Shouto clenches his right fist and coats his knuckles in uneven chunks of ice with the vestiges of power still left in his blood.

“Sorry 'bout this,” he mumbles, right before he punches Izuku’s shoulder with every ounce of strength he has left in his body.

The effect is instantaneous. The second Shouto’s fist presses against the tender, not-quite-healed wound deep beneath the surface of Izuku’s skin, the hero freezes up like his joints have been welded together with a blowtorch. His skin takes on a frightening green cast as his mouth moves soundlessly and Shouto watches as his body curls in on itself, fingers scrabbling uselessly at the front of his costume like he means to shred the fabric to ribbons with his fingertips.

Don’t lose your chance, do it, do it, do it.

Rearing back, Shouto lets out a cry and delivers a powerful right hook that catches Izuku directly across the cheekbone, snapping his head sharply to one side with decisive force. Izuku balances precariously for two heartbeats before he falls, limp, off to the left with his cheek pressed to the sun-warmed pavement.

Shouto's never felt less victorious in his life.

Chapter End Notes

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Shouto hurts.

He hurts all over, almost like somebody’s hurled his body through a meat grinder and hit him with a car for good measure. His teeth ache, his breathing is labored, his mouth tastes like molten iron edged with the bitterness of something he can’t quite identify. Tentatively and without opening his eyes, he attempts to wiggle his fingers and toes, curling them in one by one. His tendons strain and protest against the motion, and there’s a familiar numbness in his phalanges that paints a vivid portrait in his mind of dark purple bruises and jammed, crooked joints. Ice and antiseptic alone might not be enough to heal him this time around.

The sun-warmed asphalt sears Shouto’s skin through the tough fabric of his costume, and somewhere overhead birds flap their wings by the hundreds. Wincing slightly, he cracks one eye open, then the other.
The sky is still blue. There are no clouds.

There’s also an awful lot of noise.

Shouting, fuzzy and indistinct through the ringing in his ears, pierces the veil. He hears sirens, feels the buzz of people nearby through the ground. He thinks he hears Momo’s voice, too, but he can’t be sure at this distance. He feels almost like his head’s been dunked underwater or his eardrums have burst all over again.

He doesn’t think he’s ever been this tired before. The pavement feels soft and spongy beneath his shoulders, warm and comforting like a feather bed and twice as welcoming. Midoriya’s weight is solid and reassuring where he’s slumped over Shouto’s legs. Exhaling softly, blood paints Shouto’s lips in scarlet spatters. Maybe he can rest here for just a few more minutes. Surely nobody would mind all that much, right?

The silence lasts for seven glorious, blissful seconds.

“What is wrong with you?”

It’s Yaoyorozu, her voice a lot clearer than before. A cool darkness slashes across Shouto’s face in the form of a shadow and he squints up where she stands over him, hands on her hips in obvious disapproval.

“Is that… a rhetorical question?” he croaks, coughing wetly.

Her mouth thins into a displeased slash of razor-thinness, lips all pale and bloodless as she contemplates the pros and cons of homicide. “Yes,” she answers finally, voice taut. But she catches herself. “Actually, no. It’s not rhetorical. I’m honestly really curious. What the hell would ever possess you to start a brawl in the middle of a hostage crisis?”

Shouto glances from side to side blearily, noting that the first responders have given them a wide berth in favor of breaking the villain out of his icy shackles—or maybe they’re actually super close. Shouto’s depth perception seems to be a bit skewed right now. There’s a sharp pressure on the left side of his chest when he inhales, and he presses a hand against the affected ribs. Bruised, possibly cracked.

Gritting his teeth, he pushes himself upright with his scraped, bloody palms. “It worked, didn’t it?”

Momo rubs a hand over her face and mutters several creative curses under her breath—a testament to the severity of the situation if ever there was one. She aims a weary glare down at him. “This is going to be a PR nightmare. You know that, right?”

“For who?” Shouto spits blood on the asphalt and wipes his mouth on his sleeve, gesturing vaguely toward Midoriya’s limp form. “Me or him?”

“For both of you.” She throws her hands up in the air emphatically. “Fucking testosterone, honestly. You couldn’t have come up with some other plan that didn’t involve punching the Symbol of Peace in the face?”

“I was just trying to contain the situation.”

“Yeah, and you made everything ten times worse in the process,” she points out angrily. The muscle in her jaw flutters violently as her eyes skim the carnage scattered across the parkway. Overturned cars, splintered asphalt, broken glass, and half-melted ice mar the scenery—the Symbol of Peace, unconscious with a hand still loosely gripping his own shoulder, cheeks scraped
all to hell.

Somehow, that’s the worst part of all of it.

Shouto tongues at a loose molar in his mouth while he leans forward, grabbing Midoriya by his broad shoulders to roll him onto his back. His head lolls to one side, eyes closed in a dead sleep and hair flopping back in a green tangle matted with crimson blood from a gash near his hairline. The shadows beneath his eyes only look darker with the complementary bruising on his face. Reaching forward with frigid fingers, Shouto checks for a pulse—just in case. Sure enough, Midoriya’s heart beats steadily but sluggishly in his chest.

He doesn’t think he’s ever seen Midoriya look quite as small as he does now. He hates it.

Sighing softly, Shouto spits more blood off to the side and gestures vaguely to the far perimeter where a few media vans have gathered with the civilian collective. “Go ahead and deal with them,” he tells Momo quietly. “Do what you have to. I’ll accept full responsibility for all of… this. Whatever you need.”

Momo’s expression softens a fraction and her mouth curves into a faint frown. “Fine,” she complies quietly. “What will you do in the meantime?

Shouto looks over at Midoriya, noting the paleness of his freckles and the way his face looks the complete opposite of peaceful.

“I’ll take care of him,” he says resignedly.

It’s no secret that Midoriya, despite his shorter-than-average stature, has enough muscle mass to carry the entire world on his back with strength to spare. Even back when he initially started bulking up around their third year, the sheer amount of weight he carried with him by the time graduation rolled around almost seemed to shake the Earth and rattle the atmosphere with every single step he took. As if his smiles weren’t powerful enough, he just had to go ahead and have really nice shoulders along with it. Shouto used to think it was overkill of the highest order.

The problem with muscle mass, however, is that it’s called mass for a reason. Midoriya is really fucking heavy.

Shouto hisses out a curse as he bumps his elbow for the fifth time, teetering dangerously to the left side of the hallway with every unbalanced step. He has Midoriya’s limp body thrown over one shoulder like a sack of bruised, bloodied potatoes, and Shouto is suddenly entirely aware that that’s an awful metaphor for this situation because ew, gross. Honestly, he doesn’t even know why he’s thinking of metaphors at a time like this. He has more important things to worry about, like the state of his rapidly-swelling left eye and the shards of glass stuck shallowly into the skin around his raw elbows. (Perhaps he has a concussion. Based on the splitting headache that’s currently working his skull into a thousand little tiny pieces, he figures it’s more than a possibility at this point.)

Fumbling for his keys, Shouto manages to pull them out of his utility belt with crooked fingers that look a little more swollen around the joints than should be considered perfectly normal. His knuckles pop noisily, one right after the other, and he grits his teeth against the pain as he turns the key in the lock, loosening the tumblers just in time for both of them to spill into his apartment in a
tangle of uncoordinated limbs.

The second Shouto steps foot into his loft, he knows Keiji isn’t here. He’s always had good situational awareness—most heroes do for obvious reasons—but there’s a certain stillness to the air that always follows Keiji’s absence in any given room. It’s an odd feeling; Shouto still doesn’t know if he likes it or not. Grunting, Shouto kicks the door closed behind him and drops his keys on the floor with a musical clatter, staggering through the entryway and into the central living room with Midoriya’s arms swaying limply against Shouto’s back. If Keiji isn’t here, he supposes it doesn’t matter where he puts Midoriya for the time being.

Shouto eyes the empty sofa on the other side of the living room. He also eyes the soft rug beneath his feet. Decisions, decisions.

He drops Midoriya on the floor in a heap. Shouto falls on his back alongside him, staring up at the ceiling as his chest heaves with the effort. He supposes they both sort of deserve a rough landing.

“Jesus,” he wheezes, fingers fumbling for the clasp at his neck. Kevlar clings to his damp skin; his compression undersuit has never felt more restrictive. “I need… to do more deadlifts.”

No response from Midoriya. Clumsily unzipping the front of his sweat-soaked costume to allow air in, Shouto glances sidelong to see that Midoriya is still passed out cold, cheek pressed against the soft carpet with his eyes closed and mouth wide open. Up close, Shouto can make out each individual dark eyelash, every cinnamon freckle that dots his pale skin, the hairline scars that catch the afternoon sunlight and shine silvery-white. Purple shadows haunt the sharp angles of his face and his cheeks are gaunt—has he been eating?

Not okay, he thinks to himself, sinking back against the carpet with a pained exhale. Not okay at all.

Objectively, Shouto knows he should get up, throw his costume in the washer, jump in the shower, and clean up any and all wounds on his body before they get infected or swell past the point of no return. He knows he should do that. But as he lies here, arms denser than lead and twice as immovable, exhaustion reaches out to tap him on the shoulder and remind him that oh, yeah, he hasn’t slept in about two days and he might’ve reached his limit somewhere in between punching Midoriya and dragging him halfway across town in an unconscious tangle of limbs. (Impractical, sure—it would’ve made more sense for them to both go to the hospital, but then they’d likely never leave and somehow Shouto doesn’t think Midoriya would appreciate all the questions and comments from the hospital staff.)

Against his will, Shouto’s labored breathing slows down and grows deeper, longer, stretched and released like a taut bungee cord. His tendons loosen one by one, heartbeat slowing to something more manageable, and his eyelids decide to mutiny and close of their own accord.

A few minutes of sleep won’t kill him. Right? Right.

Shouto drifts.

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He’s in a room that isn’t a room at all, with no walls or windows or ceilings or anything at all beyond the fuzzy edges of what he can see. Lights flicker in the distance, muted and hazy like lightning trapped within a thunderhead, and there’s a faint breeze that doesn’t taste like anything
except ashes. Everything is dark, drawn in muted shades of indigo and purple mixed with glittering stars that can’t possibly be stars at all—chips of broken glass, perhaps, but definitely not stars. The floor that isn’t a floor ripples like water. He does not sink an inch.

He’s also not alone.

Izuku sits in the center, knees pulled up to his chest as he watches the not-lightning flicker in the distance, the flashes negated by the total absence of sound around them both. He’s wearing his school uniform, tie discarded and tossed aside to sink below the glassy, fluid ground, trousers rolled up his calves like he’s been puddle-jumping in summertime, wading through the tide pools at Dagobah, stepping through puddles of hot, sticky blood that always seems to follow them wherever they go.

Midoriya does not look up as Shouto approaches soundlessly. His eyes are half-closed and empty, unblinking, and devoid of color and light and everything that used to make those eyes so special. Shouto feels his stomach twist, tying itself into pink ribbon bows and knotting into something he’ll never be able to unravel.

“Midoriya,” he tries, but the word sits oddly behind his teeth. He feels like he’s talking with too much chewing gum in his mouth, words muffled and distorted around the sugary stretchiness that he can’t seem to spit out no matter how he claws at the yawning space behind his lips. He tries his name again, but the word warps even more than before, practically unintelligible.

Midoriya still does not move. He doesn’t flinch, doesn’t look up, doesn’t even blink. Shouto feels panic set in as his tongue swells in his mouth, all cottony and soft against his incisors. Frantic, he reaches out to touch Midoriya’s shoulder to warn him, to ask for help because Shouto is going to die otherwise. He just knows it, he knows it, he’s going to choke to death and suffocate here and he has to do something—

Against all odds, Shouto’s fingers press into the thin set of Midoriya’s shoulders—but gone is his school uniform, gone is his lanky sixteen-year-old body. He’s twenty-seven, not sixteen, and he’s wearing green and his hair is green and his eyes are so green as they stare up at Shouto with wide-eyed fear and bewilderment.

“I don’t know,” Izuku says in a small voice, shaking his head back and forth repeatedly. He recoils from Shouto’s touch and sinks a few inches into the rippling abyss beneath them both. “I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t—”

‘What don’t you know?’ Shouto wants to scream, but he’s suffocating and it’s getting harder to focus as his vision clouds black around the edges. Curiosity and fear burn a hole in his chest right where his heart should be. He needs to understand, just a little bit. He’s missing something, and it carves a hole in his chest with a jagged, invisible knife. Incomplete. Unfinished.

Izuku sinks slowly, the black nothingness lapping lazily against his shoulders as he sinks up to his neck. He watches Shouto choke as words press against the roof of his mouth and the flat of his tongue. Izuku does not struggle, accepting his fate like he’s been expecting it his entire life and never wanted anything else. Shouto fights for his life, but this is a fight he knows he won’t win.

Right before Izuku disappears beneath the black waves, he speaks. Shouto screams silently into the void, helpless and watching from afar.

“I don’t know where I’m supposed to be anymore,” says Izuku as the indigo ocean floods into his open mouth like liquid death. “I don’t think I’ve ever really known.”
With a gasp, Shouto surges upright, accidentally bumping his head on the corner of the coffee table in the process with a sharp whack. Stars spring into his vision and he claps a hand to his forehead, hissing through his teeth. His breathing is rapid and every inch of his body hurts, but reality sets in like an ink stain, bleeding into every crevice second by second, heartbeat by heartbeat.

Apartment. He’s in his apartment—the living room, specifically. He spots the end table he got at IKEA last year, the unwashed mug of tea that sits alone on the kitchen island across the room, and a photo of Fuyumi and Mizu that hangs on the far wall next to other assorted photos of his family. The ground feels solid enough beneath his body, the air smells faintly of ginseng and paperback books, and Midoriya snores softly on the floor next to him, curled up on his side with his hands curled neatly near his chest. Everything is right where he left it—everything except the sun, which has dipped below the city skyline and subsequently been replaced with starlight.

He blinks, surprised. A quick look at the clock tells him that it’s nearing nine o’clock—Shouto’s been asleep for six hours straight. He’d laugh if the situation weren’t already ridiculous enough.

Swallowing thickly, Shouto lets out a shuddering exhale. He presses the heels of his hands against his eye sockets and tries to rid himself of the afterimages leftover from his nonsensical nightmare. He explores every crevice in his own mouth, reveling in its emptiness and the soreness of his teeth, noting how the bitter taste of blood lingers on his tongue.

I don’t know where I’m supposed to be anymore.

He doesn’t know what any of it means. He doesn’t pretend to. He stopped trying a long time ago.

It doesn’t take long for Shouto to stagger up to his loft, shed his costume and compression suit, and fall into the shower like his skeleton suddenly decided not to support him. He keeps the spray icy and the water pressure weak as red-tinged water swirls down the drain, not caring one bit that he’s practically covered from head to toe in fist- and foot-shaped bruises courtesy of Midoriya and the villains of the past week. He’s in bad shape. Not horrible shape, of course, but he’s still going to be sore for a while.

The water eventually runs clear. Shouto dries off, dresses a few minor wounds on his forearms and patches a cut on his cheek, throws on a plain t-shirt and flannel pajama pants, and returns to the main floor where Midoriya is still sprawled and snoring. He’s scowling in his sleep, eyes moving rapidly beneath translucent, freckled lids, and his fingers flex every few seconds as his muscles tense up. Dream or nightmare? Sighing softly, Shouto reaches for a crocheted blanket his mother sent him a few months back and drapes it lightly over Midoriya’s body. Then he goes to make some tea because he doesn’t know what else to do at this juncture. Might as well enjoy the rest of his day off before patrol in the morning, he supposes.

He busies himself for the next forty-five minutes by tidying his apartment, scrubbing the bloodstains out of his brand-new costume (Support is going to kill him if he keeps this up), and finishing a level-five Sudoku puzzle he’s been working on for the past three days. He also shoots a quick text to Midoriya Inko somewhere in between all that, explaining where her son is and how he’s doing because she’s likely burning down forests to find him at this point. He receives a rapid-fire response to that message with thousands upon thousands of heart emojis and enough gratitude to flood his apartment twice over, and he can’t help but smile a little bit down at his screen as he scrolls through it all.
When Midoriya finally awakens from his coma (because that’s the only fitting descriptor for it, clearly), Shouto is sitting in the recliner in his living room with his legs pulled up underneath him, the Sudoku puzzle book open wide on the armrest, and the end of a ballpoint pen stuck in his mouth as he scrutinizes the tiny little boxes he’s been fighting with for the past several days. He’s close to a solution—he can feel the correct number sequences itching beneath the surface of his skin, just waiting to be thrust into the limelight. Maybe his fours are off somewhere? That lower left quadrant had been tricky, after all.

That’s when he hears it—a change in Midoriya’s slow, even breaths, almost too subtle to notice at all. Shouto knows he’s awake and listening carefully, eyes closed as he scopes out his surroundings while pretending to be asleep. It’s clever, really. Smart. Sensible. Shouto does the same thing every time he wakes up just in case he’s being held captive by villains again. Top heroes can never be too careful these days.

Exhaling softly, Shouto sets his pen in the puzzle book to mark his place and closes it, setting it aside next to his steaming cup of ginger tea. He laces his fingers together on his lap.

“Midoriya,” Shouto says quietly so as not to startle him. “It’s just me. You’re on the floor of my living room and there is no one else here. You’re safe, and your mom knows you’re here with me.”

At first, Midoriya doesn’t acknowledge Shouto’s words at all. He keeps his breaths even and his eyes closed in a mock dead-sleep that would fool just about anyone—anyone except Todoroki Shouto, that is.

And after several gut-twisting moments, Midoriya’s eyes flutter open.

“Oh my god,” he wheezes immediately, reaching up to clutch at his left shoulder with black-gloved hands. His fingers dig into the flesh around his half-healed wound and he curls up more tightly on his side. “Oh my god.”

Shouto winces as a pang of guilt carves through his chest, sharp and searing. “There’s aspirin on the table next to you. You’re, uh... probably going to have one hell of a headache.”

“I already do,” Midoriya groans, reaching blindly to grab the two white pills off the table; he swallows them dry without complaint. With a grunt, he hauls himself up into a sitting position and braces a hand against the front of the couch as all the blood rushes to his head. “Christ,” he mumbles before slumping back down to the floor. His eyes squeeze shut. “Am... am I dead? I kinda feel like maybe I’m a little bit dead.”

“You’re not dead.”

Izuku winces. “Well, I wish I was. Ow.”

Swinging his legs down, Shouto stands from his chair and crosses the room, taking a seat on the couch closer to Midoriya. “If it makes you feel better, I think you knocked a few of my teeth loose.” He pauses, frowning. “Again.”

“It doesn’t,” he mutters.

His hands shake as they fumble to remove his gloves and facemask, dropping all three items onto the carpet with a muffled thunk before he starts for the zipper on the front of his costume with frantic fingers. He grimaces as he peels the tight fabric away from his shoulder, removing his left arm from its sleeve delicately to let his skin breathe.

The wound is... not pretty. Understandably so. It’s several inches long and surrounded by mottled
purple bruises edged in swollen redness, silver-white scar tissue laid over the muscle of his shoulder like a thick rope. Shouto feels his insides clench uncomfortably as he surveys the jagged, raised ridge of aggravated flesh, suddenly very thankful he’s only ever been shot or bludgeoned in the line of duty. Stab wounds are hard to come back from.

Izuku bares his teeth and grimaces at the sight of it, gingerly touching the bruise that’s flowered over his entire shoulder and part of his chest like blue-black ink stains. “Recovery Girl is going to kill me,” he mutters, letting his eyes drift shut as he drops his head back against the carpet. “She’s been threatening to off me for years, but I think she might actually do it this time. Like, for real.”

Shouto hums, curling his fingers to create a small chunk of ice. He holds it out to Midoriya, who takes it with a murmured thanks and presses it to his shoulder lightly. Shouto tells him, “I’ll call her tomorrow morning and see if I can do some damage control. Least I can do.”

“She’ll kill you too.” Izuku cracks one eye open up at Shouto. “That woman doesn’t discriminate.”

“I know.”

“I really don’t think you do. She’s a different lady than the one we knew in high school.”

Shouto gives Izuku a flat look. “Right,” he deadpans, dragging the word out. “I’m sure she’s secretly a drug mogul with a dark, tortured past that she hides behind her love of quilting and lollipops. It’s the perfect cover.”

“It’s always the person you least suspect, right?”

Shouto sighs, biting his split lip. “I’m glad to see your sense of humor is still intact after everything.”

“It’s about the only part of me that is,” Izuku murmurs, gritting his teeth as he sits up. His skin takes on an unhealthy pallor and his lips thin as he tries to withhold his noises of pain, but he manages to maneuver his other arm out of his costume and compression suit with only minor struggling, leaving him bare from the waist up as he rifles through his utility belt for the pain-relieving salve he’s always kept on hand ever since they were first years.

It takes every ounce of self-control not to react viscerally to the damaged, freckled canvas of Izuku’s back the second the amber lamplight of Shouto’s apartment touches his damp skin. Shouto clamps his mouth shut and does his best not to stare. Really, he tries. He tries and tries and tries.

Scars and half-healed injuries litter every inch of the exposed part of Izuku’s body—from the column of his neck to the small of his back to everywhere in between, no area is left untouched by the groping fingers of pain and permanence. Shouto recognizes a collection of puckered, penny-sized bullet wounds beneath his left shoulder blade and a few scattered around the base of his spine; there’s a series of long, pale lashes of rope-like scar tissue that traverse all the way from his left shoulder to the right side of his hip before they disappear into the recesses of his costume where it sits gathered at his waist in a green-and-black pool of fabric; hell, there’s even a ragged-edged silhouette of something that looks like it had to be acid splashed across the shallow dip of his lower back, filling in all the empty spaces between burn marks and other small silverite scratches that could’ve been claws or razor blades—or maybe both.

Blinking hard, Shouto shakes his head and gets up from the couch, moving robotically into the nearby kitchen to put the kettle on the stove. He relies on muscle memory for most of it, thoughts scattered in two million directions that he can’t possibly control, what with Midoriya Izuku sitting in his fucking living room like they’re seventeen again and New York never even happened. He
sees Izuku out of the corner of his eye, all bruise-purple and moss-green with none of the vibrancy that he used to bleed so readily back when they were younger. Shoulders slumped, unrecognizable. A stranger with a familiar face.

And Shouto doesn’t know what to do about any of it.

He clears his throat awkwardly, fiddling with the temperature dial as the gas flame flares up and down with the rhythm of his nervous heartbeat. “Midoriya,” he starts, wincing at how impersonal that sounds. “Listen, about earlier—”

“Don’t.” Midoriya holds up a hand, head still lowered as he tends to some bruises on his stomach. His hair covers his eyes, shielding his expression from view, but his shoulders are tense like all of his bones have been replaced with cast iron. “I’m the one who needs to apologize, not you. So don’t bother. Please. Just…” He sighs softly. “Give me a minute to pull myself together and then we can talk. Sound good?”

Shouto tongues the split flesh on the inside of his cheek, leaning into the sting. “All right,” he says after a moment. He nods upstairs toward his loft. “Shower’s upstairs if you want it. First aid kit is —”

“Under the sink?”

There’s a sharp twinge of something in Shouto’s chest. “Yeah.” He coughs. “Extra clothes are in the dresser if you want them.”

“Cool, thanks.” Izuku nods, wincing as he pulls himself to his feet with a ripple of bruised muscle and a hiss of pain. He staggers slightly as he presses the chunk of half-melted ice against his bruised ribs, glancing around the loft as he heads toward the stairs. “Nice place, by the way. It, uh, suits you.”

Shouto eyes the large windows and soaks in the industrial practicality infused with every piece of stylish décor, wondering if he should point out that Fuyumi was the one who helped him decorate the place after he moved in. She’s the one who made him buy houseplants and photo frames, coat hooks and end tables. Every piece of his life, purchased from a fancy store and placed with the intent of belonging. Of fitting in.

Sometimes he feels like he’s the only part of his apartment that doesn’t quite match everything else—he has no place to rest, nowhere to blend into the shadows and disappear. Nowhere to curl up and hide when his job demands too much and nowhere to shatter when he wakes up from yet another nightmare. He’s a transitive fixture—like he was never really supposed to be here in the first place. A placeholder for something else, something better. Temporary.

“Thank you,” he says quietly after a moment, turning back to the stove to pass his fingers through the flickering blue flames that tickle the curvature of his kettle. “Make yourself at home.”

There isn’t a lot left in the world that would scare someone like Midoriya Izuku. He’s faced monsters by the millions, villains with agendas a mile long, hordes of faceless henchmen, demons of his own design, and he’s only ever gotten stronger for it—keep rolling, keep smiling, keep going, going, going, going. It’s all he’s ever known.
It’s all he’s ever needed to know, right up until it wasn’t.

As Izuku flips the lock on the inside of the bathroom door and claps a hand over his mouth to keep a silent scream from slipping past his teeth, he wonders if it’s possible to actually fear nothing. Not death, not taxes, not the shapeless, harrowing creatures that lurk in the darkest corners of his mind. Nothing to lose. Nothing to lose. Nothing to lose. It plays on a loop in his head, over and over again until he feels each iteration echo in the spongiest parts of his skeleton.

Pressing his back against the smooth wooden door, Izuku slides down to the cold bathroom tile and pulls his knees up to his chest despite the way his bruised and battered body protests the movement. He drops his forehead to his knees and squeezes his eyes shut, fingers creeping up to cover the searing reminder on his shoulder that looks like death and feels like failure painted in fifteen different shades of violet.

He remembers… fragments. Broken snapshots here and there of images that don’t quite make sense when put together. Shattered glass and flashing sirens, unfamiliar blue flames and panicked passersby, and fighting, oh my god, the fighting. Fighting with the one person Izuku thought he’d never face in the field ever again, much less throw a punch at. The man who keeps turning up in the unlikeliest of places.

Like a bad penny, he hears distantly. It’s Lucy’s voice, faint and indistinct amongst the wreckage of his racing thoughts. Or a particularly determined quarter, maybe. I don’t know. It’s a dumb saying.

Fumbling with a pouch near his hip, Izuku manages to pull out his phone with shaking, bloodied fingers. Notifications flood the screen by the thousands—tweets, news reports, panicked texts from his mother and Uraraka. He even has a missed call from All Might. That one stings the most.

All the fine print on his phone screen only serves to make him sicker. He knows he’ll have to do major damage control later and probably take some more time off until things cool down—if things cool down, that is—but right now, all he can think of is the way his muscles burn and the fact that he’s curled up in Todoroki Shouto’s bathroom while the cold fingers of horror cinch more tightly around his lungs with each passing breath. Handle the immediate threat, then tackle everything else. Prioritize. He knows the drill.

Gritting his sore teeth until they crack, Izuku grabs the door handle above his head and hauls himself to his feet before stumbling over toward the vanity and the first aid kit he knows is behind those doors underneath the sink. The bathroom itself is all pale marble and polished tungsten with honey-hued bamboo accents that lend the room a certain kind of warmth not found in the rest of the apartment. There’s a walk-in shower and a two-person vanity, both pristine and gleaming in the lamplight. Spacious. Modern. Much nicer than Shouto’s old place, that’s for sure.

Strangely familiar at the same time. Weird.

Surgical tweezers in hand, Izuku plucks all the bits of broken glass out of his hands and face first, dropping the shards in a glittering crimson heap on the white marble countertop before stripping the rest of the way out of his bloodied costume and compression suit. His skin is a nasty Pollock painting of bruises, scrapes, and abrasions that stand out starkly against the pale neutrals of the surrounding bathroom—Shouto really wasn’t pulling his punches earlier. Damn.

Just as he’s about to step into the shower, Izuku’s eye catches on his left shoulder in the mirror. Something bitter creeps up the back of his throat as he stares at the twisted tissue that should blend in with the rest of the battle scars on his body.
Swallowing back the bile in his throat, he pushes the thoughts from his mind and packs them into their respective boxes, shelving them for another day.

Later.

Shouto hears the shower hiss to life upstairs at exactly the same moment that his phone begins to ring—his personal tone, not the work-related one. Kettle abandoned, he snatches his mobile off the counter and answers it, not even bothering to check the caller ID because he knows damn well that there’s only one person who would call him this late.

“No, I am not dead,” he hurries to say before Keiji can get a single word out, “and yes, I was going to call you at some point. Before you ask.”

“Where have you been?” he demands breathlessly, voice crackling over the phone. “I’ve been trying to reach you all day.”

Shouto winces. “I’m sorry. Things are—” he glances up toward his loft, biting his lip “—complicated right now. Really complicated. I can’t say much more than that.”

There’s weighted silence on the other end of the line. Shouto can clearly picture Keiji in his office at the university, lips pursed and glasses sitting low on his nose with his desk lamp casting long shadows across his angular face. He’s probably up to his elbows in essays and reports, a third empty mug of coffee sitting precariously near the edge of his desk. It’s how he chooses to spend most of his Tuesday nights, Shouto knows.

After a moment, Keiji sighs softly. His voice is quiet, secretive. Careful. “Would this have anything to do with what I saw on the news earlier this morning?”

A grimace twists his face and he drops his forehead against one of the kitchen cabinets with a soft thunk. “Maybe,” he mumbles dejectedly. A sigh slips past his teeth. “Look, Keiji, you know I can’t—”

“I’ll take that as a yes, then.” He doesn’t sound surprised. Tired and a little bit sad, perhaps, but definitely not surprised. There’s a shuffling in the background of the call—essays, Shouto determines. “Well,” he says carefully, enunciating every syllable, “as long as you’re okay, I suppose that’s all that matters.” A pause. “How is he doing?”

Shouto glances up toward the loft worredly. He can’t hear the shower any longer, but the door is still locked tight. “Hard to tell.”

“If you had to guess?”

I’m glad to see your sense of humor is still intact after everything.

It’s about the only part of me that is.

He bites the inside of his cheek. “He’s… not good. As far as I can tell, at least.”

“Mm. Hiding it well, I take it?”

“Extremely.” Shouto tries not to sound frustrated.
On the other end of the line, Keiji huffs a laugh. “Oh, I can’t possibly imagine how that feels,” he says drily. “Someone hiding their emotions from the rest of the world? Must be horrible to deal with.”

Shouto’s lips curl against his will, forehead still pressed against the cabinet door. “Shut up. I’m not that bad.”

“Yes, you really are,” he laughs, and Shouto can’t help but lean into the familiar sound. “Well, the good news is that you’re probably the best-equipped person to deal with this sort of thing, so you’ve got that going for you.”

“Are you joking?”

“Not at all. You’re friends, right?”

Something clenches in Shouto’s chest, cold and heavy like iron. He watches the steam rise from the spout of the kettle, eyeing the swirls and wisps of vapor as they disappear into nothingness. “UA was… a long time ago. We, uh.” He coughs. “We didn’t exactly end things on good terms after graduation.”

Another dry laugh. “You make it sound like you dated the man.”

The burner beneath the kettle sputters and flares bright orange for a split second, emitting a wave of searing heat that tickles Shouto’s cheeks. He coughs, clearing his throat, and pushes off the counter to keep from accidentally setting his apartment on fire. “W-What?” he stammers, raking his fingers through his hair as he meanders into the center of the living room. “No way. That’s… no. Not even remotely. I’d never.”

“I know, darling,” Keiji tells him with a smile in his tone. “I feel like you would’ve told me by now if that were the case. Don’t worry. I trust you.”

Shouto freezes, every joint locking in place like somebody took a blowtorch to his cast-iron skeletal system and welded him to the spot. He stares out the windows at the glittering city skyline, sharp and jagged against the inky backdrop of the night sky like crooked teeth in a mouth large enough to swallow all of them whole and still have room for a second helping.

*I trust you I trust you I trust you*

*Say something.*

*Say anything.*

*Tell the truth.*

In the end, he swallows and squeezes his eyes shut. “We were… friends,” he says instead, tasting the bitter words on the back of his tongue like poison as he skirts the serrated side of honesty. “Once. That’s all.”

It’s not technically a lie. Shouto hates himself anyway.

There’s a shuffling in the background as Keiji gathers his students’ essays and shoves them in his bag to take home for the night, and Shouto tries not to vomit all over his hardwood floors as guilt seeps out of every pore. Keiji, by some miracle, doesn’t notice his plight. “Right, well, all I’m saying is that every little bit helps, you know? Stay positive. Just don’t start punching each other again and I’m sure you’ll both be in fine spirits come morning.”
“Right.” Shouto presses his fingers against his eye sockets until he sees stars. “You— yeah. Of course. You’re right. You’re always right.”

“Oh, can I please get you to say that again really quick—for posterity’s sake?” Keiji’s voice is warm and loving and amused and perfect. Shouto absentmindedly wonders how quickly he would bleed out if he stabbed himself in the leg with a steak knife—because it’s totally what he deserves right now.

Upstairs in the loft, Shouto hears the telltale click of the lock being thrown open right before Izuku emerges from the bathroom. He’s got a towel wrapped around his waist and his hair is dripping wet. He does actually look a little better than he did before—his shoulders still aren’t perfectly straight, but he’s not bent in on himself like a parabola anymore, so that’s got to count for something.

Izuku glances over the railing down at Shouto, opening his mouth to say something right before he notices that Shouto’s on the phone. Izuku bites back his words. Wordlessly, he instead points to the nearest dresser and mouths, ‘This one?’

Shouto presses the phone against his ear until it hurts. He nods, then turns away as he hears Izuku begin rifling through his drawer of workout clothes and sleepwear. Into the phone, he murmurs, “Hey, I’ve got to go. Talk later?”

“Sure. Everything okay?”

No. “Yeah.” Everything is awful and I have no idea what I’m doing. “Everything’s great.”

There’s an understanding noise on the other end of the line. “All right then. Talk later tonight?”

“If you’re still awake, sure.”

“I’m grading persuasive essays tonight, so I’ll probably be awake until I’m old enough to retire. No worries though. Call if you need me.” There’s a pause, and Shouto hears Keiji suck in a shallow breath through his nose. “I— erm. Stay safe, all right? For me. Please.”

Shouto’s mouth curls up on one side in a pleased little half-smile. “I will. Good luck with your grading.”

“Good luck with your friend.”

He hangs up with a few murmured well-wishes and slips his phone into the pocket of his pajamas pants, rubbing a hand over his face wearily as he takes in a deep, shuddering breath. Outside his window, the city lives and breathes on its own, veins flooded with glow-in-the-dark traffic as the heart of the metropolis pounds a rhythm Shouto’s never been able to match once in his life. He’s always felt half a beat behind, playing catch-up every single day to reach a goal he’s never even glimpsed.

There are footsteps behind him, jogging down the stairs. Izuku comes up on Shouto’s right, slotting into place beside him. He looks out over the darkened, glimmering cityscape as he dries his hair absentmindedly with his towel, elbow brushing Shouto’s every once in a while. Glancing sidelong, Shouto notices that he’s wearing one of his plain t-shirts with a pair of black joggers Shouto honestly forgot he owned. They… sort of fit him. The shirt is obscenely tight, but that’s to be expected, he supposes—Midoriya is much broader across the chest. That’s just a simple statement of fact.

“Boyfriend?” Izuku asks quietly after a few moments, combing through his dark curls with freshly-
bandaged fingers. Shouto’s gaze snaps to him, surprised, and Izuku shrinks back sheepishly under his stunned scrutiny. “Ah—sorry. N-Not my business. Ignore me, honestly, I’m probably just going cra—”

“How’d you know?” Shouto asks, frowning.

Here, the side of Izuku’s face that isn’t swollen and red turns a faint shade of pink. He jerks a thumb in the direction of the bathroom. “Second toothbrush on the vanity,” he says quietly. He points toward the bed upstairs. “Glasses on your bedside table that clearly aren’t yours ’cause you’ve always been 20/20.” He points directly at Shouto’s face. “You were smiling when you hung up the phone. Wasn’t exactly hard to put the pieces together.”

Shouto presses his lips together in a thin line. “I see.”

“Sorry,” Izuku mumbles. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

Shouto waves him off, still frowning. “It’s fine.”

“I won’t tell anybody.”

“Midoriya, I said it’s fine.” Shouto presses his fingers against his mouth as he strategizes, eyes narrowing in thought. “And I know you won’t tell anybody. I just need to be more careful, I suppose.”

Midoriya nods, draping his towel over his shoulder as his mouth curves downwards. He bites his lip, eyebrows knitting together. After a moment, he hesitates, then asks, “Do you want a tip?”

Shouto raises an eyebrow. “Sure.”

Midoriya turns and points toward the foyer in the direction of the coat hooks that line the wall nearest to the door. “Your spare key is missing from its spot. I’m assuming your boyfriend has it?”

“He… does. Yes.”

He nods, clearly having expected this answer. “I’d get another one to replace it, then. Most people give out extra keys and then forget to replace them once they’re gone, which tells villains that somebody else can get in here who isn’t you—usually a spouse, family member, or significant other. People they can hurt in order to hurt you.” Midoriya swallows, frowning down at the hardwood floor beneath his socked feet. He stuffs his hands in his pockets, clenching his fists. “It, uh. It makes a difference. Villains look for little things like that.”

Shouto watches Midoriya carefully, nothing the way the soft lighting of his apartment outlines the straight bridge of his nose and the precise angle of his bruised jaw. The shadows under his eyes are infinite in their depth and impossibly dark, and at this distance, Shouto can see the incalculable sorrow that’s etched into every line around his eyes and mouth. Dark slashes of something unknowable.

“You’re speaking from experience,” Shouto murmurs quietly, tilting his head to one side in order to catch Midoriya’s gaze. “Aren’t you?”

The muscle in Izuku’s jaw flexes dangerously. “I’m trying to help, not attend a therapy session.”

“It was just a question.”

“Don’t push it, Shouto.”
“Humor me.”

Izuku looks up sharply, brows slashed low and mouth set into a displeased line. “You know what? Fine. We moved six times in two years because people kept trying to find us so they could hurt me. It was shitty, she was always scared, and I couldn’t do anything about it without making it all a million times worse.” He waves a hand sharply, dismissively before aiming his glare back out the window. “Boom, done, end of conversation. Now leave me alone about it.”

Shouto digs his nails into the flesh of his palms, trusting the sting of pain to anchor him in this moment. For several moments, he stands there in silence, unsure of what to say in this situation. Words have never been Shouto’s strong suit—violent actions and ignoring people, sure, but not talking. He has no idea how to broach this subject at all.

In the end, he bites his lip. He starts, “Listen, Midoriya—”

But a sharp sigh cuts him off mid-thought. Izuku runs a hand over his face, muttering, “I know.”

Shouto shakes his head. “I really don’t think—”

“Seriously, I know.” With a grimace, Izuku chucks the damp towel across the room where it lands on the back of the sofa. “You don’t have to tell me, all right? I’m not okay, I’m unstable, I’m volatile, I need professional help, whatever. I swear, it’s all anyone’s told me since—” he chokes slightly, face twisting into something unrecognizable for a brief second. He blinks hard. “I just hear it a lot, all right? And I’m… I’m so fucking tired, Shouto. Tired of all of it.”

“That doesn’t mean you can disrupt an ongoing hostage investigation and attack without cause,” Shouto reminds him. His words are harsh, edged with steel and cored with soft, spongy concern. “You blatantly broke protocol back there.”

Izuku flinches, cheeks flushing pink beneath his pale freckles and multicolored bruises. “I know,” he says miserably, rubbing his eyes. “I’m sorry. Honestly, I really am. I don’t— I don’t understand why—” he groans in frustration, raking his fingers through his hair. “Can’t we just both agree that we’re both assholes and move on with our lives? Like, I’m obviously the bigger jerk here between the two of us, but you also punched my shoulder and I am super not over that yet.”

“Midoriya,” he sighs wearily.

He holds up his hands. “I’m just saying—pretty cheap shot for the Number One Hero. Whatever happened to ‘honor among thieves,’ huh?”

“We’re not thieves.”

“It’s the principle of the thing.”

Shouto’s mouth twitches and he glances away. He shouldn’t laugh—he should continue with his pre-planned dressing-down speech about responsibility and taking care of yourself, make Midoriya report to Yaoyorozu and the IHA to fill out a report about the incident, and force Izuku to call his mother because she’s probably worried sick. Justifiably so.

But Shouto can’t help it—he smiles at the dry, familiar joke of a broken man who’s held together with nothing more than scotch tape and enough raw determination to just barely patch the largest cracks. It’s a stupid joke and Shouto knows it’s stupid, but it’s the kind of ill-timed stupid that makes everything else a little… less stupid, in a way. It’s something, no matter how small and insignificant, to remind them both that they’re not Shouto and Deku right now, but Todoroki and Midoriya—two men who would watch the stars together every Friday night and used to think they
were invincible.

Outside, the stars twinkle down at them both through the windows of Shouto’s apartment. In this moment, bruised and battered and just barely out of arm’s reach, they’re seventeen again. They’re stupid and star-struck and ridiculous because that’s all they’ve ever been. It’s all they’ve ever known.

“Dammit,” he curses, pressing his knuckles against his lips to keep from smiling while his shoulders shake imperceptibly. “Dammit. Don’t you take anything seriously anymore? Honestly, I had a speech planned and everything.”

Shouto expects a rapid-fire retort to that one. Something funny, something zany and very, very Midoriya. Something that will take him right back to that stupid rock quarry and studying for English quizzes and every note they ever passed in Aizawa-sensei’s homeroom—but nothing comes except the soft sound of an exhaled breath and a heartbeat.

Izuku looks over at Shouto, his gaze green and dreadfully despondent in all the worst ways. He smiles at Shouto—it’s little more than a flickering nightlight when held against the supernova smile that he used to hand out by the dozens.

They’re not seventeen. There are no English quizzes, no notes to pass. Just Izuku and Shouto and something shattered in between them, lost to years of neglect and purposeful ignorance.

“Trust me,” Izuku murmurs after a moment. “It’s better if I don’t.”

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr | Twitter | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist
Izuku used to appreciate the quiet.

In his youth, he would relish in those late-night study sessions alone in his dorm room at school, faded All Might posters silently cheering him on as he crammed all manner of mathematical formulas and scientific principles into the corners of his too-busy, too-jumbled mind. He lived for those taciturn nights spent stargazing with Todoroki, their hushed words providing the only challenge to the ambient sounds of nature and the nearby city. He loved to wander the stacks of the library, fingers skimming across worn leather spines and embossed text as his classmates muttered over their homework and passed notes to each other like everything was one big secret. Izuku always tried to make those little moments count—to savor them, clinging to the taste of peace for as long as it would last.

Everything’s a little different now.

Silence suddenly sounds deafening and oppressive to his ears—too large, constant, overbearing in every sense of the word—and he can’t stand it. Izuku writhes in the slick, grimy heat of reticence and chokes on the enormity of it every time, suffering breathlessly while the world looks on with nothing more than mild concern for their Number One Hero. Deku is supposed to be unstoppable, right? Surely, he can handle something as paltry and inoffensive as the heavy silence of a room.

So, he sits, pressed on all sides as he shrinks and shrinks beneath stagnant sound, hunching beneath the impossible weight of things unsaid. He hears the whispers of concern and emotional instability and maybe he should see a therapist, but arguing against the naysayers only makes the media murmur even more, and he simply doesn’t have the energy nor the motivation to war with any of them right now.

It isn’t an ideal existence by any means, but it’s manageable enough. He can be stubborn, just like the rest of them. He can deal.

Izuku expects the silence of Shouto’s apartment to feel similar—heavy, infinite, and incredibly uncomfortable, just like everything else has been since that night in New York. There likely won’t be any hemming and hawing because Shouto isn’t that kind of person, but there will be inscrutable looks and awkward conversations about the weather, no doubt. As they stare out the large window side-by-side, Izuku clenches his fists in the pockets of his joggers and wonders whether it’d be best to make an excuse and leave now or wait until later for the sake of politeness.

Injuries? No, he’d see right through that. I’d use mom as an excuse if he hadn’t already messaged her. Maybe Uraraka could do a favor and get me out of here. She owes me for that Christmas party two years ago, so—

“Are you staying for dinner?”

Shouto’s voice is quiet, his impassive gaze still trained on the glittering city skyline in the distance. His gnarled, scraped fingers curl around the outside of a ceramic mug of tea as it steams pleasantly, the blue-white wisps of vapor curling languidly before they’re dispersed into nothingness by his steady exhalations.
Izuku bites the inside of his cheek, thumb tracing one of the jagged, torn nails of his right index finger within his pocket. “I… can,” he says hesitantly. “If you want me to.”

Shouto shrugs, taking a sip of his tea. “Up to you.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose.”

Shouto huffs a breath through his nose. “Midoriya, if you were imposing, I wouldn’t have brought you here in the first place.” He gestures vaguely to the rest of the loft. “If you want to stay for dinner, stay.”

Izuku twists his wedding band with his thumb—or tries to, at least. His ring finger seems to be a bit swollen and sore right now. “I could hang out, I suppose,” he murmurs. “For a little while.”

Shouto nods once, expression forever unchanged. “Fair enough.”

Izuku hums lowly, rocking back and forth on his heels. “So… are you cooking or am I? Because I gotta say, I’m a little out of practice with Japanese cuisine. Haven’t fully adjusted yet, I guess.”

Shouto turns and gives him a disparaging look over the rim of his mug. “Right,” he deadpans, raising an eyebrow. “Ha-ha. You’re hilarious.”

“What?”

“You actually expect me to believe that you can cook now?” Shouto shakes his head, turning away to walk toward the kitchen on the far side of the living room. He sets his empty mug down in the sink, rinsing it out with warm water. “The day you touch my stove is the day I die, Midoriya. Forget it. I remember what happened last time.”

Izuku follows closely behind, taking a seat on one of the island stools before counting off on his fingers. “All right, first of all, ouch. Second, that ramen noodle incident was a total fluke and you know it. Third, if I’m not cooking, then what’s the plan?”

Shouto turns off the water with a flat look. “I don’t have to feed you, you know.”

“But I thought I was the guest.”

Shouto rolls his eyes and mutters something under his breath about annoying pro heroes and stalks toward his fridge. He whips it open, frowning at the ingredients he finds in there—or, more specifically, the lack thereof.

“Dammit, Momo,” he mutters, letting the door swing shut. He rubs a hand over his face—Izuku doesn’t miss the way Shouto winces when his fingers come into contact with the blue-black bruise on his unscarred cheekbone—a bruise that approximately matches the size and shape of Izuku’s right fist. “All right, so it looks like neither of us will be cooking because I didn’t have time to hit the farmer’s market this morning.”

“Ah. Tuesday, right. I remember.” Izuku drops his chin into his hands, elbows braced against the granite countertop. “Plan C, then?”

With a sigh, Shouto opens a drawer and snatches a folded-up takeout menu before plopping down on the stool next to Izuku. He slides the menu over.

“Plan C,” he agrees.
Half an hour later sees both men with boxes of spicy noodles in their laps, bare feet propped up on the edge of the living room coffee table while they sink into the couch cushions and aimlessly channel surf. It’s a lazy sort of coexistence, and a comfortable one. Familiar, even.

Izuku isn’t sure how he feels about it. He’s sore and tired and weighted by an invisible kind of guilt that squeezes him from the inside out, but that doesn’t mean he knows what to make of any of it. So he doesn’t try.

“What do you wanna watch?” Shouto mumbles as he scrolls through endless channels. His hair hangs low and tangled in front of his eyes, and he looks tired—more tired than Izuku has ever seen him. “A movie, a show, the news, etcetera. I have, like—” he checks the guide “—eight thousand channels or something.”

Izuku blinks, dropping his gaze to the box of noodles in his hands. He frowns. “I don’t care. Whatever.”

Shouto stops clicking the remote and looks at him flatly. “Midoriya, you have to pick. Come on.”

“Why do I have to pick?”

“Because you’re the guest,” he says, as if this justifies everything.

Izuku jabs his chopsticks into the vat of steaming noodles and huffs. “Well then, I want to watch whatever you want to watch. So there. That’s my choice.”

Shouto’s face sours. “That’s not an option.”

“Sure it is.”

“No, that’s cheating.”

“How is it cheating?” Izuku asks incredulously.

Shouto gestures vaguely with the remote, making a noncommittal noise. “It just… is. Now come on, tell me what you want to watch.”

“Hey, you never said I couldn’t choose that. Gotta be specific.” Izuku mutters, sinking back into the couch cushions with a soft, wheezing huff. He frowns up at the flatscreen on the wall, scanning the listings for something that will pass the time. “Ooooh, how about *Keeping Up with the Karda—*

“Over my dead body,” Shouto says automatically, flipping a few channels in rapid succession as if determined to get as far away from channel 237 as possible.

Izuku swallows a laugh and a smile at the stubborn, familiar display, choking on the pressure of the stifled sound despite himself. He feels the sour echoes of his own laughter within his chest and all the way down into his toes where it settles like mercury—too heavy, too poisonous. He doesn’t dare let it loose.

After a few minutes, Shouto stops on a NatGeo special about the Serengeti just as a lion tackles a wildebeest to the dirt and tears its throat out beneath the blazing African sun. “How about a
“Documentary?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

Izuku drops his head back against the couch and groans, ignoring the soft-spoken English narrator as he details the vicious animal murder in a disturbingly explicit amount of detail. “It’s like you want me to dry up and rot here on your couch or something. Honestly, Shouto.”

“Documentaries aren’t that bad,” Shouto mumbles defensively. “They’re interesting.”

“Yeah, when they’re about All Might or candy factories or… something else fun and fascinating like that. This—” Izuku gestures vaguely at the screen, grimacing “—is a special kind of torture. Please. Come on, dude.”

Shouto’s expression pinches, displeased. “I think you’re being really overdramatic. It’s just nature.”

“Yeah, and it’ll put me straight to sleep.” Izuku takes a bite of his noodles, shaking his head back and forth slowly. Onscreen, the lioness has called the rest of the pride out for dinner. “Unless you want me crashing on your couch for the night, I suggest you change the channel to something a little more upbeat.”

For a brief second—an instant, a heartbeat, a flashpoint in time that should hardly be consequential at all—Shouto’s fingers tense around the remote as he holds it aloft, aimed at the television. Bruised, raw knuckles whiten as mottled skin stretches over bone, pulling taut along the mainstays of the pale blue veins that snake up the curve of his delicate wrist, and Izuku finds himself tensing right along with him. Joints, locked. Breath, held. Waiting.

(He’s always waiting—but for what?)

Slowly, Shouto turns his head, glancing sidelong over at Midoriya. His left eye glimmers turquoise in the flicking light of the television, the creases beneath his lower lashes more pronounced than they were before. All at once, he looks every year of twenty-seven with those sharp cheekbones and shadows in his eyes dark enough to swallow Izuku whole in a heartbeat. He is endless, infinite. Impossible in every way.

Izuku holds his breath—for what, he’s not sure. He just knows he can’t afford the luxury of oxygen right now.

After a moment, Shouto swallows, throat bobbing against the collar of his t-shirt. Izuku watches the movement closely, noting the slide of skin against soft fabric as it permeates the silence like a whisper.

“Have you been sleeping?” Shouto asks, voice pitched low like he’s telling a secret that nobody’s supposed to hear.

Izuku doesn’t miss a beat. “Have you?”

Shouto says nothing. He doesn’t have to. Izuku can see the impossible weariness in his two-toned eyes, the sloped set of his once-proud shoulders beneath the soft lines of his shirt, the mug of caffeinated tea he drank earlier like a man deprived. Stopgaps and symptoms, all of them. Signs of something much more insidious than plain old surface wounds.

Blood and bruises are one thing—but this?

This is so much worse.
Chapter End Notes

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As the Wind Behaves

August 25, 2025

The weatherman is a fucking liar.

Overhead the rain falls hard and fast, catching the glow of the city streetlamps in tumultuous sheets as the sky crumbles inward to drown the city in its spontaneous fury. The city takes a preparatory breath all at once as people begin to move a little faster than before: pedestrians and bike messengers hunch over and begin to scurry through sloshing, silvery puddles; businessmen hold newspapers above their heads while they bark and swear into their expensive Bluetooth earpieces; humble vendors tie down their awnings and cover their goods with thick tarps, apologizing to customers and inviting them inside their establishments for tea until the storm passes over.

The honk of car horns and muffled shouts echo down the thoroughfare to accompany the quiet rolls of thunder, tying the tableau together like thick strands of fraying twine. It’s almost nice to see the city like this, united against a common enemy and seeking solidarity in their time of need. Even if that enemy is the weather, it’s still progress. Shouto will take what he can get.

The street corner where Shouto stands is largely empty, save for an elderly woman with a sopping paper grocery bag braced against one hip and a college-aged boy wearing headphones who doesn’t appear to notice that it’s raining at all. The woman continually shifts from foot to foot, waiting for the crosswalk light to change.

The college boy, on the other hand, keeps sending Shouto quick, wide-eyed glances from beneath his fringe of dark hair. He’s young—a freshman, most likely—and his frame is thin beneath the drenched fabric of his graphic tee.

Shouto ducks his head and grimaces, looking down at the blinding display of his phone. Three minutes, the notification informs him in crisp, uncaring font. Shouto almost wishes his Uber driver would break a few traffic laws to hurry things up a bit. He feels the gaze of the college student on the back of his neck searing his skin like a laser. Come on, come on…

“Um,” says the college student, removing one of his earbuds slowly as he cocks his head to one side. He clears his throat and taps Shouto’s shoulder lightly. “Hey, aren’t you…erm, Shouto? The hero guy?”

Dammit.

Shouto squeezes his eyes shut and swears softly under his breath. The rain has plastered his hair flat against his scalp, his thin summertime hero costume is clinging to his skin in all the wrong places, and his left arm hangs limply at his side, bruised and burned beyond belief after that run-in with a small gang in the alleyway two hours ago. He’s not exactly picture-ready, nor is he feeling particularly personable right now. He just wants to go home.

Except that he can’t do that because his Uber isn’t here and he’s the Number One goddamn hero, so brushing fans off isn’t something he can really get away with anymore.
He misses the comforts of obscurity sometimes.

Swallowing his curses and the spasms of pain that reverberate from the top of his left shoulder to the tips of his sparkling, sputtering fingers, Shouto cements an impassive expression on his face and turns around, meeting the college student’s eyes with a grimace. “Ah, yes. That’s… me.” *What’s left of me, at least.*

The college student positively lights up at Shouto’s words, eyes going wide as saucers as he takes in the signature scar on his face and the trademark blue-and-silver suit. “Holy shit,” he breathes out, shaking some of the excess rainwater from his hair. He yanks out his other earbud and starts scrambling for his phone in his pocket, mumbling, “Oh my god, oh my god, my roommates are never gonna believe this. Can— is it cool if I get a quick picture with you? Seriously, they won’t believe me otherwise and I don’t wanna—”

Shouto shrugs with one shoulder, wincing as his muscles shift uncomfortably beneath the seams of his suit. “It’s fine,” he mutters. “Just be careful of—"

“That’s great!” the boy chirps, grinning brighter than the muted flashes of lightning in the distance. Shouto barely has time to blink before the boy is leaning in with his phone outstretched, snapping a selfie that Shouto’s sure he looks terrible in.

The boy immediately pulls away and looks at the photo, eyebrows furrowed as if he’s searching for the answers to life’s problems between the pixels. Shouto winces, rolling his bad shoulder, and checks his own phone for an update on his ride. *One minute,* it says. Really helpful.

The boy nods once, pleased with the photo before pocketing his phone once again. “Hey, thanks for that,” the guy says with a lopsided smile. “One of my roommates does this crazy research on all of the different hero types ‘cause he’s majoring in Quirk biology. I swear, he’s gonna shit his pants when I tell him I got to meet you. Fuckin’ wild, man.”

Shouto thinks of notebooks filled with line after line of neat block-print and scratchy doodles, all lined up on a shelf in a row with All Might figurines acting as dustless bookends. Shouto was in one of those notebooks, once upon a time. Volume fifteen, he thinks. Or was it sixteen? He wonders if Midoriya still has those notebooks.

He wonders why he cares.

Shouto clears his throat carefully, flipping the dripping ends of his hair out of his eyes. “Uh, thank you. It’s… always nice to meet the people I protect. I’m sure—"

“You have, like, six million followers on Twitter, dude.” His voice is tinged with awe. “You’re a legend.”

Shouto blinks. It takes him a moment, but he remembers that yes, he *does* indeed have a Twitter account. Momo just happens to be the one who runs it. Shouto doesn’t even know his own username for Christ’s sake, so it’s not like he’s qualified to talk about this with anyone, much less a random person on the street.

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“Um,” he stammers, taking half a step toward the curb. He surreptitiously glances at his phone; his car will be arriving soon. “Yes, I have Twitter. I enjoy, uh… tweeting. And such.”

If the kid notices anything about Shouto’s awkward demeanor, he doesn’t let on. Instead, he places a hand over his chest and widens his eyes reverently. “Hey, just so you know, we’re all on your side, dude. What happened was fucked up, but you were totally in the right. Just— well, you
“For the record, the apology you gave was on point.”

That gives Shouto pause. His joints seize, and suddenly, he doesn’t feel quite as wet as he did a minute ago.

“Apology?” he repeats, frowning. The word feels foreign in his mouth, all sour and unwelcome. “What apology?”

The boy gives Shouto a confused look, eyebrows furrowing deeply. “Um. The— the thing you posted a few weeks ago? A-About Deku?” He laughs nervously, rubbing the back of his neck. “My roommates all retweeted it, man. Shit was crazy. That video’s still trending right now, I think.”

“Video,” Shouto says numbly. He has a sinking feeling he knows exactly which video the kid’s talking about.

(flashing cameras and split lips, fists and fighting, so much fighting, and I’m sorry for this, you’re not okay, you’re not okay, Izuku, you’re not okay—)

(awkward goodbyes and half-empty cups of tea left to cool on his coffee table, documentaries boring enough to make them both sleepy, soft voices and even softer words. Stupid infomercials, take-out, the liminal space between their bodies as they sank into the couch and just… breathed.)

They haven’t talked about it. No texts, no calls—nothing. Only deafening silence and the haunting echo of questions they’re both too afraid to ask.

Are we okay? Were we ever okay? What happens now?

I feel like I don’t know you anymore.

Sometimes Shouto wonders if he dreamed all of it. Sometimes he wonders if he ever really woke up in the first place.

Clenching his bruised, raw-knuckled fist, Shouto nods tightly and turns back toward the street with all its flooded gutters and floating bits of litter that look a bit greyer than they should. There’s something sour in his throat that tastes an awful lot like blood and bad memories, and he’s not quite sure he’s ready to deal with this just yet. “Right,” he says quietly to the boy. “Well, thank you. For… that. It’s always nice to know people are on my side.”

The boy gives Shouto a wide grin and a good-natured clap on the shoulder. “Hey, no problem, dude. Japan’s got your back.”

Behind Shouto, a car abruptly rolls up to the curb, splashing a puddle of dirty water on his scuffed boots in an impressive show of cosmic disdain. (Or maybe it’s karma. Shouto doesn’t know the difference, honestly.) He lets out a long, low sigh as he wiggles his toes, feeling the squelch of his socks and the frigidity of his toes. Figures.

Pocketing his phone, Shouto steps off the curb and yanks open the back door, spilling into the car in a heap of sore limbs and soaked Kevlar-spandex. The air conditioning that hits him is shockingly cold, but his body temperature adjusts in the blink of an eye, warming his extremities until the ends of his hair sizzle with steam.

“Nice to meet you, man!” shouts the kid, waving a drenched hand wildly in the air from the street corner. “Keep kicking ass, you hear?”

Shouto forces a tight smile and raises a hand in acknowledgement before closing the door behind
himself, sealing himself off from the rest of the world and, better yet, the fucking rain.

“City hero agency downtown,” he mumbles half-heartedly, buckling himself in with bruised, mangled fingers. He sags into the upholstery, tipping his head back against the headrest. His eyes drift closed of their own accord.

“Please,” he adds, almost as an afterthought.

When he arrives at the agency, the first thing Shouto notices is how busy it is for nine o’clock on a Sunday.

Sure, the agency’s been a little busier since Shouto took on the mantle of Number One hero. They’ve been receiving more distress calls than ever before, internship requests are at an all-time high, and Shouto barely remembers what his desk looks like at this point because he’s hardly ever here. He’s never been the type to enjoy sitting at a desk anyway though, so it’s probably for the best.

Shouto nods stiff greetings at the receptionists on the first floor as he passes through the lobby, making a beeline straight for the elevators. Analysts and interns scuttle around the wide, open first floor with tablets in hand and earpieces aglow, and businessmen and women in suits mill about as they wait for late-night appointments and conference calls with the higher-ups. Shouto pretends he can’t see some of them waving at him, skirting around groups of people as best he can so as to not draw attention to himself. He’s just too tired for this sort of thing right now.

The second he spills into the elevator, Shouto leans heavily against the stainless-steel wall panels and slams a hand against the button for the eighteenth floor with a weary exhale. He presses it repeatedly, each motion weaker than the last until the doors finally seal him away from the uproarious hustle and bustle of the lobby.

How long’s it been since he slept? Twenty hours? More? He can’t really remember.

File the paperwork, he tells himself as his eyes drift shut for several precious seconds, and then go home. File, home. Paperwork, home. Home, home, home.

I can manage it.

His stomach lurches as the elevator rises swiftly and steadily through the core of the building. He counts the floors as he would count sheep, lulled into lethargy by the blinking numbers on the button display that flicker in time with the sluggish beating of his heart.

When the doors finally open on floor eighteen, the sounds that flood the elevator compartment are nearly deafening. Shouto opens his eyes blearily, blinking against the onslaught of exhaustion that hammers his senses from all sides, and stares uncomprehendingly at the buzz of the night shift as sidekicks, interns, and people from Support scurry to and fro across the floor. Computer screens glow, cups of coffee steam on tabletops, and sidekicks mutter to each other with pensive expressions on their youthful faces.

There’s a thick current of electricity in the air, Shouto notices. Immediately he’s on high alert, eyes wide open and scanning the perimeter of the whole floor for any signs of blatant distress. Something’s up. He just isn’t sure what it is.
Hesitantly, Shouto steps out of the elevator. A petite intern in a pencil skirt and pressed blouse skirts by him, muttering apologies under her breath as she listens to someone on the other end of her Bluetooth earpiece, eyes trained on the scrolling contents of her tablet almost as if—

As if Shouto were invisible.

Exhaustion abandoned, he frowns and begins walking up the leftmost aisle of the floor past desks, cubicles, and glass-walled conference rooms full of floor employees all whispering to each other. There’s an undercurrent of fury and action that has Shouto on edge, fingers twitching nervously at his side.

Rolling his injured shoulder with a grimace, Shouto soldiers on through the churning mess of workers and sidekicks. Yaoyorozu, strangely enough, is nowhere to be found in all this mess. As if things weren’t odd enough, he thinks to himself.

Murmuring apologies and biting back curses as he’s jostled in the flurry, Shouto manages to make his way toward the administrative hero offices at the far end of the agency floor. He sees his own office at the end of the row, the lights dark and space entirely vacant through the narrow window above the doorknob. Momo’s office is right next door. The light is on.

Glancing from side to side, Shouto takes a deep breath and brushes past a few interns on his way to Momo’s door. He grips the handle, not bothering to knock—something’s up in this agency, and he’s too tired to give a shit about social conventions right now. He pushes in with his good shoulder with one swift movement.

“Yaoyorozu, what the hell is—?”

The words die in his mouth.

Midoriya Izuku stands on the opposite side of Momo’s oversized desk, scarred hands frozen in midair as if he was in the middle of an impassioned sentence when Shouto walked in. His face is pale in the yellow lamplight, eyes shadowed as if he hasn’t been sleeping. He’s wearing jeans and an old Ground Zero t-shirt beneath an open zip hoodie, hair still damp from the rain outside. It’s curling into an uncontrollable mess.

And he’s here, why is he here?

The silence that falls is poignant and heavy as he stares at Midoriya, speechless. Shouto is suddenly very aware of the fact that he’s soaked to the bone, injured, and about to keel over from exhaustion. Fantastic.

“Speak of the devil,” Momo mutters, leaning back in her office chair. She steeps her fingers, elbows braced against the armrests as she surveys Shouto with weary eyes. “We didn’t expect you back so soon. Figured you’d be at least another hour.”

Shouto’s fully convinced that his heart has stopped beating inside of his chest for the time being. He fights for breath, counts the number of skyscrapers he can see in the distance outside Momo’s window, and manages to get to seventeen before he realizes he should probably say something in response.

“Slow night,” Shouto lies numbly, letting the door swing closed behind him with a dull thunk. He swallows nervously.

He’s not even sure why he’s nervous in the first place.
Momo hums, glancing pointedly at his bruised, battered arm with those dark, familiar eyes that always seem to notice everything. Her hair is pinned back today in a neat coif, hero outfit abandoned in favor of one of her managerial blouses and pencil skirts—she must’ve been stuck in meetings all day again.

“Slow,” she drawls, clearly unconvinced as she glances between the two heroes on the opposite side of her desk. “Right.”

“Slower than normal,” Shouto amends begrudgingly.

She raises her eyebrows. “Ah, there it is. Much better.” She leans back in her chair, steepling her fingers with true concern etched into the shadows of her fading smile. “Need me to get medical to come and take a look at that arm before you go home tonight?”

“I’m fine, Momo.”

“You don’t look fine,” Midoriya mutters, shifting his weight uneasily. He stuffs his hands in the pockets of his hoodie and drops his gaze to the toes of his scuffed red sneakers.

Momo gestures to Midoriya, raising her eyebrows as if to say, see, I’m not the only one!

Shouto shakes his head from side to side sharply, suddenly fully aware of the headache that’s beginning to coil at the base of his skull. “Look, I just came back to do some paperwork so I can go home and sleep. I’ll ice my arm when I get home. It’s not a big deal.” Exhaling sharply, Shouto turns to look at Midoriya, who is currently staring at the carpet between his sneakers like it’s the most interesting thing in the entire world. “Why are you here?” he asks point-blank, too tired to suffer through politeness for one more second.

Momo’s perfectly-plucked brows knit together as she scowls, her manicured fingers lacing together on top of her desk with white-knuckled displeasure. “Shouto, don’t be rude,” she admonishes, but Midoriya cuts her off with a dismissive shake of his head.

“No, no, it’s fine. It’s, uh. A fair question. Totally fair,” he tells Momo, voice more subdued than usual. He clears his throat awkwardly, gaze dropping to the floor. He begins rocking back and forth on his heels, hands fisting in his pockets—a nervous habit he’s had since they were first years at UA.

“I…” Midoriya stops short, biting his lip. A hand escapes his pocket to rub the back of his neck, and he looks at the door behind Shouto with something akin to half-panicked desperation. “Could we…” he trails quietly. The implication is obvious.

Shouto glances at Momo, who nods brusquely and waves them both out. “That’s fine. Talk it out amongst yourselves, figure it out—just let me know what you both decide by tomorrow. This’ll take some time to get through all the proper channels if you decide to go for it.”

Midoriya nods emphatically, taking a step toward the door. “Of course. Thanks, Yaoyorozu.”

“What?” Shouto asks, blinking. He looks between them incredulously. “What is going on?”

Momo ignores him. She instead inclines her head toward Midoriya, smiling faintly. “Have a good night, Midoriya. Keep in touch, okay?”

“You too,” Midoriya replies quietly. “Again, thanks for seeing me on such short notice. Means a lot.”
“Any time. Don’t be a stranger.”

Shouto huffs irritably. “What are either of you talking about?” he demands, but they continue to pretend like he doesn’t exist for some maddening reason. He scowls, crossing his arms over his chest. “I feel like you guys should be able to hear me right now.”

Midoriya grimaces, reaching around Shouto to hold the office door open. “I’ll explain in a minute. I promise,” he mumbles, gesturing out toward the busy agency floor. His brows are furrowed and his mouth is pinched, his expression wholly unfamiliar to Shouto with all its sharp edges and deep shadows. He jerks his chin in the direction of the doorway. “Come on, let’s talk in your office. I know you have one around here somewhere.”

The walk to Shouto’s office is little more than fifteen steps directly to the left—it should take a grand total of ten seconds to reach his door, give or take a few depending on how many people manage to get in their way from Point A to Point B. With Midoriya at Shouto’s left shoulder, however, the journey seems to take a whole hell of a lot longer. Years. Decades.

Shouto feels the eyes of every worker on the floor trained on them both as they walk. He hears whispers of his name permeate the air and hisses of Deku, Deku, Deku. Some give them pitying looks as they pass, mouths tilted downward and sighs soft; others appear ready to duck and cover at the first sign of a thrown fist or hurled curse. Shouto isn’t sure which look he hates more.

Shuffling for the small ring of keys in his pocket, Shouto unlocks the door and only fumbles a little bit when his muscles protest the movement. He winces, shoving the door wide and stumbling in. He gestures vaguely and mutters, “Make yourself at home.” If you can.

Shouto’s office is spartan to the point of uninhabited, and he’s never been more aware of that fact than he is right now. His mostly-barren desk with the stiff-backed chair positioned behind it looks frighteningly utilitarian in its simplicity, sharp edges painted silver in the dappled moonlight that peeks through the storm clouds outside. Rain sluices down the floor-to-ceiling windows, blurring the city skyline into something softer and far less intimidating than usual. For this fact, Shouto is thankful. (He also notices the potted peace lily in the corner of his office has wilted. Its petals are frail and dingy, the once-lush leaves drooped and dried. He might be able to save it, but he’s never been very good with plants.)

Midoriya steps in behind him, closing the door with murmured thanks. He stuffs his hands back in the pockets of his zip hoodie as soon as he can, wandering into the room with nothing short of abject reticence. His gaze darts from blank wall to blank wall, lingering on the dying peace lily with a disturbingly blank expression.

Grimacing, Shouto reaches out and flips on his desk lamp, bathing the room in amber light that casts long shadows across the flat planes of Midoriya’s drawn, tired face. This close, Shouto is reminded of that evening they spent in his apartment, watching shitty documentaries and forcing conversation that used to be easy once upon a time. The silence now is thick enough to choke them both.

“So,” Shouto starts awkwardly, staggering toward the silver briefcase for his costume that’s laid open on his desk, its velvet interior stuffed haphazardly with the street clothes he came in wearing this morning. He begins to fold each article one by one, making sure every edge is crisp and all seams are straight. “Care to tell me what’s going on now?”

Midoriya chews on the inside of his cheek, frowning down at the carpet beneath his feet. He swallows, opens his mouth. Closes it. Tries again.
“I’ve… come to ask you something,” he says after a moment, voice hushed and tinged with faint notes of melancholy. “A favor, of sorts.”

Shouto’s fingers freeze. “A favor,” he repeats carefully. The rain outside sounds a lot like the frantic rush of blood in his ears. “What kind of favor?”

“The kind I’m expecting you to say no to.” He winces, reaching up to scratch at a half-healed scrape on his cheek. “It’s, uh. Not exactly small.”

Shouto waits for Izuku to offer a more apt description. When he doesn’t, Shouto says, “Well, don’t keep me in suspense.”

Izuku swallows, nodding quickly. “Right, right. I just—”

Here, his voice falters and plunges into weighty silence. His brows deepen into a dark slash of consternation above tired, dull eyes, and Shouto immediately feels the urge to reach across the desk and smooth them out into something less worrisome. Something…

Well, less.

_Your face is made for smiling_, he thinks to himself, returning his attention to folding his clothes. _Not this. Never this._

After a moment, a frustrated sigh cleaves the silence in two. Shouto pauses in his ministrations, looking up through his lashes to find Izuku bouncing on his toes, biting his lower lip while he frets.

“This… was a bad idea,” Izuku finally mutters under his breath. He rubs a scarred hand over his face, tearing those crooked fingers through his tangled, messy hair. “I shouldn’t— I really shouldn’t be here. At all. Like, I’m just now realizing how terrible this idea is and I don’t think Momo really understands how self-centered it is to even ask something like this, but. I mean. It’s —” he squeezes his eyes shut, exhaling sharply. He shakes his head. “I’m sorry. This was stupid. I’m… sorry, I’m just gonna—”

Shoulders hunched, Izuku steps to the side, reaching for the doorknob to leave. His face is pale, cheeks gaunt and speckled with hairline scars the color of mercury. He looks like he’s about to hyperventilate on the spot.

“Izuku,” Shouto interjects quietly before he can leave, freezing the panicked hero in place with his crooked fingers curled around the metal doorknob. “Wait, don’t—”

“I’m sorry,” Izuku blurts out, not turning around. “I never should have come.”

“Wait,” Shouto implores, skirting around his desk with clumsy, uncoordinated steps. He approaches Izuku’s left shoulder, automatically reaching out to hold him back—but his hand stops short before it makes contact. Shouto drops his arm to his side, flexing his fingers. “Just… wait. Stay. Everything is fine.”

Izuku shakes his head back and forth, staring wide-eyed down at his feet as if he can see straight through to the lobby eighteen stories below them. “I shouldn’t be here, Shouto. This is your office, your agency, and _I’m not supposed to be_—”

“Have you eaten dinner yet?”

Shouto shrugs. “It’s a fairly common question.”

“Doesn’t explain why you’re asking.”

Shouto raises an eyebrow and counts the reasons off on his fingers. “This place makes you nervous. I’ve been on patrol since six this morning and haven’t eaten since noon. You’re usually more relaxed when you’re eating. I’m curious about this favor of yours.” He gestures vaguely. “The list goes on. I could continue, if you’d like.”

“Oh. No, that’s… fine.” Izuku lets his hand falls from the doorknob, popping his index finger knuckle loudly with his thumb. He bites his lower lip. “Uh, well. I guess I kinda had to skip dinner to make it here before rush hour. But it’s not a huge—”

“Great,” Shouto says lightly. He reaches past Izuku and pushes open the door of his office, nodding in the general direction of the elevators on the opposite side of the floor. “I’ll get changed and meet you in the lobby in ten minutes. I know a ramen bar a few blocks from here that’s pretty good. Should be pretty quiet this time of night.”

Izuku’s mouth opens and closes several times, no sound escaping his lips as he flounders. Shouto can almost hear the cogs in his brain kicking into high gear, grating against one another as they’re forced to shift direction so suddenly.

“I’m sorry, I’m a bit, uh. Confused,” Izuku stutters awkwardly, words stiff and strange in his mouth. He rubs the back of his neck, frowning in confusion. “Are you… asking me to dinner?”

“Yes,” Shouto says simply. “If you’re okay with that.”

Izuku gives him a suspicious look. “I thought you had paperwork to do.”

He waves Izuku off. “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“You’re injured.”

“I’m always injured.” Shouto rolls his eyes lightly. “I’ll take some Tylenol and ice it as soon as I get home, don’t worry. Next argument.”

Izuku clenches his jaw, shooting a helpless look up at the ceiling as if the acoustic ceiling tiles could swallow him whole and erase this whole situation from history. Shouto watches closely as he cringes, mutters something under his breath in English, and shifts his weight from foot to foot on a loop as heartbeats slip by them both. Everything, from the way Izuku purses his lips to the way he flexes the stiff fingers of his right hand one by one is strikingly familiar and—at the same time—completely foreign.

Shouto waits patiently, leaning a shoulder against the doorframe. It never helps to rush Midoriya’s decisions, especially when he’s torn about something.

Eventually, Midoriya groans and presses the heels of his hands against his eye sockets. “This is ridiculous,” he mumbles against the sleeves of his Ground Zero hoodie. He drags his hands down over his pale, gaunt cheeks and peeks past his fingers with narrowed eyes the color of warm clover. “You know this is ridiculous, right? You have to. Tell me I’m right. I’m right, aren’t I?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Shouto says tiredly, grimacing as he finger-combs the tangles out of his damp hair. “And ridiculous or not, I’m starving and need to eat something soon, or else I’m going to die before I get halfway home. So…” He shrugs. “Your choice.”
Izuku drops his hands from his face and sighs wearily, shoulders slumping in defeat.

“Perhaps dinner couldn’t hurt,” he says.
Hurry Up Please It's Time

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the endnote.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He should’ve bolted when he had the chance.

Izuku cranes his neck forward, surreptitiously peeking past the potted fern he’s hiding behind to glance at the glass doors at the far end of the lobby. He could still make a run for it, he supposes, but he didn’t exactly wear the subtler outfit in his wardrobe today. He’d get noticed in a nanosecond by the staff milling about the lobby, no doubt about it. It’s probably best to just stay behind this fern and hope for the best.

Except that he doesn’t know what the best is, much less how to hope for it.

Izuku sighs through his nose, angling his head back to rest on the wall he’s leaned up against. His eyes drift shut of their own accord. The masses meander through the polished-steel-and-cut-glass antechamber like ocean currents, all interwoven and constant, little more than white noise against the echoing sterility of the pristine lobby. They murmur amongst themselves as they scurry from one corner of the massive room to the other, never stopping to look behind that potted fern in the corner. Never stopping to look up from their tablets or escape the babbling in their earpieces. Never stopping, never slowing. Moving, moving, moving.

No one except the front desk secretary seems to have noticed Izuku’s presence at all, thankfully. He’s self-aware enough to know that she’s been casting him wide-eyed looks every few seconds like she can hardly believe he’s there at all, much less hiding behind a potted fern like a certifiably-insane person. Izuku considers telling her that he feels the same way—seeing ghosts tends to make people feel like they’re going a bit crazy. Imagine being one.

Exhaling softly, Izuku tilts his face upward toward the honeyed halogens overhead. He clenches his fists in his pockets, thumb automatically straying forward to brush against the heavy metal band situated on the fourth finger of his left hand. His nail sinks into the dings and dents that litter its polished surface, catching all the chasms he's created in the soft metal over the past several years.

This is what she’d want, he tells himself for the millionth time. I’m doing the right thing.

Clenching his fists, Izuku takes a shuddering breath and lets it out between his teeth, sagging heavily against the wall. Luce never liked it when he sat on his hands for too long, twiddling his thumbs while the rest of the world burned. “With great power comes great responsibility,” she used to quote in that mocking, sage-like voice of hers, lips twitching while she fended off smiles and laughter in the middle of Central Park on a checkered picnic blanket made for two.

(She wore a blue scarf that day. Neon green socks, too. They were horribly wine-drunk after Shakespeare in the park, giggling shoulder-to-shoulder for hours about absolutely nothing on the floor of Lucy’s shitty apartment in Queens. The engagement ring ended up being two sizes too small and the proposal was totally botched because Izuku’s terrible about that sort of thing, but
Lucy insisted on wearing it on her pinky anyway.)

The memory fades in and out, losing color around the edges like a daguerreotype photograph even as Izuku thinks about it. How many years ago was that? Two, three? He… isn’t sure.

Why can’t he remember?

Panic seizes him. Before Izuku can stop himself, he’s slipped his phone out of his back pocket and unlocked it, scrolling through his missed calls and voicemails until he reaches the month of April. Breathing rapid, fingers trembling, he clicks on the third voicemail from the bottom—dated April 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2025—and holds it up to his ear until Lucy’s familiar, lilting voice spills from the speaker.

*Tag, you’re it, dork. Can’t believe I keep missing these calls from you—I swear, this has been the busiest day at the hospital since, like, my intern days. It’s nuts. You’d laugh if you could see me right now—I’m a walking disaster in scrubs. At least I’m on my way home now, right? I sorta blend in…*

Izuku closes his eyes, pressing against his eyelids with his thumb and forefinger until he sees spots. Lucy’s voice floods his ears, weighing him down until his knees knock and tremble. She speaks and speaks and speaks, but Izuku hardly hears any of it because he memorized these voicemails a long time ago and he has to know, dammit.

It was… four years ago. Yeah, that’s it. Shakespeare in the park and Lucy’s blue scarf happened four years ago. It’ll be five in May.

Oxygen returns to Izuku’s lungs and his breathing evens out, blood slowing in his veins as he calms down. He remembers. He remembers.

*Love you,* Lucy tells him softly on the other end of the line. She’s smiling; he can hear it through the phone. *See you soon.*

The voicemail tapers off. Silence falls, thick and heavy like a blanket. Izuku swallows and drops the phone from his ear gracelessly, locking it with unsteady fingers before sliding it back in his pocket. His hands are clammy, skin cold.

The murmur of the agency lobby comes back to him in pieces; the incessant ringing of the phones at reception, the hushed whispers of two interns across the room, the steady rhythm of rain outside—

The soft *ding* of the elevator.

Izuku watches, frozen in his hiding spot, as Todoroki Shouto steps past the sleek silver elevator doors. He’s dressed in dark wash jeans and a half-zip sweater with the sleeves rolled up, hair damp and an absolute mess compared to how he normally keeps it. He has a nice-looking bomber jacket folded neatly over his left arm, no doubt hiding the bruises he got from his time out on patrol; the bruises and scrapes on his face and neck stand out like wine stains on a pale tablecloth compared to the rest of his skin. Regardless, Shouto pays his injuries no mind as he searches the crowd for Izuku.

Unsurprisingly, it only takes him a few moments to notice Izuku hiding behind the fern in the back corner of the lobby. Shouto’s mouth tightens imperceptibly into a faint frown and he blinks, but other than that, he doesn’t have any reaction to the fact that the former Symbol of Peace is hiding behind foliage like a toddler at an adult party. Small mercies, Izuku supposes.
For the millionth time, he wonders if this whole thing is a terrible idea.

It probably is.

Shouto approaches slowly, deliberately with his head tilted to one side. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think that you didn’t want me to find you,” he says as soon as he’s within earshot.

**Bad idea, worst idea, just run—**

Taking a deep breath, Izuku steps out of the shadows of the fern and stuffs his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. He rocks back and forth on his heels, nibbling on his lower lip. “Good thing you know better then,” he remarks with forced lightness, handing out a shaky smile. He swallows, cringing, then looks at the front doors. “Are you, uh— ready to go?”

Shouto shoots another pointed look at the fern, then raises an eyebrow inquisitively. “I feel like I should be asking you that. Why in the world were you hiding behind a bush?”

“I think it’s a fern.”

“It could be a cactus for all I care. You still didn’t answer my question.”

Izuku shifts his weight, blinking rapidly as his gaze flits around the lobby. Slowly but surely, the other inhabitants of the room are starting to notice that the Number One hero has walked into the room. Whispers tarnish the air, indecipherable and sharp. Eyes narrow, fingers still over tablet screens as the world slows down in anticipation of something. Izuku just isn’t entirely sure what it is.

Wincing, he inclines his head in the general direction of the strangers watching them. “That’s why,” he mumbles under his breath.

Shouto frowns and turns to look, but Izuku hisses through his teeth and grabs Shouto’s right shoulder to keep him in place. Even through the thick material of his sweater Izuku can feel the frigidity of his skin like an ice block.

“Don’t look,” Izuku whispers, dropping his hand back into his pocket where his skin begins to burn steadily. “That’ll only make it worse, trust me. Just, uh… pretend they’re not there. Or something.”

Shouto purses his lips, sighing through his nose. “I’m going to assume that a few people are staring at us,” he says flatly.

“More than a few.”

“I see.” Shouto glances off to one side, fingers fistng in his jacket briefly as he considers something. Then, a sharp exhale as he meets Izuku’s gaze with startling intensity. “Well, in that case, is the back door of the building all right with you?”

He tries not to sag in relief. “Yes, god, please. I’ll take anything.”

“Great.” Shouto slips his jacket on with stiff, pained movements that flicker across his face in steep, shadowed creases. He clears his throat as he draws the zipper up to his throat, slipping his hands into his pockets. “Follow me.”
The ramen bar is small—smaller than Izuku was expecting, at least—with only five empty stools at a small Formica countertop that’s situated right beneath a faded, red awning. Aside from an older man and woman behind the counter (who both frown disapprovingly at them when they take their seats, stripping their soaked jackets off and grabbing laminated menus from the stack near the register), there is no one else here. Even the sidewalk behind them is relatively quiet, save for the occasional bike messenger or civilian passerby.

The scent of green onions and soy wafts through the metallic, storm-soaked air to make Izuku’s mouth water. His stomach rumbles; the sound is masked by the pitter-patter of rainfall past the edge of the awning overhead. He’s starving.

“The number four is pretty good,” Shouto murmurs as he peruses his own menu, fingers pressed against the seam of his mouth. “Number six isn’t bad either.”

Izuku glances over the menu, not really reading anything at all. He feels the gaze of the restaurant owners boring into his skull, sharp and hot like a laser. “Mm,” he hums distractedly. “You come here often?”

“Keiji brings me food sometimes when I’m stuck in the apartment with an injury. This place is on his way home from the university, so it’s not like it’s out of the way.” He pauses. “Plus it’s fast.”

It takes a moment for the name to register, but when it does, it’s no less jarring. Izuku remembers folded reading glasses on a nightstand and a blue-and-orange toothbrush kept neatly in its holder. A key missing from its spot in the foyer. Boyfriend, right.

Izuku clears his throat and bites his lip, skimming crisp white font he doesn’t care enough to comprehend. “Oh. That’s… um. Nice of him. To do that for you.”

“I like to think so,” Shouto hums.

“So you’ve never actually been here in person?”

Shouto blinks, gaze shifting from his menu to the worn countertop as he thinks. “Once or twice, maybe,” he answers after a moment. He shrugs. “I usually don’t have the energy after patrol.”

A weight settles in Izuku’s stomach, bitter like lead. “Right.”

Silence falls between them. Izuku eventually gives up and hands the menu to the woman, muttering an order he doesn’t bother to remember. Shouto does the same shortly thereafter, sounding much more articulate with his order—but then again, that’s no surprise. He’s always had that commanding sort of voice that tends to make people pause when they hear it.

As skillets begin to sizzle and broth bubbles behind the counter, Izuku takes a moment to breathe, sinking down on his stool like somebody let the air out of his body. Shouto rolls his left shoulder carefully, wincing with the movement. In the dingy, yellow lighting of the restaurant, the bruises on Shouto’s face look much darker and more distinct than before. Izuku watches raptly as Shouto reaches up to rake his fingers through his two-toned damp hair, shifting the neckline of his sweater just enough for Izuku to see the outline of a few fingers inked into the pale skin of his neck, all violet and horrible.

*Choke hold? Bruising Quirk?* The possibilities are endless, none of them good.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Shouto says quietly while they wait for their food. Izuku flinches.
involuntarily, startled. Shouto only glances at him sidelong, a worried crease between his brows. “You were mumbling, so I thought…” he explains, trailing off. He winces. “Sorry. Anyway, it’s really not that painful—"

“You look awful.”

Izuku claps a hand over his mouth, horrified as soon as the words pass his lips. Shouto’s eyebrows fly up into his hairline in surprise.

“Ouch,” he deadpans slowly. His lip twitch subtly. “Tell me how you really feel, why don’t you?”

Izuku shakes his head frantically, eyes widening as sheer panic courses through his entire body from head to toe. “No! I didn’t— I mean, you’re not—” he wheezes, tearing his fingers through the tangles in his hair. “Oh, Jesus. That’s not what I meant, I promise, that came out all wrong—"

“Izuku,” Shouto says, one side of his mouth quirked up in amusement. He holds up a hand to stop Izuku’s panicking babbling. “Hey, it’s fine. Really. I know what you meant.”

Izuku claps his hands to either side of his face and squeezes his eyes shut. “I am so sorry.”

“Why? It’s not like you’re wrong.”


Shouto frowns. “‘Considering?’” he repeats, tipping his head to one side in question.

Izuku presses his fists against his eye sockets and swears under his breath. “I am going to stop talking now,” he mutters. “Forever. Forever and ever and ever.”

Shouto hums. “This is about to become a very boring dinner in that case.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“You’d prefer a silent dinner?”

Izuku drops his hands from his face and into his lap, giving Shouto a pointed look. “Not helping.”

“Sorry.” Shouto smiles faintly and picks up the small cup of hot tea near his elbow, taking a slow sip. He sets it back down on its saucer with a quiet clink. “Now, are you going to tell me what you meant by that comment or should we just skip to the part where you ask me about this supposedly enormous favor of yours? I’m not picky either way. Your choice.”

Izuku feels himself go pale all at once. “Both of those options suck.”

“Pretty much, yeah.” He crosses his arms over his chest and regards Izuku with a raised, expectant eyebrow. “But I’m a bit tired and sore right now, so forgive me for being a little more impatient than usual.”

Izuku eyes the finger-shaped bruises beneath his jaw and bites his lower lip. “I… right. Right, right, you’re right. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’d just like to get to the point, if that’s all right with you.”

Clearing his throat, Izuku braces his hands against his trouser-clad knees and curls his fingers into
the fabric until he feels the humble beginnings of pain. He can do this. He was the Number One hero and he saved the world more times than he can count, laughing death in the face right up until death began to laugh right back at him. He hoisted the world on his shoulders and held it there for years with no complaint. He was the Symbol of goddamn Peace. A *legend*.

There’s the sizzle of cooking utensils and the soft scattering of rain on the damp sidewalk behind him and he can *do* this, dammit.

(He’s really not sure he can do this.)

(He has to try.)

“I… need your help with something, Shouto,” he says quietly. Exhaling sharply, Izuku glares down at his sneakers with grim determination set into every crevice of his features. “It’s big. Huge, even, and trust me, if there was *anyone* else in the world I could ask this of, I would. I don’t want you to feel obligated or anything just because—” Here, he chokes on his words. “Because we used to be friends. All right? I want you to know that. You don’t owe me *anything*, especially something like this. You can say no at any time.”

“Ominous words,” Shouto murmurs, shifting his weight in is seat. “But go on.”

Izuku nods and blusters on, nausea twisting his stomach into knots. His heart races in his chest. “I’m not exactly in good standing with the IHA or the public right now. Obviously. My, uh, temporary hero license was suspended after that whole thing at Yamazaki Enterprises.” He looks up, wide-eyed sincerity written across his expression. “Which I am *so* sorry for, by the way. Like, you know that, right? Everything about that day was awful, you were right to tell me to leave, I shouldn’t have—”

“Izuku,” Shouto interrupts, face stony and unreadable. “I know. We already had this conversation, remember?”


Shouto gestures for him to continue, taking another sip of his tea. He looks thoughtful. Izuku wrings his hands, blunt nails rasping over callused skin until it hurts, and prays for the best.

“Right,” he repeats, sounding more and more like an insane person as the seconds tick past. “Well, I’ve been operating under a provisional license for a while now. Obviously. My, uh, temporary hero license was suspended after that whole thing at Yamazaki Enterprises.” He looks up, wide-eyed sincerity written across his expression. “Which I am *so* sorry for, by the way. Like, you know that, right? Everything about that day was awful, you were right to tell me to leave, I shouldn’t have—”

Shouto blinks. “I’m… sorry, what?”

“I want you to take me on as a temporary sidekick until I can get my hero license back,” he rushes out all at once, tripping over his words.

And in the ensuing silence, Izuku braces himself for the absolute worst.

Almost as soon as the words are past Izuku’s lips, Shouto’s shoulders stiffen beneath the heavy knit of his sweater, knuckles going white around the chipped porcelain of the teacup held between his hands. He’s looking at Izuku with a sharp frown, lips slightly parted as he processes the implication. He takes a breath as if to say something, then lets it out.
Izuku’s face burns. He wishes he had Edgeshot’s Quirk just so he could get the hell away from this restaurant and drown himself in the ocean or something equally as dramatic. Anything would be certainly preferable to this slow, painful death.

Slowly, with calculated moves, Shouto sets his cup back down in its saucer, carefully aligning the handle to sit at a perfect ninety-degree angle with the napkin beneath it. He’s still frowning, the expression in his eyes completely unreadable. Is he mad? Confused? Oh, god, he could be jumping for fucking joy right now and Izuku wouldn’t even know for certain. This was such a bad idea.

Hands shaking, Izuku bolts upright from his stool and grabs his jacket, slipping the damp fabric over his t-shirt as he makes to leave. “I’m sorry, this was stupid, I shouldn’t have even—”

“Is the IHA mandating this?” Shouto interrupts, voice low and chilling enough to stop Izuku dead in his tracks.

Izuku’s eyes bug out of his skull. “What? No! They didn’t— I told you that you could say no before I even started, this is totally up to you but I know now how stupid it was to come here and —”

“No, stop. Izuku, stop. Listen to me. That’s not what I’m asking.” Shouto’s face is stony, chiseled at the edges like solid marble. His brows knit together sharply, angling over those eyes that look so much like his father’s. “I’m asking if the IHA told you to request me— specifically me—for this pairing. Or did they give you a list of heroes to choose from?”

“Why does that matter?”

“Because it does. Tell me.”

Izuku stares at Shouto, stunned into silence. His knees are bent and ready to bolt into the acrid spray of rain at a moment’s notice, heart dead-set on jumping straight to Shanghai if that’s what it would take to get away from him and this and everything else that’s awful in this world.

Shouto’s gaze is icy, and despite the cloying August humidity that sits on the top layer of his skin, Izuku feels strangely… cold.

(There’s also a sting right in the center of his chest—tiny and subtle, but there nonetheless. He didn’t expect that part.)

A lost cause. That’s what this is. A pipe dream, a fantasy, a nightmare. Maybe all four. Izuku was foolish to think of it as anything other than what it was. His shoulders sag, energy leeching out of his body in one swift breath. He laughs humorlessly, feeling properly hollow for the first time in a while. Stupid. So, so stupid.

“This… isn’t how any of this was supposed to happen,” he murmurs after a few heart-twisting moments, smiling bitterly down at the silver-wet pavement beneath his soaked sneakers. He huffs, shaking his head from side to side to fend off the stinging moisture that pricks at his eyes. “M’sorry. I never should’ve come here. Phone call would’ve worked just as well.”

He pushes the stool back underneath the counter and drops a few bills on the counter to pay for the food he never got. “I’m really sorry for wasting your time, Todoroki. Take care, all right? Tell your family—"

Before he leaves, however, a cold hand reaches out and closes around his wrist.

“Answer the question,” Shouto says quietly, imploringly. He looks up at Izuku with something
unreadable in his eyes. “Please.”

Izuku gently pulls his wrist out of Shouto’s grip, ignoring the ice crystals that have solidified the droplets of rain on his skin like diamonds. He rubs a hand over his face, suddenly feeling every single hour of sleep he missed out on last night.

“Just— oh, fuck it, whatever,” he mutters gesturing outward vaguely. He sighs wearily. “No, all right? They didn’t give me a list or anything like that. The board asked me who I was considering, I gave them your name, they approved it, and I set up the appointment with Yaoyorozu a few days ago. It was all my goddamn decision, okay? Does that answer your question?”

Shouto blinks, sitting back in his stool. He laces his fingers together in his lap. “Actually… yes,” he says, sounding faintly surprised at himself. “That’s exactly what I wanted to know.”

Izuku throws his hands up in the air. “Well, congratulations, I guess,” he says bitterly, zipping up his hoodie. He takes a step toward the curb, squinting through the haze of rainfall for any passing cabs in the vicinity. “Glad I could be so helpfu—”

“Why me?”

He huffs an incredulous laugh. “What are you talking about? Why not you?” he asks exasperatedly, giving Shouto a frustrated look. He cards his fingers through his hair, gesturing wildly. “You’re good at long-range combat and maneuverability, and I’m good at kicking shit until it stops moving; it’s a fact that we function well together in a fight. Plus, if I work with you, I don’t have to back out of my apartment lease and I’ll finally get to live near my mom again for the first time in nearly a decade. That’s ninety percent of the reason right there.”

Izuku’s heart is racing, threatening to burst right out of his chest. Shouto, still sitting at the counter as still as a statue, clenches his teeth and glances away for a brief moment. The muscle in his jaw flutters nervously beneath those watercolor bruises.

“And the other ten percent?” Shouto finally asks, his voice barely a whisper above the downpour.

He spears Izuku with that damned expression—the one that makes him feel like he’s made of glass, all see-through and breakable. Izuku hates that expression. He’s never been immune to it.

With a frustrated sigh, Izuku grits his teeth. He glances up at the cloudy sky, noting a few patchy spots where starlight has begun to shine through.

“Look,” he begins slowly, articulating his words carefully. “No one knows your job better than I do. Being Number One, it—” he bites his tongue, wincing as the echoes of pain tear through his shoulder, sharp and searing. He takes a breath. “No one else really knows how… how it just takes and takes until there’s nothing left. Nothing left for it to steal, to break apart. This position… it’ll kill you from the inside out like a fucking disease if you let it, and I don’t want to see that happen to you, Shouto. I really, really don’t.”

He pauses, taking a shaky breath. “You have a family, friends. You have Keiji and Mizuki and everyone at your agency. You have things to lose in this game, whether you like it or not. I-I could balance your workload a bit if you’d let me, maybe give you a real fighting chance at having a life and a fam—”

“What, like you don’t have things to lose?” Shouto asks, frowning.

Izuku’s thumb strays to the nicked, tarnished wedding band on his left hand.
“No,” he says with certainty. “Not anymore.”

Shouto’s face crumples. “Izu—”

“No, no, don’t turn this on me,” he snaps. He jabs a finger at his own chest emphatically. “This is what she would’ve wanted me to do. Making a difference in the world, saving people, stopping the apocalypse, whatever. Sitting on my hands, biding my time like this—” he shakes his head. “She would’ve hated it. She’d hate me for it, and she’d be right to. Always said there were people that needed saving in the world and that since I had the power to do it, I had no excuse for sitting on my ass and letting it all pass me by. She stood by that belief for a long time. A long time, all right? This…” he trails, feeling that yawning void open up a little wider in his chest. “This is what I’m supposed to do. I have to be a hero. I have to because if— if I’m not a hero, then—”

He sucks in a shuddering breath.

“Then I’m nothing,” he finishes quietly.

Shouto is silent, watching Izuku with that blue-and-grey gaze of his that always seems to notice everything. The rain has slowed considerably, sprinkling the pavement and the city street in a gentle shower rather than an unending torrent. The neon glow of store signs and advertisements casts multicolored, flashing rainbows across the silvery puddles collected in the gutters.

Izuku swallows thickly, glancing out toward the street. He inhales deeply, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his hoodie.

“Look, before you say anything,” Izuku starts, voice low and dejected. He rocks back and forth on his heels. “I don’t want you to agree to this whole thing just because you think I’m still feeling sorry for myself or anything like that. I’ve, uh.” He clears his throat. “I’ve actually been seeing a counselor for—” he scratches his head “—two weeks, I think? Yeah, that sounds right. She’s been helping me get through some… things. It’s slow going, but I’m getting there. Maybe. I hope.”

Here, he pauses, fighting the knot in his throat.

“I just… I want to do this because it’s my job to save people. My destiny. That’s what All Might told me and that’s how I’ve lived my entire life.” Izuku shrugs sullenly, toeing at a crack in the sidewalk. “And the way I see it, if I’m going to do this thing right, then I think that means I need to start by saving one person.”

“Me,” Shouto says numbly, voice breaking on the word.

Izuku nods slowly. “Yeah. You.”

The silence that falls over them is thick and heavy like a woolen blanket. Izuku’s cheeks are flushed and Shouto is staring, dumbfounded, down at his cup of tea as he processes, lips twitching around words that won’t come. The tea inside the cup has frozen into one smooth, solid chunk of ice with pale green leaves suspended between the crystals like the particles in a snow globe.

He blinks, surprised; Shouto doesn’t often misuse his Quirk like that.

Izuku spins his wedding band around his finger with fervor. The two restaurant owners shoot judgmental looks his way as they garnish their ramen bowls with green onions and seaweed, lips pressed into wrinkles of displeasure. Izuku watches as they slide the bowls out on the countertop, chopsticks tossed haphazardly to the side before the storeowners both turn and disappear into the back of the establishment.
Shouto doesn’t move. He doesn’t blink, doesn’t twitch. His fists clench over and over again, but he makes no moves to say anything. *Frozen.*

Clearing his throat, Izuku shifts his weight awkwardly as the silence stretches out. “You—you can have my bowl if you want. I’m not really hungry now anyway, and, uh.” He scratches the back of his neck, cringing. “…sorta yelled at you back there? That sucked. So yeah, you pretty much deserve to eat it at this point—”

“Do I need to sign anything?”

Izuku stops short, blinking in confusion. “For the ramen?”

“For the provisional partnership.”

Izuku’s heart stops dead.

He stares. He *stares,* sucking in a breath that he’s content to hold for the rest of infinity if that’s what it takes for this moment to last forever. *This isn’t happening. No way.*

Shouto traces the top rim of his teacup with his delicate index finger, a contemplative look situated on his face as he slowly melts the tea in his cup back to boiling temperature. He looks up, eyebrows raised at Izuku’s stunned silence. “I’m assuming there’s some kind of paperwork we’ll have to do to get this cleared through the IHA, right?” he asks, clarifying. “Momo will probably know, I suppose, but—”

“Are you fucking with me right now?” Izuku interrupts, staring at Shouto with wide eyes. He sputters wordlessly. “Because if you are, it’s *really* not cool. Like, at all.”

“No, I’m not fucking with you,” Shouto says softly. He gestures at the empty stool next to him turning toward his bowl of ramen. “But I am starving. Sit down, eat dinner with me. We can discuss the details afterwards.”

“You’re seriously agreeing to my proposal?”

“Yes, I am.” He waves dismissively. “Now *sit.* I don’t like eating alone.”

Izuku sits down like his knees have betrayed him, plopping into the seat with numb limbs, a distinct lack of oxygen, and a still heart. He stares dumbly as Shouto picks up his chopsticks and begins stirring his noodles, face placid and soft around the edges.

Hesitantly, with shaking fingers, Izuku reaches for his own chopsticks and begins to eat. They do not speak, letting the sound of broth and soft slurping fill the air between them. The second the noodles hit his tongue, however, Izuku is reminded of how absolutely fucking *famished* he is and how long it’s been since he’s eaten a meal that didn’t involve shitty protein bars and dry cereal. He devours his bowl in minutes, relishing the sharp taste of soy and the soft crunch of onions.

“I’m surprised you didn’t bring any pie charts for me to look at this time,” Shouto murmurs at one point, eyes trained on his ramen as he eats with polite, controlled bites. He glances Izuku sidelong, a glimmer of *something* present in that summer-blue eye of his. “I expected a PowerPoint presentation at the very least. Color me disappointed.”

Izuku frowns. “What?”

“Mm, never mind. Are you going to finish that?”
WARNINGS: This is Izuku's POV, so you get to see how he's handling Lucy's death since April (aka not super well) and the language in those introspective sections can be pretty powerful at times. However, most of the angst comes from the use of creative language, not actual events. Humor is interspersed here and there to keep things from getting too depressing.

Tumblr | Twitter | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist
September third comes wrapped in cool breezes, pale moonlight, and the sound of peppered gunfire that regularly plagues this part of the city on a typical Saturday night. In the distance, sirens wail and flash, each one little more than a red-and-blue echo of wasted effort and tarnished hope against the reflective sides of skyscrapers, and closer to the financial district uptown, expensive cars honk their horns to get through the late-night dinner rush just a little bit faster than before. Somewhere, the elevated train rattles and shrieks on its tracks.

And in the middle of it all, Todoroki Shouto sits perched on the edge of a rooftop water tower five stories above street level, drinking it all in. He lets his eyes drift shut against the starlit darkness as he prepares himself the long night that lay ahead of him, breathing in the heavy smog and ash like a drug. Pollution has never tasted so sweet.

Night patrols are always his favorite. There’s something so… magnetic about the city at this hour that days simply can’t hope to compete. Shouto enjoys the constant stream of crime that emerges beneath the heavy curtain of nighttime—revels in its predictability, its routine. Gang members always haunt the mouths of grimy alleyways in search of new prey with designer purses, or rivals with weapons tucked into their waistbands; refined businessmen always pick up their prostitutes beneath the shadowed underpasses near North End, barely slowing their cars to ask through cracked windows, “How much, sweetheart?”; villains always aim for high-profile places like shopping centers and financial districts to perform their dirty work, which always gets foiled. It’s like clockwork in a strange way. Soothing, horrible, flawless clockwork.

Tonight, however, is different. Shouto slips his phone out of his pocket, frowning down at the glowing display. 8:37 PM, it reads in crisp font, painfully reminding him that Izuku is thirty-seven minutes late to report for patrol—their first patrol together, no less. There are no messages, no voicemails. Maybe he forgot?

Shouto sighs heavily, stuffing his phone back into his pocket. Izuku wouldn’t forget. He also wouldn’t be late.

“Still no sign of him?” Momo’s voice is quiet in Shouto’s earpiece, crackling with the spotty connection. She’s typing in the background, likely drawing up another report or requisition from headquarters.

“Not even a text,” Shouto replies, mumbling slightly. He grabs the guardrail of the water tower and hauls himself to his feet, peering over the edge to the street below. “I’m starting to worry.”

“I’m sure he’ll be there,” she assures him. Her tone hardens imperceptibly, air puffing noisily through the microphone. “He’d better be after all the paperwork I had to do to get the two of you set up. Talk about a bureaucratic nightmare. My hand didn’t stop cramping for three days after all that writing.”

“You complain a lot.”

“I’m trapped in this office. I’m allowed to complain.”

Shouto winces in sympathy. While disaster relief hero work is noble in its own right, it’s not
exactly action-oriented. Still, management seems to suit Momo on her off days, at the very least. “Fair point,” he says, rolling his shoulders to loosen his tense muscles. “Tell you what—how about I take one of your nights next week so you can have dinner with Kyouka? I can cover the office for a few hours, at least. I owe you that much.”

“Tempting,” she drawls, “but no. Kyouka’s in Moscow for vacation right now. I won’t get to see her until next month, if I’m lucky.”

Vacation, Shouto knows, actually means international espionage assignment, which is what Earphone Jack usually gets shipped out on. He doesn’t envy her international hero status, that’s for sure. He winces in sympathy. “Ah. Well, I hope she’s having fun.”

_I hope she’s staying safe_, he really means. Momo doesn’t have to ask him to clarify.

She sighs softly, keystrokes slowing to something more manageable in the background. He can hear her exhaustion through his earpiece. “I hope so, too,” she murmurs, voice tinged with weariness. “She’s been too busy to call in a while. Must be having… fun.”

_Must not be safe to call right now_, Shouto hears instead. _I’m worried about her._

He clears his throat, stepping up to the edge of the water tower. He looks down—the drop is steep, plunging to the cracked, dirty sidewalk below. He spots a few pedestrians here and there—mostly college-aged kids with a drunken sway in their steps, glow sticks clipped around their arms and necks as they search for a cab home. “I’m sure she’ll be fine,” he says quietly, bouncing on his toes. He’s itching for action tonight. “She’s gone on longer vacations than this, right?”

She hums, dissatisfied. “I guess.”

Shouto shrugs. “So she’ll be okay. You know she will be. Jirou’s a good…” He stumbles over his words, tongue twisting in his mouth. “Uh, traveler.”

“I know, I know, I know.” He can practically hear Momo rubbing a hand over her face, brows pinched in frustration. “I just— god, I don’t know. I really miss her. Do you ever feel that way? Like, you miss being with someone so much that it hurts?”

Shouto frowns, thinking of Mizuki and his newborn nephew, Asahi. He visited Fukuoka in July for Mizu’s second birthday—he’d given her an Uravity jumper and Froppy socks for the occasion, which apparently, she refused to take off for three days straight. He’s still absurdly of proud of that, no matter how much it’d irritated Fuyumi at the time.

“I suppose,” he says vaguely after a moment, toeing some debris off the edge of the water tower. He watches it fall a hundred feet in contemplative silence, not breathing until it collides with the concrete below. “I’m not an expert on stuff like that though. Distance has never really bothered me.”

“Wish I could be like that.”

_No you don’t_, he thinks to himself. He hums noncommittally in response, unwilling to argue the point with her.

Momo resumes typing on the other end of the line, breath coming out in one long, tired exhale through her nose. “I just wish I could go with her, you know?” Her voice takes on a wistful quality. “Travel alongside her. See the sights, help out here and there, eat weird food together. Couple-y things like that.”
Shouto raises a disbelieving eyebrow. “You’d be okay with traveling that much?”

“If it meant being with her…” she trails. She exhaled sharply, resolute. “Yeah. Without a doubt.”

Her tone is so nonchalant, so certain. It strikes Shouto in the center of his chest and settles in his stomach, burrowing in between his joints to weigh heavily like lead. “Huh,” he says dumbly, turning words over in his brain. None of them seem right for the situation. “Interesting.”

Momo stops typing abruptly. “What?”

“Nothing,” Shouto deflects, shrugging it off.

“No, no, don’t do that. What were you going to say?”

He shakes his head. “Seriously, it’s nothing.”

“Shouto.”

He rubs the back of his neck, spotting some flashing sirens in the distance—a car chase? He reflexively moves to leap off the roof and pursue the situation as it snakes through the downtown area, but he sees another hero swoop down before he can take the first step. Frowning, he relaxes and settles back on his heels. Dammit.

“I suppose I just never pegged you for the traveling type,” he says vaguely, unwilling to admit the fact that he can’t understand her desire to move all over the world for the woman she loves. “Seems like a lot of effort for one person.”

Momo lets out a displeased noise. “Cynical tonight, are we?”

“Just realistic,” he corrects.

“Right,” she says flatly, unimpressed. She exhales slowly. “Well, Mr. Sadness, when you love someone, it doesn’t feel like effort. Just feels like it’s what you’re meant to do.” She huffs, shuffling some papers around on her desk. “Besides, it’d be better than being stuck in this office all the damn time. I don’t remember the last time I made a villain cry with something other than paperwork.”

Shouto smirks, leaning out over the guardrail to balance perilously on the edge above the death-defying drop to the street. “But you’re so good at it.”

“Says the guy who does field work more than any other hero in Japan. Must be nice, all that fresh air and fighting.”

“Must be nice, all that air conditioning and lack of injuries,” he deadpans.

Momo pauses thoughtfully for several moments. “All right, point taken. I love my office.”

“Thought so.”

She laughs lightly, keystrokes resuming with renewed vigor. She’s humming tunelessly—a song that was popular when they were in high school, Shouto thinks. He can’t remember the name. Izuku would probably know; he’s always had a memory for that stuff.

“Hey,” Momo says suddenly, jarring him from his thoughts. “You’re near South End, right? I think the JPD’s got a call for an armed robbery in the area. Art gallery or something. You might want to check it out.”
Shouto’s brows pinch. He looks out across the rooftops, not noticing any flashing lights or sirens in the area yet. “I’m on it,” he tells her, shaking the stiffness out of his hands as he prepares to move. “What about Midoriya?”

“I’ll call his cell and see if I can get ahold of him for you. If he’s skipping—”

“He’s not,” Shouto says firmly, frost feathering across the surface of his skin as he prepares to jump. The city doesn’t love it when he uses his ice to get around, but it’s faster than running. “Something must’ve come up. He wouldn’t just bail like this.”

“Maybe so,” Momo says, though she doesn’t sound wholly convinced. “I’ll have Yuuna from Support keep you updated on things. Just pinged you the address of the gallery. Get moving, Shoucchan.”

Shouto grumbles, “You know I hate it when you call me that.”

“Mm, don’t care. Good luck!”

The connection cuts out, plunging him back into the ambient noises of the sleeping city all at once. He hears the beeping of large trucks backing up, the rush of wind over dirty rooftops, the choked sound of exhaust pipes and air conditioning units, and squeaking brake pads at every intersection from here to Midtown. It all blurs together, overlaying his thrumming heartbeat like a thin sheet of gauze, merging into a wall of sound that numbs his senses like Novocaine.

Shouto sucks in a breath, clenches his teeth, and makes the leap into nothingness.

The wind whistles through his hair, whipping it away from his face and screaming past his ears. Fingers clench, muscles tense. Gravity sinks its claws into the hollows of his chest, ripping him through the air with speed that never fails to stun him speechless as the cracked, sun-bleached pavement looms larger and larger—and

With a shout, Shouto tucks in and flips head over heels, landing hard on a slide of ice that materializes thirty feet above street level. His heels dig in, the soles of his boots keeping him upright with knees bent and arms outstretched to either side as his center of gravity reorients itself and sends him arcing forward at incredible speed. He arcs past flickering streetlamps, building the ice in front of his feet just as quickly as he melts it behind him. His breath trails behind him in a stream of white vapor. Gooseflesh ripples across his skin.

Below him, civilians swear and gasp as he passes. Some snap pictures, some cheer and whistle. Others retreat into the shadows of grimy alleyways and dilapidated storefronts, heads lowered and hoods covering their faces. He pays them no mind, eyes trained on what’s in front of him and nothing else—he’ll deal with nameless thugs later tonight.

The street ends at a sharp interchange, cutting off his method of passage. Without batting an eyelash, Shouto ignites his left side in a flash of blue and orange flames, using the burst of heat to lift him up and over the building before him. He twists, teeth gritted until they crack inside his mouth and his lungs constrict painfully.

And with a sweeping gesture, he conjures more ice beneath his feet at the apex of his jump, continuing on his way down the next street over.

Yeah. Much faster than running.

It isn’t long before Shouto reaches the scene of the crime. He slides upward to a rooftop across the street from the art gallery, planting his feet on the edge of the roof as he finally skids to a stop. His
skin crackles with ice as he moves. Pushing his hair out of his eyes to squint down at the street, he catalogues the evidence laid before him.

*Front window smashed—definitely broken from the outside in, so probably not an inside job. Flashlights can be seen inside, clearly visible. Getaway car at a nearby street corner, lights off but engine left running.*

Not very clever burglars, then. He huffs, unimpressed. Should be easy enough to contain on his own. Even so, the echo of police sirens can be heard in the distance, closing in with every passing second. *Backup.*

Popping the knuckle of his right index finger noisily, Shouto exhales slowly and leaps off the edge of the rooftop, crossing the street and landing on the piles of broken glass that litter the sidewalk. He presses his body flat against the chipped masonry of the front of the gallery, peering around the broken edge of the main window.

The inside of the gallery is dark and empty, most paintings having been slashed from their frames with box cutters. Sculptures lie tipped over on the polished wooden floor, broken shards of ceramics lay in wicked piles of brightly-colored bisqueware at odd intervals throughout the room. Security cameras sputter and spark uselessly from their perches near the ceiling—short-circuited, clearly. An electricity Quirk?

The burglars must be closer to the back of the gallery. Noiselessly, Shouto slips through the shattered window and tiptoes across the main gallery floor, being careful to avoid spots of broken glass that would alert the criminals to his presence.

Once he’s across the room, he crouches behind the doorway to the exclusive gallery and strains to hear the muffled voices of the burglars. (“Only Kyoshi Art Patrons allowed past this point!” claims an expertly-designed poster near the door. The poster’s been ripped clean in half.) Shouto can’t make out specific words, but he can at least tell that there are three criminals—two male, one female. They’re arguing about… something.

Three versus one isn’t a *terrible* number, he supposes. It’s not great, obviously, but it’s not the worst he’s ever faced, either. He only hopes it’s an accurate assessment.

Silently, he reaches up and taps his earpiece. “Support, do you copy?” he whispers, quiet enough that he can barely hear himself. “Support, this is Shouto. Come in.”

It takes a moment for someone to reply. “Hero Shouto, this is Support,” comes a chipper, young female voice. “We sure as shit copy. What can we do for you this fine evening?”

Shouto cranes his neck back toward the way he came, making sure no one has followed him. “Hey, Yuuna. Can you pull up a blueprint of the—” he frowns, squinting at the torn poster on the wall “—Kyoshi Fine Arts Centre? I’m in South End, near Bixby’s. Please.”

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” she drags out, smirk evident in her tone. Rapid-fire keystrokes echo in the background for a moment. “Yep, got it here. Looking for something in particular or do you just want the general features of the place?”

“A back door is what I’m most worried about.” The voices in the other room rise with anger temporarily before falling back to a manageable level. “Don’t want to spook these guys until I know where they’re going.”

More keystrokes, then a thoughtful hum. “All right, so you’ve got two back exits, actually, so that
sucks,” Yuuna mumbles. She snaps her gum noisily. “There’s a loading dock in the northeast corner and an employee entrance nearby, looks like. Both empty out into an alleyway off Fifth.” She lets out a low whistle. “Ooh, that place has secret doors! That’s nifty.”

“Secret doors?” Shouto asks, interest piqued. He glances sidelong at the rest of the gallery around him. “Any near me?”

“Yeah, turn around and follow the wall a few paces back. It should be somewhere around there.”

Shouto does as he’s told, skirting around some piles of glass and ceramics. Sure enough, there’s a hairline crack in the white wall that he’d missed beforehand. A simple push swings it wide, opening the door into a dark hallway lit with a pale blue emergency light next to a breaker box. He can’t see the end of the hallway. “Where’s this lead?”

Yuuna hums, popping her bubblegum in Shouto’s earpiece with a deafening snap. “Looks like it’ll take you into some office space and an employee break room. Where are the villains holed up?”

“Exclusive gallery space in the back. First floor,” he answers, carefully tiptoeing into the dark hallway. He closes the door behind him, casting the entire hallway into pitch darkness, save for that tiny emergency light. Shouto doesn’t dare ignite his fingertip to see better—instead, he feels his way along the wall, stepping carefully.

Yuuna makes a noise. “Well, if you hang right about twenty feet ahead, you’ll cut into that break room I mentioned earlier. That’s got a direct entrance into the back part of the gallery, so you’d stand a chance of cutting off their escape if you wanted. Want me to alert first responders?”

“Yes,” he answers, fingertips running over the smooth wall on his right as he makes his way down the hallway. “Tell them to monitor the front and back entrances. I’m going to try and incapacitate these guys, but if they don’t go quietly, I have a feeling they’ll try to run before they fight.”

“Yep, yep, yep, cool, awesome,” she babbles, voice light. “Anything else you need?”

“Not at the moment. But stay tuned, I might need you again.”

A dreamy sigh, and the crunch of keys as Yuuna leans her elbows on her keyboard. “Oh my god, I think that’s the sexiest thing you’ve ever said to me. Say it again, Shouto. Please?”

Shouto rolls his eyes just as his fingers find the turn-off into the first hallway to the right. “Goodbye, Yuuna.”

“Happy trails, hero.”

He cuts the connection, shaking his head while a smile fights its way into the corners of his mouth. He’s always liked Yuuna—she reminds Shouto of Ashido, oddly enough, what with her vibrant personality and sugary positivity that bleeds out of every pore. For all her schoolgirl crushes on heroes around the office, she’s the best analyst they have at the agency. Go figure.

Shouto turns the corner carefully, stepping down the dark hallway with no small amount of caution. He finds a few more branching hallways here and there, fingers running into framed wall art he certainly hopes isn’t nearly as expensive as it feels and darkened sconces along the way.

When he finally reaches the door to the employee break room Shouto can hardly refrain from sagging with relief. Finally. Pressing his ear against the crack between the door and the jamb, he listens closely for voices.
Nothing. The room is complete silent.

With a ginger touch, he twists the handle slowly. It squeaks. Shouto freezes, ice flooding his veins as he waits for someone, anyone to hear the noise. A rookie mistake—his father would be pissed. He waits five seconds, ten, fifteen.

No disturbances. Letting out a breath of relief, Shouto twists the knob a little further, disengaging the latch millimeter by precious millimeter. With delicate steps, he slips into the darkened room—

Shouto sees the movement before he feels it—a sharp pressure and the rush of air as someone fists the front of Shouto’s costume and slams him up against the wall with enough force to knock the wind from his lungs. His grunt of pain is muffled by a gloved hand closing over his mouth and nose, and his eyes water from the bone-shaking impact.

Shouto wheezes, blindly gripping the sinuous wrist of the man who has him pressed up a piece of framed wall art—it digs into his spine painfully. The pressure on his chest is incredible, verging on bone-crushing without actually doing any real damage aside from purely cosmetic. A strength Quirk, then?

The slide of fabric over skin. Shouto’s eyes adjust enough for him to make out the shape of an arm being reared back, primed for a punch.

Blue flames sputter along the length of Shouto’s left arm. It’s knee-jerk, instinctive. He doesn’t have the wherewithal to stop it, nor does he particularly care. If the villains want to fight, he’ll give them a fight, dammit.

The flames flare, and all at once, Shouto’s attacker tenses and stills. He’s frozen to the spot like Shouto had used his right side instead. Shouto, on the other hand, feel absolutely sick. Even in the dim blue light of Shouto’s shoulder flames, it’s enough to make out the stunned and faintly horrified face of Midoriya Izuku.

Izuku drops Shouto to the ground with a gasp like he’s been burned, stumbling backwards into the small Formica countertop on the other side of the breakroom with a muffled clatter. Shouto’s flames sputter out of existence as he slides to the floor, equally stunned and still too winded to speak.

“You— Jesus— I mean, I thought you were—” Izuku rambles senselessly in the darkness, hands whizzing through the air as he gestures wildly. “How?”

The air comes back to Shouto in a rush and he gasps, choking and coughing as he tries to fill his aching lungs with the oxygen he’s sorely needed since he entered the room. He groans, dragging himself to his feet. Broken pieces of plaster cling to his back and shoulders, raining like snowflakes with the movement.

“No time,” he rasps. He clears his throat and sputters another cough. “They probably heard that.”

“Did I hurt you?” Izuku asks, horrified. He crosses the room, feeling through the darkness to set a hand on Shouto’s shoulder—the right one, he notices. “I didn’t mean— shit, I really had no idea it was you, honest to God, otherwise I never would’ve—”

A crash from the other room, loud and sharp, interrupts his thought rudely. He hears heavy footsteps, curses, and the musical sound of shattered glass as the villains bolt from the premises.

Shouto shoves Izuku’s hand off his shoulder and ignites his left, casting the room in flickering
orange light. He vaults over the break table and sprints toward the door. “We can discuss this later, let’s go before we lose them!”

“But—”

“Move, Deku!”

Shouto doesn’t miss the way Izuku’s face hardens, sharpening into something professional and coldly calculating right before he swears and follows hot on Shouto’s heels. Footsteps thunder and flames crackle noisily as they run, Shouto’s fire casting long, oily shadows up and down the length of the corridor. Shouto doesn’t have to turn around to know that Izuku’s directly behind his left shoulder, gloved hands clenched into fists with his jaw set and eyes narrowed.

As mad as Shouto is about losing the element of surprise, he can at least admit that it’s nice to have someone covering his weak side. One less thing to worry about.

They burst through a small door at the end of the hallway, splintering it on its hinges as it swings out into the now-empty exclusive gallery space. The walls are painted a dark color in here, a sharp contrast to the sterile white out front, and the art has all been slashed from its frames, canvasses fraying where the blade didn’t sever the fibers quite right on the initial pass.

There is also a distinct lack of criminals.

Shouto bites his cheek, tasting blood. His eyes scan the perimeter reflexively, cataloguing hurried footprints through shattered piles of glass and ceramic, memorizing their approximate shoe size and direction—toward the front of the gallery, likely back the way they came. Maybe if they hurry, they can catch up. Then, a thought occurs to him.

“Getaway vehicle,” he mutters, clenching his fists as dread sinks its claws in and grips tightly. Even at top speed, there’s no guarantee that Shouto’d be able to catch the criminals—this part of the city is a maze, meant to hide villains and deter heroes. Plus, he shouldn’t leave the scene of the crime until the police get here; looters plague this part of the city like rats.

Midoriya.

Shouto whirls on him. He jerks his head toward the front of the gallery, gesturing sharply. “Midoriya, you go. They can’t have gotten far, especially if they’re carrying all this art. If you hurry, you can probably still catch them.”

He waits for a, “Sure thing,” or a grim-faced, “On it.” It’s what he would’ve said in high school. Hell, it’s what he would’ve said a year ago in Geneva. It’s not that much of a stretch to assume he’ll say it now.

Except that he… doesn’t.

Midoriya’s boots crunch noisily in the piles of glass, leg guards glinting darkly as he shifts his weight from foot to foot. His face is utterly unreadable beneath the flickering shadows that cross his features. “You want me to go after them?”

“He asks distractedly, surveying the scene around them. He turns to storm his way out to the front of the gallery where he’d started originally, entirely aware of every passing second. He feels it in his blood like sand through an hourglass that’s draining far too quickly.

Izuku looks uncomfortable, face set in a grimace as he follows closely on Shouto’s heels. “Well, shouldn’t it be you? I mean, you’re the hero and all. I’m just…” He coughs. “Um, not a hero.
Shouto stops in the middle of the gallery space. He turns and stares at him, incredulous. “I’m sorry, are you kidding?”

“I’m just following protocol,” he mutters, rubbing the back of his neck. “Technically, since you’re the ranking hero on the scene, you’re supposed to be the one to—”

“Me being a hero doesn’t have anything to do with it!” Shouto snaps, mind boggling at the fact that Midoriya is arguing with him in the middle of a crime scene for some bullshit reason, like they don’t have criminals to catch and time isn’t of the fucking essence right now. “You’re faster than I am, and someone has to be here to maintain the crime scene until the police get here. Go!”

For a moment, it looks like Izuku’s going to dispute the point with him further. He opens his mouth, brows furrowing in consternation—

Suddenly, there’s the sudden squeal of tires in the distance and the revving of an engine, and Shouto feels their hourglass run dry.

With a flare of blue, irritated flames, Shouto jabs a finger toward the shattered window he came through. “What the hell are you waiting for? They’re getting away!”

“Right,” Izuku stammers, face twisted with… something. Shouto isn’t sure what. He’ll figure it out later. “Right, I’ll… Um. Just hang tight, I’ll be back in a minute.”

Izuku slips his facemask up to cover his mouth and nose, glaring down at nothing as his veins glow and green energy sparks across his skin. Shouto feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He’d forgotten what it was like to be in Izuku’s proximity when he powers up, feeling the electricity beneath his own skin just by mere association. It’s enough to make his tongue taste sour in his mouth.

In a flash, Izuku bends his knees and hurtles out the front window like a speeding bullet, green eyes glowing and muscles tensed beneath the fabric of his costume. He rolls out onto the pavement, bounces to his toes, and with an earth-shattered boom and the sharp crack of splintering asphalt, he disappears from view in an instant with a breathtaking leap of faith.

The silence that follows is deafening, echoing deep in the hollow of Shouto’s chest with the reverberation of a timpani. The sounds of the city slowly come back to him one by one—the gurgle of the street gutters, the curious murmur of people in the area as they poke their heads out of apartment windows and leave their cars to see what all the fuss is about. Somewhere close by, sirens wail and flash; they’re getting louder by the second.

Shouto frowns at the spiderwebbed crater in the middle of the street, flames dying down inch by inch as anger releases him from its grip and confusion takes its place. He rakes his fingers through his hair and tugs on the strands.

*What the hell is wrong with him?*
blue, then back again with dizzying speed. “You arrived on the scene at approximately 9:00 PM and entered Kyoshi Gallery through the front window, which was already broken when you got here. You noticed a getaway vehicle idled on the corner. Correct?”

“Correct,” Shouto tells her, arms crossed over his chest. His eyes dart toward the night sky before returning to the woman—Officer Sato, he guesses, noting the embroidered name on the front of her uniform. He’s never worked with her before. Must be new.

Officer Sato nods crisply, jotting down some notes in the margins of her notebook. “Right,” she drawls. “So, you took it upon yourself to enter the premises—”

“I had reason to believe the criminals were still inside at the time.”

“Even though you never saw them?” she asks sharply, one eyebrow lifting.

Shouto grits his teeth. He can tell she’s skeptical, whoever this new officer is, and it’s getting on his already-frayed nerves. “Yes,” he emphasizes. “Even though I never saw the perpetrators, I heard voices and saw flashlights. They were in the exclusive gallery space when I arrived. I decided to approach while I still had the element of surprise.”

“But they ended up hearing you anyway because the hero Deku—” she says his name pointedly, eyes narrowing “—attacked you in the employee break room? Am I hearing this right?”

Heat flares inside Shouto’s clenched left hand. “As I said before, Midoriya didn’t know it was me. It was dark, there was a miscommunication, some wires got crossed. It was just a simple mistake.”

“A ‘simple’ mistake that cost us the identity of the criminals, who are now at large within the city,” she says flatly, clicking her pen. “That’s some mistake, Shouto.”

Outrage boils beneath his skin, sharpening his gaze into something lethal. He glares with enough heat to melt solid steel. “Look,” he says lowly, “I’m not sure what you’re implying here, but Deku’s on the trail of the criminals as we speak. If anyone can chase them down, it’s him. The situation is contained.”

Officer Sato looks about as confident in Shouto’s answer as he feels. He swallows the ice in his throat, eyes darting toward the sky yet again for any sign of Midoriya with the criminals in tow—still, Shouto sees nothing. His hope dwindles slowly.

Flipping her notebook shut, Officer Sato stuffs it in her back pocket and glances pointedly at the broken window behind Shouto, eyes skimming the other officers that mingle around the cordoned-off street. She gestures to them all with a large, sweeping motion.

“Does this look contained to you?” she asks, expression unimpressed and tone doubly so. She shakes her head slowly, disappointment evident in her harsh features as she looks him up and down. “Next time you want to barge into a crime scene, Number One, stop and wait for some backup, all right? Save us all a lot of fucking trouble.”

Her words strike him someplace deep and hidden, and Shouto hates it with every ounce of his being. He can’t even come up with a counter argument. She’s right, his mind whispers.

With poisoned words still hanging in the air, she turns and pulls out a flashlight, ducking into the gallery through the window with her mouth pressed into a thin, displeased line. The second she’s out of sight, Shouto flexes his fists and clenches his teeth, fighting the overwhelming urge to punch the brick wall pressed against his back. Surely that would hurt less than the feeling of failure.
The sound of half-jogged footsteps over crunched glass alerts Shouto to someone’s presence. Glancing sidelong, he sees another officer approaching, eyes far too bright for the situation, all things considered. At least Shouto knows this officer. Small mercies.

Shouto closes his eyes and tips his head back against the front of the building. “Have you come to yell at me, too?” he asks, voice barely above a mumble. “Because if so, Sato already beat you to the punch.”

Officer Ikeda stops, letting out a confused noise. “Sato— what? She yelled at you? I didn’t hear anything.”

“It was the quiet kind of yelling.”

His face twists. “That… doesn’t make sense.”

Shouto sighs and opens his eyes, staring up into the inky night sky. While he’s always liked working with Ikeda, his patience has worn a bit thin tonight, all things considered. “Just tell me what you want, Ikeda,” he intones quietly.

He snorts and pulls up alongside Shouto, taking the empty spot against the wall directly to his left. He crosses his wiry arms over his chest. “Nice to see you too, asshole. Been a while since you’ve worked South End. Just wanted to say hi.”

Shouto glances at him sidelong. “Hi,” he says flatly.

Ikeda grins, crooked teeth shining brightly in the flashing red-and-blue light. “Hi there. Long night?”

“The longest. Made even longer by Officer Sato over there,” he informs Ikeda, nodding in the direction of the officer in question. He can’t help the glare that settles on his face when he looks at her. “Call it a hunch, but I don’t think she likes me very much.”

“Well, if it makes you feel better, I don’t think she likes anyone.”

“It doesn’t.” He forces a small half-smile for Ikeda’s benefit, glancing down at the smaller man. “But thanks anyway.”

Ikeda nods in understanding, narrowing his electric blue eyes in Sato’s direction. She’s questioning some civilians, that pinched look still in place on her chiseled face. Quietly, Ikeda informs him, “She’s part of the new batch of officers fresh from the academy. Apparently, it’s ‘cool’ now for new officers to hate on heroes. Lots of the recruits have similar feelings.”

Shouto’s dark mood grows darker. “Fantastic.”

Ikeda shrugs. “Eh, it won’t last. Just wait, you’ll save the country again and the JPD will praise you, the city’ll have a giant-ass parade in your honor—”

“No one’s ever thrown me a parade.”

“—and before you know it, boom!” He snaps his fingers, grinning. “You’ll be back in everyone’s good graces.” He punches his shoulder good-naturedly, a small static shock electrifying his skin for half a heartbeat. “You’re just in a slump right now, Shouto. Happens to the best of us.”

“I’m not in a slump,” Shouto mutters mulishly, hunching his shoulders as he glares at absolutely nothing. “I’m not.”
Ikeda looks pointedly at the mess of broken glass scattered on the sidewalk, one eyebrow raised. “Dude.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re—”

“I know.”

“It’s perfectly normal!” he insists, waving his hands around. “Every hero goes through a rough patch like this at some point. Honestly, I’m surprised it didn’t come sooner. With your track record being so good back when you were Number Two—”

Shouto groans exasperatedly, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes until he sees stars. This is really not what he needs right now, especially not after the shitshow he just orchestrated back in the gallery. He can hear tomorrow’s newspaper headlines already—none of them are particularly flattering.

Next to him, Ikeda continues babbling in a half-baked effort to get Shouto to feel better about royally fucking up a crime scene. He tunes Ikeda out, zoning in on the thrum of his heartbeat and the orange sparks that keep intermittently sputtering from the tips of his own fingers. Shouto almost wishes he could feel the searing heat against his skin. At least he’d feel something.

That’s when he feels the vibration.

Shouto tenses, every muscle cord pulling taut like a bowstring. At first, he credits it to the trucks roaring past the end of the block on the other side of the yellow police tape, exhaust pipes smoking and engines revving like they’ve got something to prove to each other. But as the trucks disappear from view and the traffic slows, the tremors continue, completely undeterred.

His brain kicks into overdrive. There are no subways that run beneath this part of South End, Shouto knows. No train tracks nearby, no industrial activity anywhere to be seen. He frowns sharply, and his stomach sours. These tremors must be something else. Or maybe someone—

His eyes snap wide.

“Ikeda, shut up,” he says in a rush, cutting off the bright-eyed officer mid-sentence. He holds up a hand, listening. Feeling.

Ikeda freezes, mouth hanging open with hands in the middle of a particularly wild gesture. He glances from side to side, eyes wide and utterly bewildered. “Um—”

“Do you hear that?” Shouto breathes, pushing off the brick wall. He looks up and down the street, searching for the source. It’s closer now, whatever it is.

Ikeda looks around dumbly. “Hear what?”

“That sound.” Shouto gestures vaguely, fighting to find the appropriate words. He searches the rooftops with narrowed eyes. “Like—I don’t know. It sounds like metal.”

“Metal?”

Shouto shakes his head. “I don’t know. I’m not sure. I think...” he trails, igniting his left shoulder preemptively. “I think something’s coming this way.”
Behind him, Ikeda frowns and comes to stand next to Shouto on the curb, ears perked and hand hovering near the holster on his hip. Blue-white sparks of electricity arc between Ikeda’s fingers nervously—he must be able to hear it now. “Something good or something bad?” he asks, voice pitched low.

Shouto grimaces. “I don’t know. But I think we’re about to find out.”

The noise is loud, all shrieking metal and the deafening scrape of something else against concrete. Slowly but surely, the first responders peppered all around the area begin to stop whatever it is they’re doing: cameras cease to flash, conversations die mid-sentence, and heads turn toward the southern end of the block. Collectively, everyone holds their breath—

—only to release it as Midoriya Izuku rounds the corner, dragging a half-crumpled car behind him with villains stashed inside like unconscious sardines.

Shouto’s shoulder goes out like a birthday candle, smoking and smoldering in the stunned silence that falls over the crowd. Ikeda’s jaw drops, several police officers gasp nearby. At the end of the road, Izuku has a grip on the front of the getaway car Shouto saw earlier, one gloved hand fisted in the scuffed metal like it’s nothing but crumpled tinfoil. His steps are slow, deliberate as he drags it behind him, face set in a pained grimace painted with a fine sheen of sweat and grime. Bright orange sparks rain behind the half-totaled vehicle like fountains of burning water as the undercarriage scrapes against warm asphalt, screaming and shaking the earth with every thunderous step he takes.

When he reaches the edge of the crime scene, Shouto watches in dumb silence as Izuku hauls the car forward one last time with a grunt, letting it come to a stop directly in front of a group of cops who’ve never looked paler than they do now. Inside the car, the villains groan weakly. Nobody dares to move.

Izuku exhales all at once, bracing his hands against his knees as he tries to catch his breath.

“Oh… my god,” he puffs. He shakes his head, wheezing. “I am… so out of shape. Jesus Christ.”

Shouto chokes on a sudden laugh and claps a hand over his mouth, muffling the sound against his palm. His shoulders shake despite his efforts to keep them still. It’s stupid and he feels stupid for laughing, but he supposes he’s always a little bit stupid when Midoriya’s around. Maybe it’s okay to let it slide just this once.

At the sound of Shouto’s laughter, Midoriya glances upward through his lashes, zeroing in on the source with laser-like precision and speed. He blinks once, taking in Shouto’s shaking shoulders with wide, unguarded eyes that look more than a little bit surprised at his outburst. His mouth twitches like it means to curve into a smile—that heart-stopping, blinding smile he was known for back when things were perfect and nothing in the world could hurt them—but the spark is extinguished when his gaze falls on the dozens of people in blue uniforms that surround him, staring in shock like Izuku’s a ghost they never expected to see.

Like a safe with tumblers locking into place one by one, Midoriya’s expression shutters. He stands up to his full height, mouth pressed into a thin, unreadable line, and murmurs a soft, “Excuse me,” as he begins to carve his way through the crowd, eyes downturned and brows knitted. Shouto wonders if he notices the way the police officers part like the Red Sea for him.

He wonders if Izuku notices anything, save for the thoughts in his own head.

Izuku rolls his bad shoulder as he comes to a stop a few feet in front of Shouto, one hand pressed
against the juncture of his neck and shoulder with a wince. He shuffles his feet nervously.

“Hey,” he murmurs, eyes darting nervously from side to side. “I was—”

Shouto replies quietly. “You’re late.”

Izuku pales and bites his lip, glancing from side to side. “I, uh… sorry. I lost them around East Bend for a minute, so it took some time to track them down again. Art’s all in the trunk though. I checked.”

“Any of the pieces damaged?”

“I’m no expert, but everything looked halfway decent.”

Shouto hums, nodding his head. He glances over Izuku’s shoulder, raising an eyebrow at the mangled getaway car. “Nice entrance, by the way. Very dramatic.”

Izuku cringes. He rubs the back of his neck, turning to look at the vehicle. Some police officers are trying to pry the car doors open with hands and crowbars, but to little avail—it looks like Izuku crimped them shut with his hands, of all things. “I would’ve carried the thing, honestly, but I didn’t want them to wake up.”

Shouto nods, giving Midoriya a once-over to check for injuries. “Problems along the way?”

He shrugs. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“Good.” Shouto breathes a little easier for a reason he can’t quite articulate. “I’m… glad.”

Shouto meets Midoriya’s gaze, mouth curving softly in approval despite the professional part of his brain protesting the action on all fronts. Izuku’s shoulders loosen imperceptibly at the sight of it, his expression melting down into something a bit more malleable. More familiar.

(Normality has never felt more abnormal than it does now, and yet Shouto can’t find it in himself to complain.)

“So…” trails Ikeda, voice sharp against the hushed murmurs of everyone else watching their exchange. Shouto starts, turning to look at the police officer in question, who is regarding them both with narrowed, skeptical eyes and crossed arms. Ikeda points a finger at the two of them in sequence. “Do you guys not actually hate each other, then? Because I swear the newspaper said you two were, like, mortal enemies or something.”

Izuku’s face twists, the illusion shattered. “Mortal— what?”

“You’ve got to stop believing everything you read in that thing,” sighs Shouto. He rubs a hand over his face.

Ikeda holds up his hands in a placating gesture, eyes wide. “Hey, after what happened out at Yamazaki with you two, I’d believe anything. You guys didn’t exactly look real chummy in that video, if you know what I mean.”

Izuku’s expression falls, shadows looming large beneath his tired eyes. “Oh,” he murmurs quietly. He clears his throat. “Right. Um, well, I was actually the one who—”

“It was all a simple misunderstanding,” Shouto interrupts sharply, shooting Izuku a firm look. He raises an eyebrow. “Not our finest moment, we’ll admit, but we’re doing our best to remedy that
Izuku gives Shouto a what-are-you-doing look, which Shouto returns with we'll-talk-about-it-later look and a coercive cough that doesn’t really sound convincing at all.

After a moment, Izuku swallows, then nods in Ikeda’s direction. “Uh, right,” he says slowly. “A misunderstanding. That’s all it was.”

Ikeda, against all odds, buys it. Shouto immediately worries about the intellectual integrity of the JPD if all their officers are actually this gullible, but that is neither here nor there—especially since Officer Sato takes this exact moment to march through the crowd, notepad in hand and chin tilted in defiance. Shouto immediately considers icing her toes in her shoes just to prove a point.

“Oh my god,” he mutters under his breath, identifying all possible escape routes.

Izuku looks at him, brows furrowing. “What was that?”

“Nothing, just whatever you do, don’t make eye conta— Officer Sato!” he greets loudly, willing his voice to be less than frigid. (Though if Izuku’s expression is anything to go by, it doesn’t really work.) Shouto crosses his arms over his chest, looking her up and down. “What can we do for you?”

“Midoriya Izuku.” She talks directly past Shouto, her pencil-thin eyebrows coming together to form a wicked slash across her forehead. “I don’t know who let you past the perimeter, but you’re not authorized to be here—police and hero personnel only. And last I checked, you’re not a licensed hero anymore.” She clicks her pen once, twice, then smiles falsely. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave immediately, or else be escorted out.”

Shouto closes his eyes and dreams of a world where arson is not a crime.

Izuku blinks at Sato, eyes darting over her badge at that stupid fucking pen she insists on carrying around all the time. His gaze shifts to Shouto with questions written in that viridian gaze of his, but Shouto can only shrug and roll his eyes up toward the stars.

“Um,” stammers Izuku, frowning down at Sato once again. He scratches his head. “Sorry, but… I’m actually provisionally licensed? So technically I can be here as long as he is.” Izuku points at Shouto, who merely raises an eyebrow coolly when Sato glances in his direction. “You can check with his agency, honest. I mean, unless the paperwork didn’t go through or something. But I’m pretty sure it did.”

Sato’s lips purse. She turns, looking up at Shouto with cold eyes. “Shouto,” she says frigidly. “Is that true?”

“Gee, I don’t know,” he rejoins flatly. “Why don’t you ask your notebo—?”

A sharp elbow to the ribs cuts him off, and he only barely manages to trap a curse behind his teeth before it flies loose. Pressing an arm against his stinging side, Shouto glares sidelong at Ikeda, who is rocking back and forth on his heels with a disgusting amount of leisure. He’s looking everywhere except Shouto.

“…Yes,” Shouto finally grumbles, glaring about two feet above Sato’s forehead as he pretends not to internally swear in every language he knows. “Yes, it’s true. You can check with Yaoyorozu Momo at my agency to corroborate our claims if you want, but it’s all legal and approved.”

A murmurs ripples through the crowd of police officers. Sato, thumb poised over the end of her
pen, clicks it twice in quick succession, lips twisting into a displeased frown. She jots something down in chicken-scratch penmanship that Shouto can’t make out from this angle, then flips a page with a flourish. “Right,” she says, dragging the word out. “I’ll make that call as soon as we’re done here, then.”

Next to Shouto, Ikeda scoffs. “Oh, blow it out your ass, rookie. Just let the heroes do their jobs already so we can all go home.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll do my job first, Haru,” Sato snaps, eyes narrowing into slits. She turns to Izuku sharply, pen poised over paper as she looks up at him with poison in her eyes. “All right. If you’re supposedly licensed to be here—”

“Which we already established that he is,” interjects Shouto.

“—then you won’t mind answering a few questions, right?” Sato smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “You understand, I’m sure, what with being the former Symbol of Peace and all that.”

Izuku looks between her and Shouto, eyes wide and bewildered. “Um,” he stammers, shaking his head. “I don’t—”

Like a match, Shouto’s temper flares hotly beneath the trappings of his skin. Shaking his head, he crosses the sidewalk to stand next to Izuku. He glares at Sato, channeling every bit of his energy into his scowl. “All right, look. If you have a problem with—”

“This has nothing to do with you, Shouto,” Sato intones wearisomely. “Please step aside.”

“No. You’re being completely unprofessional right now.”

“I’m being unprofessional? You’re the one who botched the crime scene and let the villains get away without—”

“Well, we obviously solved that problem!” Shouto jabs a finger at the crumpled car behind Sato’s left shoulder. He crosses his arms, glaring sharply. “Now, I’m not sure what your issue is with me or my work, but Midoriya had nothing to do with the g—”

The gentle pressure of a hand against his right shoulder. “Shouto,” Izuku says quietly. “Hey, dude, stop. It’s fine. I’ll answer her questions.”

But Shouto doesn’t care. He only has eyes for Officer Sato, who is looking at him with all the ferocity of a rabid ferret or… something. Shaking his head, he says, “No. No, this is ridiculous. She is way out of line and you’re not—”

“Shouto,” he emphasizes, smiling softly. Izuku squeezes his shoulder, fingers long and capable. His palm is deceptively warm through his glove. “It’s fine. Really. I can handle it, trust me.”

No, you don’t understand, he wants to say. She’ll twist your words and make you feel like the villain and I don’t want you to feel like this was in any way your fault, please, please, please—

Shouto wants to say a lot of things, really.

None of them actually come out of his mouth.

Exhaling slowly, Shouto resigns himself to witnessing a first-degree murder right in front of his eyes. He rubs a hand over his face tiredly. “Fine, all right,” he sighs. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”
“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Izuku says dryly, his eyes lined with shallow mirth. One breath in, one breath out, and Izuku turns to Officer Sato, bouncing lightly on his toes as if gearing up for a good spar. He cracks his neck loudly.

And then he smiles, and Shouto’s pretty sure he stops breathing.

It’s bright, blinding like a solar flare in the dim glow of flickering streetlamps and flashing police sirens. His eyes crinkle like candy wrappers, his eyes reflect green and gold like a grass field in summertime. His entire demeanor just… shifts into something impossibly bright as the pro hero Deku comes out of his shell for the first time since—

Well, since.

The effect is immediate as Izuku plants his hands on his hips, tilting his head to one side as he sunnily regards Officer Sato. “I’m all ears, officer,” he says cheerily. “Are we playing Twenty Questions or Jeopardy tonight? I’m game for both if you are but let me be the first to warn you—” he lowers his voice into a conspiratorial whisper “—I am way better at Jeopardy.”

Shouto bites the inside of his cheeks to keep from smiling. Dammit.

The rest of the first responders aren’t quite so lucky, falling prey as warm chuckles work their way through the nearby group of CSIs and police officers. Some muffle the sound in their hands.

Sato blinks at Izuku, brows knitting in confusion. She glances at the CSIs like they’ve sprouted new heads out of their shoulders. “Uh,” she starts eloquently, clicking her pen once, twice. She coughs. “Well, this isn’t, erm… either of those things.”

“Well then, what do you wanna know? I’m an open book.”

Sato’s gaze settles into something serious, mouth pinched in displeasure. “Shouto reported that you two were supposed to rendezvous with each other on Southeast Fiftieth Street approximately forty-five minutes before the events at the crime scene transpired. You never showed. Do you have an alibi?”

“Alibi? Jeez, with words like that, I almost feel like a suspect.”

A few CSIs shoot dirty looks in Sato’s direction when Izuku finishes, and more than a few officers scoff and shake their heads in mild disapproval. Sato’s eyes widen and she shifts her weight. She doesn’t let up though—rather, she squares her shoulders and stands taller, doing her utmost to meet Izuku’s gaze at eye-level. “That’s… yet to be determined.”

“Oh, no worries! If I’m a suspect, I suppose I can get behind that.” He pauses, blinking owlishly. “Sorry, what was the question again?”

“I want to know where you were before you met up with Shouto in the gallery,” Sato grits out.

“Right, right,” he mumbles, tapping his chin. “Can I whisper it to you?”


“Well, here’s the thing: if I tell you where I was, I’m going to have to change my name and move to the Ukraine or something. Maybe Greenland, I don’t know. Like, this information doesn’t come without strings. It’s super embarrassing.”

Shouto smothers a huff of laughter in a cough that doesn’t sound half as convincing as it feels. Next to him, Ikeda’s shoulders shake with the effort of withhold his own guffaws, face flushed as he
Officer Sato, on the other hand, doesn’t appear half as entertained. Her face inexplicably hardens as she notices more and more CSIs and officers hiding their own laughter, her features solidifying into something sharp and lethal. She clicks her pen angrily. “Deku, I’d appreciate if you took this line of questioning seriously—”

“Who says I’m not serious?” Izuku’s brows crease in concern, head tilting curiously. “I’m perfectly serious right now. Aren’t you?”

“Of course I—”

Sato cuts herself off and sucks in a breath, seemingly counting to ten before blowing the air back out through her teeth. There’s a vein in her neck that’s beginning to bulge, Shouto notices with some amusement.

Carefully and with a death grip around her pen, she slowly reiterates, “I just need to know where you were between eight and eight forty-five tonight. That’s all.”

Izuku frowns. “So that’s a no on the whispering, then?”

“Yes.”

“Yes I can whisper it to you?”

“No!”

“Ohhh, you were saying yes to my ‘were you saying no’ question.” Izuku snaps his fingers and points at her, grinning cheekily. “Gotcha. Totally on the same page now. I was lost.”

Sato presses her thumb and index finger against her eyelids with a muttered curse. “You are utterly incompetent.”

“Mm, maybe,” he hums. Then he frowns. “Hey, aren’t you going to write that down?”

“Write what down?” she groans.

“My answer to your question.”

“You didn’t answer my question, you moronic—”

“Sure I did.” Izuku’s expression is inquisitive, soft around the edges. “You asked where I was, and I told you. I was lost.”

For several seconds, no one blinks or breathes. No one dares say a word, even the CSIs listening in on the conversation. Sato stares at Izuku like he just spoke a yet-to-be-discovered dialect of Swahili at her. Her mouth moves soundlessly; she’s speechless, just like everyone else.

Shouto is the one who breaks the silence first, stepping forward with incredulity written all over his own face. “Wait, are you serious?”

Izuku gestures vaguely in the direction uptown, toward the financial district. “I think it was that new commercial development near Eighty-First that threw me off. I dunno, I just got really turned around once I hit South End, and I couldn’t contact you and tell you where I was. Eventually I just gave up and called Momo. She told me where you were headed.” He shrugs, smiling sheepishly. “Figured I’d just follow the sirens and meet up with you at the scene.”
“Why didn’t you just call me?”

“I did.” Izuku slips his cell out of a hidden pocket on his costume, thumbing through his apps to open his call log. He holds the phone out toward Shouto. Sure enough, there are seventeen outgoing calls to Shouto’s personal number listed at the top, right below the call to the agency’s operator number.

“Oh,” Shouto says quietly, pressing his fingers against the seam of his mouth. He hums discontentedly. “I don’t carry my personal phone with me when I’m working.”

Izuku’s smile is wry. “Yeah, I kinda figured that out in between calls fifteen and sixteen.”

Sato blinks rapidly, shaking her head as she comes back to herself. She clutches her pen in a white-knuckled grip as she trembles with rage (or maybe utter confusion), and for a moment, Shouto worries she’ll snap the damn thing clean in half and spray ink everywhere. He takes half a step back, just in case.

“So you expect me to believe that you,” she says angrily, jabbing the pen in Izuku’s direction, “the former Number One Hero, got fucking lost in the city on the way to work? That’s the story you’re feeding me?”

Izuku beams. “Yep, that sounds about right.”

“Bullshit.” She shakes her head back and forth, eyes wide. “Bullshit. Someone like you wouldn’t get lost here. Where were you, really?”

Izuku’s smile drops off his face inch by inch, replaced with thinly-veiled curiosity as he regards Sato. He cocks his head to one side, humming. “Not sure if you’ve noticed, but I haven’t exactly lived in Japan for, what—” he takes a step closer to her, encroaching on her space a bit. “Six years? Seven?”

“Eight,” Shouto says automatically.

Izuku smiles and nods, not taking his eyes off of Sato. “Right, right. Eight years. That’s a long time, isn’t it, officer?”

Sato blinks. She fumbles with her pen. “I wouldn’t, uh. I wouldn’t know—”

“So you’re telling me you knew enough about my career to know that my license was revoked last month, but not that I lived in New York City for eight years?” He raises an eyebrow, *tsking* quietly. “Seems a bit far-fetched to me.”

She flushes, glancing from side to side frantically as Izuku looks down at her, face settled into something more serious. “I didn’t— I don’t—” she stammers uselessly.

“Let me do you a quick favor and tell you everything that happened here tonight,” Izuku says, voice low and dangerous despite the soft smile on his face. “In return, you can stand right there and listen. Sound fair?”

Sato swallows, then nods. Izuku’s smile curves a little more sharply.

“*Great,*” he says, grinning. “So, here’s what happened: I was late for patrol with Shouto, like you said. I’ve never operated professionally in this city before—South End isn’t exactly a part of town I knew super well, even back when I was a citizen. Naturally, I got lost. Now, when I couldn’t find Shouto, I gave up and called Yaoyorozu Momo—Creati, you probably know the name—and she
pointed me in the direction of the gallery."

“You attacked him there,” murmurs Sato, eyes wide and tinged with mortification. At this point, every officer on the scene is watching, waiting. Staring. “You hit—”

“An accident, nothing more.”

“Some accident.”

“It was dark, I heard movement, I acted. Any hero would’ve done the same, I assure you. But I wouldn’t expect you to understand.” Izuku laughs lowly, the sound reverberating deeply in Shouto’s chest, and Sato clutches her notebook a little closer to her chest. “Are you keeping up with all this? You’re not writing. No matter, I suppose. Once Shouto sent me off to catch the criminals, I lost track of them near East Bend. Took me a while to find them. When I did, I incapacitated them, placed them in the car, and made sure they couldn’t get out. I found the stolen goods in the trunk. Decided to bring the whole thing back with me. Seemed easier.”

Izuku narrows his eyes suddenly, pinning Sato to the spot with the power of his gaze alone.

“Are my answers to your satisfaction, Officer Sato?” he asks lowly. “Or do you require more detail?”

Shouto watches from the sidelines, transfixed as Sato wilts like a flower beneath the tangible authority that emanates from Izuku’s body—from his broad shoulders to his strong jawline, the man embodies raw power, bleeds it from every orifice. Were Sato any less formidable, she would wither away in an instant, replaced with little more than ash in front of a man who once balanced the world in his hands. She bites her lower lip and manages a tight nod, eyes darting in every direction except at Izuku.

Shouto sees trembling fingers clenched inside strong fists, twitching as they try to maintain control. He sees damaged, freckled skin covered with layers and layers of fabric to hide the secrets those scars would tell. He sees the falseness in that blinding smile, the stiffness of a machine that hasn’t been oiled in a very long time. He sees the gut-churning, unspoken threat of a man with nothing to lose reflected in green eyes that have seen far too much.

Izuku rubs at his jaw absentmindedly, fingers tracing the outline of a watercolor bruise that curls beneath his chin. “All right then. I’ve answered your questions, officer,” he says, smiling once again. (Shouto sees the puppet’s strings this time, each one pulled taut and fraying.) “Are we free to go now? Or was there something else you needed?”

Sato swallows and shakes her head. “No,” she answers quietly. “Nothing else, sir.”

“Fantastic. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help in the future.”

And with that, Izuku turns on his heels and cuts through the crowd of speechless first responders like they’re little more than incorporeal specters with pressed uniforms and badge numbers. He doesn’t meet anyone’s gaze or nod in anyone’s direction—he merely keeps his chin level with the ground and walks, steps heavy, as he makes his way to the end of the short block and sinks into the shadows near the bus stop. Police officers murmur worriedly as he disappears, CSIs laugh and shake their heads good-naturedly. One person even claps lightly as he passes, nodding in approval.

Somehow, Shouto knows Izuku will be waiting for him on the other side of that fluttering police tape, ready to tackle whatever situations come their way for the rest of the night. The thought is comforting in more ways than one, and it sends a thrill down his spine almost like Ikeda had
reached over and shocked him with all five fingers.

Ikeda lets out a low whistle the second Izuku’s out of earshot, eyebrows lifted far into his hairline. “Wow,” he says, dragging the word out. “That guy didn’t come to play.”

“He usually doesn’t,” Shouto murmurs.

“Jesus. And he’s your sidekick?” He huffs and shakes his head, eyes wide with disbelief and admiration. “Sounds like a pretty sweet deal to me.”

Shouto feels a small smile twist his lips as something light floods his chest. He doesn’t want to say it feels like hope, but it feels an awful lot like something.

“No,” he says quietly after a moment. “He’s my partner.”

Chapter End Notes

Want to know how Keiji and Shouto met and started dating? Click here!

Want to see fantastic artwork of chapters eleven and twenty-one by this person? Click here!

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And the Lost Heart Stiffens

Chapter Notes

That E rating kicks in a bit here.

Trigger warnings: We're got some minor nitty-gritty descriptions of human trafficking in this one, we have mild sexual content, and we have angst. More in-depth warnings can be found in the end note! If you're really worried, just skip the middle section (December) altogether and pick things back up on January 9th, 2026.

Keep an eye on those time jumps, fam.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

October 30th, 2025

“And how are you feeling today, Izuku?”

It’s always the same question phrased in exactly the same way every single time.

Absently, Izuku takes the time to wonder if all therapists start with that line, or at least some variation of it. Hell, maybe this whole thing is some kind of scripted TV show where the audience is hidden behind one-way glass and the cameras are all perched in potted ferns, continually rolling in hopes of capturing something juicy enough to broadcast. He wouldn’t exactly be surprised.

Broken record therapy, Izuku thinks to himself—that’s what they should call this. Not grief counseling or company-mandated psychiatric evaluations. Broken record therapy sounds significantly more apropos, in Izuku’s opinion.

Tracing the tip of a scarred, senseless finger over the embossed leather binding of a book on one of Dr. Kubo’s massive bookshelves, he hums. “I’m… fine,” he murmurs vaguely.

“Just fine?” Izuku doesn’t have to turn to know that Kubo’s raising a single microbladed eyebrow in faint disbelief.

He shrugs, admitting, “A bit better than last week.”

“Good, good,” replies Kubo, voice soft and warm. He can hear her smile in her voice, and he almost hates it. “I’m very glad to hear that you’re improving.”

“It wasn’t exactly a high bar,” he mutters under his breath, pulling the book off the shelf and thumbing through the crisp pages. It’s a reference book of some kind, full of multisyllabic words he’s never heard of before in his entire life. He snaps the book shut and replaces it on the shelf, glancing over his shoulder pointedly. “Aren’t you going to interrogate me about it? Figured you’d be interested to know why this week wasn’t as terrible as the last one.”

“Will you actually answer me if I do?” she asks dryly.
Izuku spins the wedding band on his finger. “All right, fair point. Don’t have to be so smug about it.”

Kubo crosses her knees, tablet balanced delicately on her lap as she leans back in her comfy purple chair. Her thick-framed glasses rest low on her small nose, expression vaguely curious as she regards him from across the room with that expression that reveals absolutely nothing. Empathy is her Quirk, he knows, and even though Izuku can’t feel her sifting through his emotions like groping hands in a vast sandbox, he knows it’s happening anyway. The thought is more than a little discomfiting.

After a moment, she sighs softly. “I’m not smug, Izuku,” she tells him quietly, expression bleeding into something vaguely pitying. She gestures to where he stands on the opposite side of the room. “Just… stating the obvious. I’m concerned that you’re not getting very much out of these sessions of ours.”

Izuku touches embossed titles and worn leather book spines with the callused tips of his fingers, reading each and every one without really seeing them at all. He supposes that she’s right, in her own way—he hasn’t been getting much out of them. He fights with himself every time before coming, wondering if any of this is even worth it. Are the bruises he earns on patrol worth the one-hour stretches of silence he experiences with Kubo every Tuesday like clockwork? Is the satisfaction of capturing bad guys and foiling villains enough to keep him coming back for more?

Izuku tastes metal in his mouth. His shoulder aches dully, the phantom pains of burning blades and soured promises ripe between the fibers of his muscles. The silence is heavy but not uncomfortable, offset by the hum and gurgle of Kubo’s fish tank on the far wall. She waits for him to speak.

With a soft sigh, Izuku rakes a hand through the tangles in his hair and turns from the bookshelf, crossing the room to drop into the overstuffed chair opposite Kubo’s. He slouches, shoulders rising up to his ears and knees splayed wide, uncaring.

“What do you wanna know?” he mumbles, picking at a frayed spot on the left knee of his jeans.

Kubo twirls her stylus between her fingers and sets the tip to her tablet screen. She smiles softly. “Why don’t you start with this week? What was good about it?”

Izuku exhales, frowning up at the ceiling. “Well, Shouto and I busted a human trafficking ring on Monday, so that’s… cool. I guess.”

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October 21st, 2025

“Head’s up!”

Faster than thought, Izuku drops to the ground to narrowly avoid a punch aimed directly at his throat, sweeping out a leg to catch the villain at the ankles with an earsplitting snap of bone and the sickening stretch of tendons. He hears the gasp of the villain as he falls prone on the dirty floor, face pale beneath the tattoos on his cheeks and red eyes wide. Izuku quickly locks the Quirk-suppressing handcuffs around his wrists and doesn’t give him another thought, already turning back to the center of the warehouse where Shouto wages war with the main villain of the
Shouto is a flurry of blue flames and sublimating ice as he dodges, kicks, and punches his way past the villain’s defenses with teeth gritted and eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. Half-melted shards of ice litter the warehouse in grimy puddles that glisten between the cracks in the concrete, reflecting ultramarine as Shouto’s temper flares like a supernova. He’s vicious, unrelenting, merciless. Izuku doesn’t envy the man on the receiving end of his ire. Bent, dirty needles and animal droppings litter every shadowed corner of the former squatter’s den, and on the other side of the massive warehouse floor lies a faded orange shipping container that Izuku knows is full of human trafficking victims who’ve been locked in there for who-knows-how-long.

He strategizes a way across the room, wincing against the searing heat that beats across his face with every angered yell from Shouto. From his side of the room, Izuku notices two henchmen waiting in the wings; they watch the fight with grim determination in their bloodshot eyes, knives clenched in their hands as they wait for an opening to strike. Izuku doesn’t think, just acts—sinking his teeth into the molded mouthguard within his facemask, he feels the stomach-twisting thrill of One for All as it skitters across his skin.

Bending his knees, Izuku takes off at a speed Iida would be proud of and closes his eyes against a sudden burst of searing heat that singes him a little too closely for comfort.

“Are you trying to burn the entire place down?” he snaps into his comm, digging his heels in as he comes to a sharp stop directly in front of the henchmen. They barely have time to widen their eyes in horror before Izuku’s got one in an unbreakable headlock and the other one’s been kicked into a wall with enough force to bury him a few inches deep in the concrete.

Shouto’s voice is breathless, vowels strained as he snaps back, “Not intentionally, no. Though I’m pretty sure it’d be considered a public service if I did.”

Izuku glances sidelong at the shipping container, noting the enormous rusted bolts keeping the doors in place. He doesn’t hear movement from inside, but then again, it’s hard to hear anything over the roar of Shouto’s flames. “Try to keep the arson at bay until I get the hostages out, at least. Then go nuts.”

“Noted.”

“Need a hand?” he asks, already formulating a plan for breaking that shipping container wide open.

“Do I look like I need a hand?”

“Well, no, but—"

Suddenly, across the room, Shouto gets knocked back by an impressive punch that seemingly comes out of nowhere. His flames sputter and die as his back collides with the far wall, followed by a deafening crunch of concrete and the creak of steel girders that bend beneath his weight. Horror clutches at Izuku’s chest, and he lunges forward—but stops.

Wait for orders, wait for orders, wait for—

Izuku watches in thinly-veiled relief as Shouto peels himself from the crater in the wall, staggering as the dizziness takes hold with its clawed fingers. He wipes a thin trickle of blood from his mouth with the back of his hand, frowning down at the spot of red as if it’s personally offended him somehow.

Slowly, his flames reignite and burn brighter than before, hot air pushing his tangled hair away.
from the murderous glare that he trains on the villain at the center of the room.

“Get the hostages out,” Shouto says calmly as he trudges back into the fray with deadly confidence, eyes trained on the villain. He spits red-stained saliva off to one side, rolling his shoulders. “I can hold him off. Come back for me after.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. Go, Deku.”

In a flash of blinding blue fire, Shouto clashes with the villain once again. It’s like watching a firework show too closely, Izuku thinks as he drops the now-unconscious henchman to the floor in a limp heap. So much power, unrestrained. Blinding for more reasons than one.

The urge to jump into the fray is strong, but Izuku holds himself back, choosing instead to turn and head toward the shipping container. With a burst of power, he tears the six-foot steel locking bolts in half like they’re little more than strings of licorice, releasing the lock from its hold and swinging the door to the shipping container wide. The smell that hits him is pungent—the sweat and grime of unwashed bodies kept in close quarters for far too long—but the sight that greets him is so much worse that he instantly forgets about the smell altogether.

Rail-thin teenagers and young adults are packed in the shipping container like sardines, clothes torn and dirty as they hold each other and weep silently with every shudder and explosion that wracks the container from the outside. They flinch collectively as light spills inside, painting them all in angry shades of blue and violet. Some stare at Izuku in horror. Some whimper in fear and shy away, skittering out of the light like recluses.

The stench of hopelessness is worse than anything Izuku could’ve ever imagined.

Izuku holds up his hands imploringly, making sure to keep his expression wide open and friendly. “Don’t be afraid,” he tells them softly, smiling. “I’m not going to hurt you. My name’s Deku and I’m a her—” he catches himself at the last second “—uh, here to help you. I’m going to take you all home, all right?”

The young people in the container glance at each other, wide-eyed and skeptical. Then, a young man pushes forward through the crowd—blonde, blue-eyed. His feet are bare and blackened on the soles.

“You—” he stammers in perfect English, eyes glistening. “You’re… Deku? The hero from New York City?”

Izuku smiles his best *I-am-here* smile in an effort to be reassuring, but it gets caught between his tongue and teeth. “I… yeah. That’s me.” The young man’s accent strikes him as familiar somehow, and he frowns. “Are you from—?”

“Brooklyn,” the boy gasps, falling to his knees heavily like he’s lost the ability to withstand gravity’s pull. There are tears working their way down the boy’s face, tracing pale tracks through the grime that coats his skin. “I’m from fucking Brooklyn. Oh my god, it’s really you, it’s— I can’t believe it, I just— guys, we’re saved.”

The rest of the people in the container blink owlishly at him. A few suddenly seem to recognize his outfit, and others begin shaking with relieved sobs as well.

Izuku counts twelve people in total—too many to carry all at once. He looks down at the boy from Brooklyn, frowning. “What’s your name, kid?”
“Bryce,” he hiccups, rubbing at his eyes. He sniffs. “M’name’s Bryce.”

“Okay, Bryce,” Izuku says, holding out a hand for him to take. “I’m gonna need your help.”

“H-Help?”

“Yeah, help. Can you do that?”

Bryce blinks, eyes watering dangerously. He sniffs again, and nods hesitantly. “I—I think so.”

Izuku feels his heart clench. The accent sounds like home in all the wrong ways, and he clears his throat to rid himself of the knot that’s tied there. “Good, great. Look, my friend’s keeping the bad guy busy for now, but we don’t have much time. I need to know if anybody’s injured or too weak to run so I can escort your guys out of here.”

Bryce’s face hardens as he thinks, glancing back over his shoulder. “None of us are injured, but we’ve got one who’s sick, I think. She hasn’t been awake for a while.”

Izuku lowers his facemask. “Show me.”

Bryce leads him over to a knobby-kneed teenage girl laid out toward the back of the container on what appears to be a few soiled hoodies people saw fit to give her as a form of bedding. Her skin’s frightfully pale, her pulse flutters irregularly under her skin, and a thin sheen of cold sweat paints her face ghostly silver; she can’t be older than sixteen.

Izuku kneels beside her and checks her pulse—slower than average, definitely not good. Without looking up, he asks, “She just dropped? No warnings or anything?”

Bryce rakes a hand through his greasy hair and gestures shakily. “N-No, man. She just complained about being hungry for a little while. It was like she just… went to sleep after.”

Izuku gingerly picks up the girl’s left hand, noting the faint tremor that wracks each digit. Her skin is cool to the touch. Hungry, shaking, passed out—

Ah.

Izuku slips his facemask back on, activating his comm. “Hey, Shouto,” he says into his mask, leaning back on the balls of his feet and his elbows braced against his knees. “Dude, come in. You there?”

He listens, ignoring the stunned murmur that ripples through the shipping container at the mention of Shouto’s name. Suddenly, hope sparks between the hostages like a current of electricity.

After another earth-shaking explosion from outside, the comm crackles to life. “Here. Make it fast, I’m busy.”

“You’re about to get busier,” Izuku grunts, leaning down to hoist the girl up into his arms. She curls in against his chest, trembling and whimpering in her sleep as her fingers grip the fabric of his costume weakly. “Hostages are all safe and ready to move, but we’ve got a girl here in hypoglycemic shock. I need you to draw the villain off a little ways so I can get these guys out of the building.”

Another explosion, and a wave of heat sweeps through the container. “Well, you don’t want much, do you?” he grumbles. Shouto swears under his breath, then sighs. “Give me a minute. This guy’s getting tired anyway, but I’ll do what I can. How long’s the girl been under?”
Izuku frowns. He looks over at Bryce. “Hey, how long’s she been like this?”

The boy pales, mouth flapping soundlessly. He shrugs. “I dunno, man. A few hours?”

“A day,” someone chimes in.

“Two days,” says another.

Izuku grimaces. Being trapped in here with no light, they probably don’t have the best idea of time passage. “Anywhere from two days to a few hours,” he tells Shouto. “No one’s sure.”

Shouto grunts discontentedly. “Too long either way.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“EMTs are posted outside waiting for the hostages. As long as you can get her there, she’ll be taken care of.” A deafening crackle of ice splinters throughout the warehouse, louder than any explosion. It’s shortly followed by a searing wave of heat. “Okay, I’ve got this guy pinned down about fifty meters off,” he grinds out between his teeth. “Best I can do for you guys. Get moving.”

“I’ll take care of that.”

Izuku cuts the connection, adjusting his hold on the thin girl in his arms with a wince of sympathy. He inclines his head toward the entrance of the shipping container. “Let’s get out of here. Everyone, follow me quickly and quietly, and do exactly as I say.”

With the twelve survivors rallied and the girl safe in his arms, Izuku kicks the door to the shipping container off its steel hinges and barks directions, jogging around the southern perimeter of the room with each person in tow. On the opposite side of the warehouse floor, Shouto and the villain are tangled in hand-to-hand combat, both too occupied with not dying to notice their escape out a side door. Izuku grits his teeth and soldiers on, resisting the urge to go over there and help.

Focus, focus, follow orders, go, go, go—

The second they touch fresh air, Izuku ushers them down the grimy alleyway they exited out into and directs them to the waiting police and ambulances on standby in front of the warehouse. There’s excited, breathless mumbling as the victims stumble over their feet and run breathlessly toward the freedom they’ve sought for so long.

Once they reach the police perimeter, activity takes over in a bustle. Izuku hands the diabetic girl off to a grim-faced EMT, not even hearing the grateful sobs and thank-yous thrown his way by the survivors in every direction as he cuts through the crowd of first responders. He only has eyes for the blinding flares of blue that illuminate the grimy windows of the old warehouse, lighting up the neighborhood like Christmas and casting shadows long enough for other buildings to get lost in.

There’s no hesitation. He doesn’t wait for the inconvenience of doors or the tedious length of hallways. Bending his knees, Izuku leaps and shoots his way through one of those windows like a bullet, shattering the dirty glass into a thousand pieces as he vaults back into the central chamber of the warehouse.

Izuku barely has time to tuck and roll midair to avoid a plume of fire sixty feet long that’s aimed directly for the kingpin of the trafficking organization. He lands hard on his feet, skidding to a stop about twenty feet from Shouto—his concentration is singular as he pours every ounce of his power into his fire, teeth bared in a grimace.

“Is there a reason you’re always late?” Shouto shouts over the sound of his fire, hair blown back
from his face in a multicolored tangle. His gaze shifts to Izuku.

Izuku rolls his shoulder and pushes himself to his feet, staring down the villain on the other side of the room. “You know me. Always gotta make an entrance.”

“Dramatic ass.”

“Self-sacrificing bastard.”

Shouto’s grin is wickedly sharp, breath streaming between his teeth. He nods in the direction of the villain—a large man with a size Quirk and two meaty, raw-knuckled fists whose clothes are smoldering and smoking. “Waiting on you, Deku. Go to work.”

Izuku feels himself smile, bending his knees as he sinks into a fighting position. His eyes glow, his skin tingles. The thrill of this—the fight, the danger, the purpose of it all—sings in his veins and lights his blood on fire, bringing him to a new high that tastes an awful lot like adrenaline and fear—a good combination if ever there was one.

Izuku’s never been able to fly before. He supposes this is as close as he’ll ever get.

Maybe he’s okay with that.

Clenching his fist, he readies himself for a fight. “With pleasure,” he grinds out, and lunges into the fray.

January 1st, 2026

“How are you feeling today, Izuku?”

Same question. Izuku swears even the inflection is the exact same as it was the week before, and the week before that. Uncanny.

Izuku bites his cheek as he parses together a suitable answer. He notices that the anemone in Dr. Kubo’s fish tank houses a new clownfish, which pokes its head out of the anemone as Izuku watches, too scared to come all the way out of its home but still curious enough to see what all the fuss is about. The pink starfish that had been perched on the glass last week has since moved to the rock right below the anemone, two of its arms touching the base of the creature as if to say, “Hey, I’m here, too.” If this were a kid’s film, Izuku imagines the three of them would be good friends.

The clownfish stares at Izuku unhelpfully, fins flicking back and forth as it sways with the rhythm of the anemone. He doesn’t provide Izuku with an answer to Kubo’s question, nor does he offer any particularly insightful advice about anything else. He just sort of stares for a moment, then retreats into his anemone once again.

Sighing quietly, Izuku leans up to his full height and stretches his arms above his head, wincing as his left shoulder twinges with the movement. He shrugs as he lets his arms drop, turning back to Kubo where she sits in her purple chair, same as she does every week. This week, however, her sweater is yellow. Must be new.

Kubo watches Izuku carefully as he lumbers across the comfortable office and drops into the chair
opposite of Dr. Kubo, shoulders slumped. “I’m decent,” he says, frowning down at the torn nail of his index finger. “You?”

“I’m quite all right, thank you for asking.” She smiles sweetly, and for a minute, the curve of her lips almost comforts him. “How was your week?”

“Uneventful.”

She hums and writes something down on her tablet. “A double-edged sword in some cases. Would you care to elaborate a little bit?”

“I can’t elaborate on something if nothing happened,” he says, tone slightly barbed. The silence that follows is edged with razor-stillness. A moment later, Izuku winces and rubs a hand over his face when he realizes. “I— shit. Sorry, Doc. I didn’t mean to—”

But she waves him off, shaking her head. “No, no, it’s perfectly all right. If you don’t wish to share, I’ll understand. We can talk about something else if you’d like.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” he tells her, tearing at a hangnail on his crooked pinkie finger until it stings. “There’s just… nothing really to say? I don’t know. It was a slow week for us out there. Seems like all the villains are on vacation or something.”

Kubo purses her lips, spinning her stylus in her hands mesmerizingly. “Is that what you really think is happening?”

Izuku’s hangnail begins to bleed, scarlet welling up into a tiny bead next to his cuticle.

“No,” he answers honestly. “No, I don’t.”

“Why?”

Izuku lets out a disbelieving laugh and shakes his head. “Are you kidding? There’s never been a single day in my life when villains have left me alone, so I really don’t think they’re going to start now. Something’s up. They’re planning, plotting, working on something big. I just—” he lets out a frustrated breath through his teeth. “I don’t know what it is.”

Kubo laces her fingers together, regarding him carefully. “And this frustrates you?”

“Of course it does!” Izuku rises suddenly from his seat and begins pacing back and forth in front of Kubo’s old bookshelves, fingers tearing through his hair as he glares at the floorboards. “I’ve always been able to track down villains’ progress, to figure out what’s going on before it happens. Always, Doc. I just— I know I’m missing something here. A piece of the puzzle, some kind of clue to the whole thing. The last time I saw a city this quiet was right before—”

The words catch in his throat and he heart spasms, every trapped syllable carving up the inside of his mouth like multitudinous razor blades as he stops dead in his tracks. There’s barbed wire cinched around his neck, a lead weight in his belly and his shoulder hurts and he can’t breathe and all he sees is her face and and—

The world begins to tip and twist on its axis. Clumsily, he reaches out and grabs the bookshelf to keep from falling to the floor in a heap. Across the room, Kubo stands with concern etched into her delicate features, but she doesn’t reach out to steady him. She watches. She waits. The silence is paper-thin.

“Something…” she trails softly after a moment, clutching her tablet to her chest with white-
knuckled hands. She swallows. “Something happened. Didn’t it?”

Izuku doesn’t even have the wherewithal to lie. He wheezes a half-sob, half-laugh and covers his face with his hands, wondering if he has any tears left to give the world or if his saltwater reserves dried up a long time ago and he’s just the last to know about it. He’s always the last to know.

With a shudder, Izuku leans back against the bookshelf and manages a small nod despite the stiffness in his neck. His hands shake, his stomach twists. Through it all, his shoulder aches and bleeds something less visible than blood.

“Yeah,” he hiccups. “I got a letter.”

December 15\textsuperscript{th}, 2025

As the sun sets over the crooked skyline of the city like it does every night, Izuku contents himself with listening to the police scanner on his nightstand and ignoring the demons on his doorstep.

It’s a simple kind of existence, living in this one-bedroom apartment with no one but his thoughts to keep him company. It’s sparsely furnished and barely habitable according to his mother, but Izuku argues that he doesn’t even spend much time here to begin with, so it’s not like it matters if he has food in his fridge or decorative towels hanging in the bathroom. It’s a place to rest his head and patch himself up after nasty fights, and that’s good enough for him.

Izuku lies on top of his crumpled bedsheets with his fingers laced behind his head as he listens in for the next big threat—whether that be a simple purse snatching in the suburbs or a full-scale terrorist attack in the heart of the financial district, he isn’t picky—and he traces the hairline cracks in the plaster of his ceiling as he waits. The scanner spews scratchy jargon on a loop, voices patching in and out as the sun dips lower and lower in the sky outside Izuku’s bedroom window. Patrol starts at ten tonight; and sure, he might be ready four hours early, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. He’s just… well-prepared.

Izuku’s eye catches on the All Might poster pinned to the wall. It’s torn around the edges and the colors have faded over the years, but All Might’s figure cuts an imposing image in the center of the glossy poster, hands braced on his hips and head thrown back in that trademark smile of his. On either side of the poster, however, are two wooden picture frames with random photos of people placed behind the glass. The frames came with the apartment when he leased it, each one nailed into the wall like a fixture and completely immovable; he doesn’t know the people in the images, nor does he care enough to take the frames down. They just… are.

He used to have photos like that in his old apartment with—

Closing his teeth over his tongue, Izuku tastes blood and stops the thought before it can complete itself. His gaze drafts back to the cracks in the ceiling, attention catching on each individual incident code the police scanner blares: he hears mentions of arson, armed robbery, suspicious vehicles, ambulances needed, coroners being notified. Each one floods his brain, pressing on the inside of his skull until it leaves no room for anything else.

He tries so hard to think about other things—anything, anything at all—that he almost misses the lazy sound of someone knocking on his front door.
Frowning, Izuku sits up in bed and listens closer. Sure enough, a moment later the knocking resumes, this time significantly less insistent than before. Scrambling to his feet with only minor fumbling, Izuku pushes through the doorway of his bedroom and into the central room of the apartment. He trips over the still-rolled up throw rug he’s been forgetting to lay out for over eight weeks and dances around the cardboard moving boxes that have collected near the doorway to his unused kitchen, eyes trained on the scuffed brass doorknob and the way it shudders with every knock.

Squinting through the peephole, Izuku sees a fish-eyed version of his next-door neighbor, Hideko Tachibana, huddled in front of his door. She’s holding… something.

Frowning, Izuku unlocks his deadbolt and swings the door wide, keeping one hand on the knob just in case this is some kind of horrendous joke or an unorthodox plot to have him murdered. He’s been nearly assassinated by stranger methods, that’s for sure—especially back when he was Number One. A guy can never be too careful.

…Except Hideko Tachibana looks the exact opposite of threatening in every feasible way, and Izuku feels stupid for thinking otherwise. She’s an old woman with a million and two cataracts, liver spots on every inch of her wrinkled skin, and a permanent scowl engraved into her face that rival’s Kacchan’s glare on a good day. Izuku doesn’t think he’s seen her smile once since he moved in back in late July.

Izuku blinks down at his hero costume, then back at her. “Um,” he starts eloquently, glancing down the hallway to see if anyone else is around. “Hi there, Tachibana-san. What are you…?”

Her wrinkled lips purse and she holds out a short stack of mail that practically overflows past her fingers. “The postman left your mailbox open.”

Izuku stares at the outstretched pile of letters, magazines, and crumpled ads in her gnarled old hands. Some of them have been crushed up, clearly left in his mailbox for far too long. “Oh,” he says, reaching out to take them from her. A few glossy ads nearly slip through his gloved fingers, but he manages to catch them in time by crushing the entire stack to his chest. “Thank you. I appre —”

“Don’t let your mailbox overflow again,” she snaps, glaring somewhere over Izuku’s left shoulder. Her white hair is frizzy and her voice gravelly, and even though she’s only about five feet tall and eighty-four pounds soaking wet, Izuku has a feeling she could make him cry if she really wanted to.

Izuk feels himself straighten up, nodding frantically. “Yeah, totall—” he catches himself with a cough. “I mean— yes. Yes, of course. I’ll be better about that in the future. Thank you, Tachibana-san.” He bows, noting her cat slippers are mismatched and on the wrong feet.

She waves him off with a grumble and a half-muttered remark about disrespectful youths and when I was your age we respected our goddamn neighbors before turning away to head down that hallway at a snail’s pace. Were she any other old lady, Izuku would offer to carry her mail and help her into her apartment like a proper, upstanding professional hero. As it stands, however, Izuku contents himself with simply watching her hobble down the hallway to make sure she gets through her door without falling and shattering a hip or two. The second she disappears from view, door slamming shut behind her, Izuku retreats back into his own apartment with a sigh of relief and an odd sense of displacement.

Locking the door behind him, Izuku walks back toward the living room as he peers down at the pile of assorted mail in his arms. He frowns and walks toward the kitchen counter, sifting through supermarket ads, credit card applications, and magazine after magazine of knock-off hero merch
and cosplay supplies. Some he throws away, others he sets on the counter to look through another
day. He even finds a handwritten letter from Uraraka—dated two months ago. Whooops. Izuku sets
that one near the coffeeepot so he remembers to reply to it when he gets home from patrol in the
morning. He hopes Uraraka isn’t too upset about it.

The last letter in the stack is a standard business envelope that looks like it was dragged through a
street gutter full of dirty water, left to dry and buckle in the harsh light of the sun, and then jammed
through a mail sorting machine about fifteen thousand different times just for the hell of it. It’s
hardly even mail at this point, whatever it is, but based on the return address, it looks like it’s from
an insurance company in America and it was sent a long time ago. Izuku raises an eyebrow at the
sheer number of postmarks crammed into the upper righthand corner of the letter, wondering who
on Earth would go to this much trouble just to—

Notify sender of new address, says one of the postmarks in faded block lettering.

Izuku Midoriya and Lucy Albright-Midoriya,
1214 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10029

Izuku’s stomach drops and his lungs lodge in his throat.

He doesn’t notice the shaking of his hands or the bile on the back of his tongue, and he doesn’t
even know that he’s falling until his shoulder clips the countertop on the way down because he’s
not in his apartment anymore. His ass hits cold tile, but he doesn’t feel it. He doesn’t feel a thing,
save for the chill-touched winds of New York City in April and the horrifying heat of blood
between his fingers.

Izuku’s in a drafty building in the heart of Queens and he’s bleeding out alongside the only other
person in the world who mattered while the sirens below paint the world red. He feels the ghostly
touch of moonlight on his skin, cruel and cold, but Lucy’s skin is already ashen and her eyes
unseeing, and oh, god, he’s failed her, he’s failed the city, he’s failed everyone—

No. He’s in his kitchen, and there’s a letter in his hands—a request to renew car insurance for a car
Izuku doesn’t even own anymore. He’s not breathing.

He’s in Queens and everything is wrong, wrong, wrong and Lucy’s dead and he feels like he
should be dead but he isn’t dead and this is all so fucking wrong—

He has patrol in four hours. He hasn’t eaten dinner yet. He should, or else Shouto will throw
another granola bar at his head and poke fun at him while they fight crime in South End.

She’s dead she’s dead she’s dead and it’s my fault—

Izuku crumples the letter in his fist and presses his knuckles against his mouth to muffle the
soundless, strangled cry that works to escape his lips. His shoulder hurts, it hurts, but the pain in
the center of his chest feels so much worse that he can’t bring himself to care. His lungs scream for
air, his body weighs more than the Earth itself, and tears leak out the side of his eyes in a deluge he
didn’t think he was capable of anymore.

He falls back on the floor in the middle of his kitchen, chest heaving and heart racing as his eyes
paint multicolored stars all over the ceiling like miniature explosions—fireworks in Central Park.
His stomach churns, and Izuku barely has time to turn to the side before he vomits all over the
chipped tile, emptying the contents of his already-empty stomach until he tastes nothing except the
sharpened edge of acid. He coughs, retches. With shaking hands, he grabs the edge of the
counter top and pulls himself to his feet, knees barely holding his weight.

His eyes fall on the letter in his fist, crumpled and mashed with the sparkling power of One for All. He hates the dirty envelope. He wants to keep it forever, tuck it in his pocket and pretend he’s fine.

He doesn’t know what he wants to do.

With clumsy, trembling movements, Izuku stumbles into his bedroom and hurls the letter at the far wall with an anguished cry that shatters his voice in two. The police scanner is still on, babbling and sputtering static that grates Izuku’s ears until he reaches over and breaks the damn thing between his fingers, leaving him in heavy silence. Off comes one glove, then the other. He can’t breathe. He needs to breathe.

Izuku swallows thickly, tasting more bile. His ears pop painfully.

Phone. He needs… he needs his phone. Gasping for air through his constricted throat, Izuku stumbles forward and rummages around in the crumpled sheets of his bed until his numb fingers come in contact with cold metal. It doesn’t read his fingerprint the first time, nor the second. He inputs his passcode manually with unsteady movements, almost dropping the device before the screen clears and allows him access.

When he looks back on this moment later, he’ll never be able to explain his decision. His fingers move on their own accord, scrolling through his contacts list until he finds the name he needs, and presses call.

The phone rings. Izuku sinks to the floor of his bedroom, saltwater tracing its way down his cheeks to drip off his chin and onto the grey carpet. He has no idea what he’s going to say, or whether or not this will work. All he knows is that he has to try.

After three rings, the line springs to life. Izuku feels like vomiting all over again.

“Todoroki Shouto speaking,” comes the voice he dreads to hear, steady and solid—almost bored in its inflection. Distracted, maybe. Izuku can almost picture him in his apartment, sitting at the kitchen island and frowning as he works on a Sudoku puzzle with a cup of ginger tea at his left elbow.

She’s gone she’s gone I’m in Queens and it’s all my fault and I can’t do this—

Izuku presses his shaking fingers against his eyelids and fights to control his breathing. Act natural. He only wishes it were so easy. “H-Hey. Um, Shouto?”

There’s a lengthy pause, then a shuffle as Shouto likely pulls his cell phone away from his ear to check the caller ID. His voice is faintly disbelieving. “Midoriya?”

He hiccups a faint laugh that feels like death. “Yeah, it— it’s me.”

“Oh.” He sounds some modicum of surprised. In the background, there’s the shuffling of pages—definitely Sudoku—and a confused noise. “Why are you calling? We don’t have patrol until ten.”

“I know, I know, you’re right.” He fights to control his rambling, digging his nails into his palm until those crescent moon indents begin to bleed. Excuse, I need an excuse, what’s my excuse? “I just—um. I’m…” He spits out the first thing that he can think of. “…sick.”

The silence that follows feels wide enough to swallow them both whole. Static crackles, blood thunders. Izuku wonders if it’d be easier just to curl up and die on the carpet rather than face this.
Shouto inhales slowly, letting it out through his nose. “You’re sick,” he repeats slowly, chewing on each word. “So… what, you’re not coming in to work tonight? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Yeah.” Izuku drags himself to his feet and tries to swallow back the throat-closing panic that creeps up his spine like a million tiny spiders. He stumble back out into his living room and paces between the untouched moving boxes, not feeling a single step. “I’m not—I mean, I don’t—”

Izuku’s knees buckle. He reaches out a hand to steady himself, palm bracing against a stack of boxes labeled *keepsakes*. He knows his All Might stuff is in there, packed between layers of paper and bubble wrap. There are also a few photo albums in there that he’s been too afraid to touch since last April.

He stares at the handwriting on the cardboard, memorizing each chicken-scratch letter of his own penmanship and thinking about how Lucy’s handwriting was always so much better than his own.

Something bitter and cold knots itself in Izuku’s throat. Tears, thick and never-ending, fall down his cheeks to soak into the hardwood beneath his feet. His knees hit the floor with an impact that rattles his bones, and a gasp tears itself through his teeth that sounds like shattered glass.

“I can’t,” he keens, curling in on himself as bitterness claws its way into his stomach. He hyperventilates, pulse thunders. Everything in his field of vision turns red and blurry. “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t and I’m so sorry, oh my god—”

“Izuku?” Shouto’s voice is sharp in his ear. “Hey, listen to me. Izuku, are you there? Hello? Izuku!”

“I’m sorry,” he sobs, pressing his forehead against the hardwood floor, “But I— the mail came and and I-I don’t— I can’t do it and and—and and she’s not here and I don’t know what—I can’t—” His lungs constrict and he tastes the sourness of bile in his sinuses, and all he can see if her face, her face staring up at the stars and the police commissioner from New York shaking her head disappointedly and the memorials they had, like everyone in Manhattan actually gave a shit about her. Like it wasn’t Izuku’s fucking fault.

On the other end of the line, Izuku thinks he hears hushed murmurs and the jingling of keys. “Tell me where you are,” Shouto demands, his voice hard. “Are you at home?”

He’s not at home because he doesn’t have a home, but there’s no oxygen in his lungs to tell Shouto that. No, Izuku’s last home was in New York City, 1214 Fifth Avenue, right on the edge of Central Park in the Upper East Side with a view that swept the entire city. The doorman knew their names. They were never late on their absurdly expensive rent.

*There’s blood and it’s hers and mine and there’s too much of it and—*

*It should’ve been me.*

“Izuku, listen to me,” Shouto says firmly. There’s a cacophony of sound behind him—honking cars, squealing brakes, the murmur of a crowd. He must be outside his building. “I need your address. Can you tell me that much? I really don’t think you should be alone right now, so I’m going to need you to tell me where your apartment is. Please.”

Through hiccuping sobs and half-breaths of anguish, he manages to relay his apartment address, which Shouto rattles off to someone else. A cab driver, perhaps. As soon as he’s done, Izuku hears the slamming of a car door and the rev of an engine, and the background noises of the city fade into nothingness.
Shouto’s voice is edged with something sharp but layered in cottoned concern. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes if traffic’s good.”

“Don’t,” he chokes out, shaking his head. “This isn’t—”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” Shouto repeats, a little harder this time. “I texted your mom, she says she’s on her way over, too. Can you hold on that long?”

Izuku closes his eyes and feels shame, hot like a branding iron, press against the surface of his heart. “No,” he sobs, shaking his head back and forth. “No, no, no, she shouldn’t see, I don’t want her to—”

“Mido—” but Izuku continues rambling senselessly, seeing all different shades of scarlet painted on the insides of his eyelids, so Shouto raises his voice. “Izuku, listen to me! I’m about to head into the Takahashi tunnel, so I’m probably going to lose service. I’ll call you as soon as I’m on the other side, but I need you to promise not to do—”

The second his voice disappears, replaced with nothing but endless static, true panic sets in. Izuku pulls the phone away from his ear, staring at the screen with no air in his lungs. Connection lost, it tells him in friendly-looking font and crisp lettering. The call screen fades away, replaced with the keypad once again. His apartment is silent, save for the rapid sound of Izuku’s own breathing and the thunderous pulse of blood in his ears.

Izuku’s gaze falls to the voicemail tab.

His hands shake.

No. With a cry, Izuku crushes the phone in his hand and hurls it at the wall with all his strength, not even blinking as it pierces the sheetrock like tissue paper and disappears somewhere within his bedroom on the other side of the wall. His chest heaves, his skin sparks errantly, and nothing is right.

It should’ve been me.

Tears on his face, he shoves a stack of moving boxes over and lets out an anguished cry. The letter is somewhere in his room, crumpled up with her name on it and suddenly, she’s everywhere he looks: he sees her in the silverware in the sink, remembering the way her eyes lit up when she registered for them before their wedding; he sees her in the bedsheets they used to share, remembering the thread count and how she insisted there was a difference in comfort level even though Izuku had argued that thread count is nothing more than a marketing conspiracy; he sees her in the laces on his shoes, the chipped plate stacked in the sink, the rolled throw rug in the corner.

I’m not supposed to be here.

Izuku falls to his hands and knees, clutching at his head and tearing his hair. He sobs and screams because nothing in the world is how it’s supposed to be, and Lucy is gone, and she never deserved this. His throat feels like ground glass and gravel, his tongue tastes like blood.

For the first time since April 22nd, Izuku knows he is alone. Well and truly alone.

It feels like ten years, it feels like ten seconds. However long it actually is, all Izuku knows is that suddenly, there’s a pounding at his door, loud and insistent. He doesn’t have the strength to get up and answer it. His eyes are puffy, his lips are dried with the tang of saltwater, and his fists shake.
The knocking is louder than gunshots. “Midoriya?” comes a voice, low and familiar. “Midoriya, it’s me. Open the door.”

Humiliation slips beneath Izuku’s skin and burns through his veins like wildfire. He buries his face in his hands, pulling his knees up to his chest. “Go away,” he calls through his fingers, hiccuping.

The pounding continues, rattling the door on its hinges. Shouto mutters a swear under his breath. “Izuku, if you don’t open the door in the next five seconds, I’m breaking it down. Don’t think I won’t.”

“I’m fine,” he calls back miserably, pulling himself into the corner of his living room. He presses his forehead to his knees. “Just... just go, please? I shouldn’t have called, I shouldn’t have— I just. I shouldn’t have.”

“Last chance to open up,” Shouto says flatly.

“Don’t,” Izuku pleads weakly, sniffing as tears drip off the tip of his nose. “Please, don’t.”

But even from across the room, Izuku can make out the feathers of frost that have started to curl around his doorframe like curious, searching fingers. They fan across the wooden door and brass hinges in paper-thin sheets of blue-white rime, and before Izuku knows it, the door shudders and bursts inward, snapping from its frozen hinges like it’s little more than a thin piece of cardboard. Before the door can fall to the ground, the door freezes itself to the wall and solidifies into a three-inch thick slab of solid ice, holding it in place.

Shouto stands in the doorway, foot descending from the kick that shattered the jamb. His eyebrows are lowered, eyes narrowed in determination, and he’s wearing a cashmere sweater and nice jeans today—casual, especially for him. His hair a tangled mess that’s swept back on the white side and tucked behind his ear, just barely long enough to stay in place. Izuku curls in on himself, hoping that maybe, just maybe Shouto will miss his hiding spot in the far corner of the sparse living room and leave him alone.

Shouto’s eyes fall on him. They widen imperceptibly and he blinks, taking in the carnage around him—the pushed-over boxes, the hole in the wall, the vomit in the kitchen—and his lips part as if to say something, but no sound escapes.

He takes a few hesitant steps into the apartment, blinking in stunned shock. “What...?”

“Don’t,” Izuku bites out, shaking his head frantically. “Just... don’t. Leave. This isn’t— this isn’t for you to see. Please, Shouto.”

Shouto ignores him and steps carefully over some shattered dishware Izuku doesn’t remember breaking. He takes in the blank walls, the unpacked moving boxes, the sparse shelves in the kitchen. Shame burns through every inch of Izuku’s body.

Shouto comes to a stop halfway between Izuku and the open doorway to the apartment. He swallows, face slack with abject horror and confusion. “I...” he trails, disbelieving. “I don’t understand.”

“Get out!” Izuku sobs, reaching for the first thing within reach—a packet of unopened post-it notes. He hurls them at Shouto; he doesn’t flinch as they hit the dead center of his chest. They fall to the ground quietly, bouncing on the carpet.

The silence is palpable and pitying and Izuku hates it. He hates all of it, he hates himself, and he hates that he’s alone because Lucy is never coming back—
Shouto swallows. Slowly, deliberately, he bends down to pick the post-it notes up off the ground, placing them gently on the nearby kitchen countertop. His gaze falls to his shoes. He opens his mouth to speak.

Down the hallway, the elevator dings quietly, stopping him short. Izuku’s gaze snaps to the doorway as his mother comes stumbling into his apartment, hair half-up, wearing sweatpants that look two sizes too large for her, with her eyes wide and frantic and fearful. She’s clutching her phone in one hand with a torn bag of groceries in another. She’s out of breath.

“Izuku?” she calls out shrilly, dropping the bag of groceries in the doorway without a second thought. Onions and cabbages roll aimlessly. She barely looks at Shouto as she scans the apartment, completely ignoring the fact that he stands in the center of the carnage with fractals of frost on his cheek, eyes wide and stunned stupid.

Izuku stares at his mother. The dam around his heart begins to fracture, the floodgates opening inch by inch no matter how hard he tries to keep them in place. “Mom?” he asks, voice small and shaky.

When her eyes finally fall on her son, Inko’s expression cracks. “Oh, sweetheart,” she breathes warmly, crossing the room with purpose. Dropping her phone to the floor, she flings herself forward and wraps her arms around her son.

With his mom holding him and murmuring in his ear, he suddenly feels ten years old and Quirkless all over again. His knees are skinned beneath his trousers, he has All Might action figures on his neatly-dusted shelves, and his hero notebooks are spread out on the table in the kitchen like they always are. Kacchan called him useless again on the playground today. But everything’s going to be okay because his mother’s making katsudon for dinner tonight, and they’re going to watch All Might videos together on the computer. No amount of name-calling or skinned knees can ruin that.

All at once, the floodgates shatter.

Sucking in a sharp, shaking breath, Izuku crushes his mother in his arms, letting out shuddering sobs that he feels all the way down in the marrow of his bones. He sobs and gasps and cries, but his mother doesn’t judge him for it. She never has. She only holds him even tighter, rocking him back and forth as she whispers, “Shh, it’s all right now, I’m here,” in that voice that only make him cry harder.

“She’s g-gone,” he gasps into her shoulder, feeling the loss echo in the shattered remains of his heart. “She’s really gone and— and— a-and it’s my fault. All my fault.”

Inko hushes him quietly and shakes her head, pressing a kiss to his temple. “No, sweetheart, it wasn’t your fault. There was nothing you could’ve done.”

“I should’ve been faster,” he blubbers, shaking his head back and forth. “I should’ve— I should’ve been there sooner.”

“Oh, honey,” Inko says miserably against his hair, squeezing him tighter. “Don’t bear this burden yourself. It’s too large, even for you. Please. There was nothing you could’ve done, I promise you that.”

Izuku sniffls and lets out a choked, strangled noise. “I miss her so much, mom.”

“I know, dear. I know.”

He hiccups, exhaling unsteadily. He swallows the bile in his throat. “She’s… gone,” he mumbles.
“She’s really gone. Isn’t she?”

There’s a pause, and Inko stiffens in his arms for a second before she melts into him once again. She smooths his hair down, trying and failing to tame his curls. Somewhere behind her, Shouto is watching all of this happen, but Izuku doesn’t care because the wedding band on his finger feels impossibly heavy now.

“Yes,” Inko whispers after a moment. Her voice is hollow and miserable, but certain. “Yes, sweetie, she’s gone.”

Izuku squeezes his eyes shut, tongue tasting like blood. “And she’s never coming back.”

“She’s never coming back,” she agrees softly.

It feels like the end.

It feels like a cruel beginning.

Suddenly he’s aware of just how tired he is; exhaustion creeps into his limbs, steals the air from his lungs like a thief in the night. He’s been sapped for all he’s worth, running a marathon with no foreseeable end for months. Crossing the long-awaited finish line doesn’t feel like a victory at all—it feels more like a welcome defeat.

They stay like that for what feels like forever—mother and son, holding each other and trying to keep all the pieces of each other intact as they both fall apart. Izuku hears some shuffling around his apartment as Shouto restacks his unopened moving boxes, picks up the shards of ceramic dishware Izuku shattered in his haste earlier, and places Inko’s groceries neatly on the counter. He stays quiet, gaze never straying to the pair on the floor in the corner while they cry. It’s not much privacy, but Izuku appreciates it nonetheless.

After hours, days, eons—Izuku lost track a while ago—Shouto clears his throat. Inko and Izuku look up at him with red-rimmed eyes and blotchy cheeks.

Shouto nods in the direction of the doorway, hands in his pockets. “I’m, uh. Gonna get going. Seems like you two have this in hand. So… yeah.”

Izuku sniffs and rubs his face with his sleeve, swallowing the salt in his throat as he avoids Shouto’s gaze. The shame curled in his stomach weighs more than solid steel and tastes twice as bitter. Inko, on the other hand, smiles shakily up at Shouto and holds out a hand for him to take, which he does, albeit a bit reluctantly.


He blinks, cheeks turning faintly pink. He swallows, eyes flickering to Izuku’s puffy face before he coughs lightly. “Erm… I didn’t really do that much, but—”

“Nonsense,” Inko says, smiling shakily. “You did plenty.”

Shouto stares at her, cheeks stained a full scarlet at this point. Swallowing, he squeezes her hand back shyly, then lets her go as he backs up toward the open doorway where half-melted ice has begun to soak Izuku’s carpet steadily. He rubs the back of his neck as he reaches the threshold. “Hey, uh— Izuku?”

Izuku sniffles and rubs his nose. “Yeah?”
Shouto takes a deep breath, brows knitting. “I want you to take the week off from patrol.”

Izuku starts, staring at Shouto with wide, horrified eyes. “What? But what about—?”

“The rest of the city can wait for a bit,” Shouto tells him, fingers playing with his keys idly. He gives Izuku that no-nonsense look he always uses on stubborn police officers and uncooperative villains. “Things won’t fall apart just because you take a little personal time. I can handle things by myself for a week.”

“But—”

“Izuku.” Shouto’s expression is serious, his gaze soft. He sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. “Please, I— I can’t do much to help you, but… I can do this. Take the week off. That’s an order.”

Izuku stares at him, half-tempted to argue further, but the look in Shouto’s eyes stops the words from escaping his lips. He swallows the sounds, settling instead on a stiff nod. Shouto’s shoulders relax, and he exhales in relief. He turns to leave, keys jingling musically between his fingers.

“Shouto,” Izuku calls out before he turns the corner into the hallway. He doesn’t know what possesses him to do it.

Shouto stops just in time, raising an eyebrow in silent question as he glances back into the apartment. His two-toned gaze is piercing, even at this distance.

Izuku swallows thickly, clenching his fists. “Thanks,” he tells him quietly. “I owe you for this.”

Shouto’s expression melts, gaze softening into something warmer than his left side—something familiar.

“No, you don’t,” he murmurs, lips quirking up on one side in a faint smile.

January 9th, 2026

“How’s work going, Shouto?”

At first, he thinks he’s misheard. It’s certainly not a question he ever would’ve expected to hear within the confines of his apartment, especially not on a soft Tuesday morning when they’re both overdue for a joint trip to the farmer’s market at the end of the block and the world doesn’t need saving for once—and to hear it from Keiji, no less.

Slowly, Shouto lowers the toothbrush from his mouth and spits into the sink, brows knit as he regards Keiji in the mirror of the bathroom vanity. Keiji’s got a shoulder leaned against the far wall near the still-wet, still-steaming shower, smartphone in hand as he browses the news in bored silence just like he does every morning before heading to the university for work. His glasses are slightly fogged from the final vestiges of humidity leftover from Shouto’s steaming hot shower, and the ends of his dark hair are starting to curl above the crisp collar of his white button-up.

“Why,” Shouto intones, keeping his gaze on Keiji’s reflection. The sconces on either side of the mirror highlights the purpled bruising that paints Shouto’s torso like explosive graffiti, mottled discoloration disappearing beneath the edge of the pristine white towel he has tucked low around
his hips—a gift from that armed robbery gone wrong he handled a few days prior.

Keiji glances up from his phone to give Shouto an odd look, but only for a second. He returns to his dutiful scrolling. “What do you mean?”

Shouto tries to refrain from scoffing incredulously. “Are you serious? Keiji, you never ask about my work.”

Keiji looks up at him through his lashes, vaguely annoyed. “I’m allowed, aren’t I?”

Shouto frowns, then leans down to cup some water from the faucet into his hands, drink, swish, and spit. He drops his toothbrush into its holder right next to Keiji’s, leaning over the sink closer toward the mirror. “I thought work-talk was off-limits,” he murmurs, finger-combing his wet hair. “Told me it scares you to hear about it.”

“It does,” Keiji says, mouth turning down at the corners. He locks his phone and pockets it, crossing his arms over his chest. “But— I don’t know. I just haven’t heard much from you lately. Figured I’d ask, stay updated a bit.”

“I’ve been busy,” Shouto answers vaguely, still confused as he leans toward the mirror and begins sorting the two halves of his hair into something a bit more presentable. The damp strands cling to his fingertips and tangle relentlessly; eventually, he just gives up and lets it lay where it wants to. “Lots of night patrols, lots of shit going down in South End now that Izuku’s back. You know how my schedule is.”

“I thought you said things might slow down once you started working together.”

Shouto’s gaze falls to the faded bruises that stain his body, the scrapes on his body that never seem to heal no matter how many times he bandages them. There’s a shallow cut across his right cheekbone that almost glows red in the lamplight—a gift from a piece of stray glass that nicked him in that city block fire last night; he can almost feel the searing heat of the explosive backdraft that blew the north side of the building to pieces. He hears the screams of the people on the street below, feels the way Izuku’s hand had grasped his wrist to pull him out of the way of a falling chunk of rubble, remembers the exact way his heart stopped beating as Izuku leapt into the building in a blur of green and silver like he had nothing left to lose.

He’s stopped wearing his wedding ring since that day in his apartment two weeks ago; Shouto noticed it last night. After the block fire had been contained and extinguished, Izuku’d removed the charred remains of his gloves back at headquarters to reveal scraped knuckles and a naked ring finger, and it took everything in Shouto not to stare. They don’t talk about what happened that day, save a passing word here and there. There’s a grim acceptance in Izuku’s eyes now that’s replaced the melancholy emptiness that lived there before, deep and infinite like an abyss.

Shouto worries about him. He figures he’ll always worry about Izuku now that they’re partners in the field, and even more so now that Shouto’s seem him at his lowest. He wouldn’t say they’re friends yet, but… well, it’s an improvement.

“I said things might slow down,” Shouto murmurs after a moment, reaching over for the small tub of arnica cream that Izuku shoved in his hands two months ago with a muttered, “This always worked for me,” and a faraway look in his eye that Shouto decided not to ask about. Twisting the lid off, he slathers some cream on his fingertips and begins rubbing the cream against his bruised side. “Things’ll level out eventually, Keiji, I promise. The transition is just a little rough right now. Okay?”
Keiji bites the inside of his cheek, lips twisting. He frowns down at the floor, shifting his weight. “All right,” he says quietly. He winces, raking a hand through the dark waves of his hair and gesturing vaguely. “Just… I don’t know, at least keep me informed? I mean, even if you can’t give me anything specific, give me something. Please. I just—” he trails nervously. “I worry. Especially when I don’t hear from you for a few days and all I’ve got is the news to go off of.”

Shouto casts a small wry smile in the reflection of the mirror, left side warming just a bit. “Have I ever told you you’re cute when you’re worried about me?”

Keiji’s gaze goes flat. “Oh, shut up. I’m being serious.”

“Mm, you’re cute when you’re serious, too.”

“Shouto.”

Shouto lets out a breathy laugh of amusement, twisting his body to reach a bruise that curls around the curve of his waist and disappears into the valley of his spine. “Sorry, sorry,” he says placatingly, smiling slightly as his fingers strain to reach. “Look, I’ll try to keep you a little bit more in the loop from now on, okay? I’m not going to promise anything, but I’ll do what I can if it makes you feel better.”

Keiji’s face relaxes, but not much. He nods, biting his lower lip. “I— yeah. Yeah, okay. I’ll hold you to that.”

“Your confidence is absolutely inspiring, you know that?” Shouto grimaces as his muscles strain beneath his skin, igniting in sharp discomfort as he tries to reach that fist-shaped bruise right in the center of his lower back. Letting out a breath, he rolls his shoulders and holds the tub of arnica ointment out to the side, raising an eyebrow at Keiji in the mirror of the vanity. “Hey— would you mind? I can’t reach.”

Wordlessly, Keiji nods and steps up behind him, taking the jar of ointment from Shouto’s hand with gentle, soft fingers. Shouto watches Keiji’s serene, sculpted face in the mirror as he rubs a bit of the cream between his hands, warming it up before massaging it into the pliant, soft muscles of his lower back with steady, assured movements. The rhythm is steady and Keiji’s hands are warm, large, and oh-so familiar.

Shouto finds himself leaning into the soft pressure of Keiji’s fingers, closing his eyes as every muscle in his body seemingly goes slack beneath his touch. They don’t often have mornings like this—conflicting schedules and incomprehensible crime rates usually get in the way of docile domestic pleasures such as this, go figure. Shouto has to take these moments as they come, enjoying their simplicity whenever he can. Most heroes are never so lucky.

The pain in his side has dulled to an ache that sits just below the surface of his skin, throbbing subtly in time with his sluggish heartbeat. He drifts and tunes everything out except the sound of skin sliding over skin and the way Keiji’s fingers seem to dance and play, nails dragging and fingertips feather-light against the dip in his spine. Sleep reaches her hands out, playfully toying with the ends of Shouto’s consciousness as he considers skipping the farmer’s market for the second week in a row just so he can stay here and sleep for the next fifty-seven years, give or take a few. After the last few days of grueling, never-ending patrols in South End, Shouto’s not entirely sure he wouldn’t commit first-degree murder if it meant he could take a nap in relative peace.

Time drips, stretches. He floats on the air, feather-light and careless for the first time in months. He’s so relaxed that he hardly notices when Keiji’s hands drift apart, coming to rest on Shouto’s hips right above the bunched edge of the terrycloth towel that’s the only thing standing between
him and the humid air of the bathroom. His fingers dig into the hollows of Shouto’s hipbones, sending warmth straight down to his toes.

He feels teeth at the juncture of his neck and shoulder, scraping lightly. Shouto shivers, exhaling a puff of frost that spreads feather-fractals of ice across the mirror.

“Mean,” he murmurs, letting his head drop back onto Keiji’s shoulder with his eyes still closed. Keiji sucks softly on the sensitive spot right beneath his jaw, earning a soft moan for his troubles. “God, mean.”

Keiji chuckles lowly, trailing his fingers lightly up and down Shouto’s sides. His fingers toy with the edge of the towel, teasing and taunting in all the right ways. “I’ve missed you, Shouto.”

Shouto inhales sharply through his teeth as Keiji presses him up against the front of the vanity, feeling hot skin and shifting muscles against his towel-covered backside along with a telltale hardness that sucks all the air from his lungs. Keiji’s grip on his hips is possessive, fingers splaying widely and nudging the edge of the terrycloth towel that’s slowly beginning to slip from around his hips. Shouto’s toes curl, his heart jackrabbits in his chest. His blood feels hotter than his own flames beneath his skin, tickling and singeing every nerve ending from his scalp to his toes.

Keiji reaches around to loosen the towel completely, letting it drop around Shouto’s feet in a damp heap that gets hurriedly kicked away with a throaty grumble of annoyance. He hums lowly against the pliant flesh of Shouto’s neck, and then there’s pressure, warm and forceful, as Keiji presses a hand to the center of Shouto’s back, bending him over the marble-topped vanity so low that his hands have to brace themselves against the mirror. The toothbrush holder gets knocked over with a clatter and the mirror shudders under the weight.

Shouto’s breathless, staring with pupils blown wide as Keiji’s reflection traces his tongue down the valley of Shouto’s spine achingly slow, hands wandering dangerously and eyes dark with promise. It’s been weeks since they’ve fucked, even longer since Keiji was able to spend the night. Shouto’s cock twitches in anticipation, practically feeling ready to burst out of his skin from the pressure that builds with each swipe of Keiji’s tongue and the slightest brush of his fingers.

“God, you’re fucking gorgeous,” Keiji whispers against a patch of unbruised skin as he ruts against Shouto’s ass, fingers digging deeply into the dip of his waist. “So gorgeous.”

“And you’re overdressed,” Shouto murmurs, arching his back and rolling his hips a bit until Keiji spits out swears under his breath.

With a startling show of force, Keiji growls and yanks Shouto back up, spinning him around to pin him against the vanity with white-knuckled grip. Keiji’s lips close over his with pressure that sends Shouto into searing delirium; there’s fire behind his eyelids, frost in his fingertips as Keiji’s tongue dips into the wet heat of Shouto’s mouth and Keiji’s hands tangle in the damp tendrils of his hair, angling his head this way and that for better access as the pressure builds below his navel. Shouto’s fingers fumble with the buttons on the front of Keiji’s dress shirt, and it takes everything in him to keep from tearing the damn thing in two when Keiji tugs at his hair to angle the kiss deeper, harder.

“Fuck,” Keiji gasps into Shouto’s mouth. His voice is ruined, eyes more pupil than iris at this point. “Fuck. Wish we— wish we could do this all the time.”

“In a perfect world.” Shouto moans against his lips, grinding his hips against Keiji’s with not nearly enough pressure to be pleasing.
Keiji groans and seizes him around the waist suddenly. He lifts him onto the edge of the vanity, stepping in the space between his legs without breaking stride in the kiss; he nips and tugs at Shouto’s lower lip, sucking and running the flat of his tongue over the area to soothe the bite before dipping back into his mouth for more.

“In a perfect world,” Keiji agrees, shrugging his unbuttoned shirt off and tossing it on the floor. He grins, slipping his hands around the back of Shouto’s neck to pull him back into another heated kiss.

“Oh,” Keiji continues, tongues still tangled, “if we finally moved in together.”

Shouto stiffens. His eyes snap open, lips sore and bruised, skin scalding—but the feeling in his belly is one of cold, frigid fear.

Slowly, Keiji realizes Shouto is no longer responding to the kiss and slows his ministrations. He pulls back, eyebrows furrowed in confusion, mouth poised to say something. Shouto beats him to it.

“You know why we can’t do that,” he blurts out, frowning. His skin feels cold, and the hard edge of the vanity is digging into the backs of his thighs painfully. “We’ve talked about this.”

Keiji blinks, then lets out a quiet, confused huff of laughter. His hands fall, settling on Shouto’s thighs, and he shrugs. “We talked about it a while ago, yes. Figured we could broach the topic again since things are different now.”

“They’re really not.” Frowning, Shouto removes Keiji’s hands from his thighs and hops down from the vanity. He bends to pick up his towel, tucking it around his hips once again and frowning down at the inconvenient bulge that sits beneath the bleached terrycloth. “I’m not risking your safety for our sex life. It’s just not worth it.”

“My safety?” Keiji asks, incredulously. He scoffs, brows furrowing in bewilderment. “That’s the excuse you’re going with this time? Honestly, Shouto.”

“What do you mean ‘this time?’ That was the reasoning the first time we had this conversation, and it’s not an excuse. It’s a valid concern and you know it.” Shouto frowns at his reflection, smoothing his hair down and rubbing irritably at the red flush that covers him from neck to navel. “I’m on a lot of peoples’ shit lists. I don’t want you to end up as leverage if worse comes to worst and something happens.”

“So, what?” Keiji asks, voice vaguely irritated. He stoops down to pick up his shirt, shrugging it back on. “You just want to keep me as the boy toy who visits a few times a month and fucks the frustration out of you? Hardly a position I’m excited to maintain, Shouto.”

“Don’t twist my words,” Shouto says tiredly, stepping past him and through the door out to his bedroom loft.

“Don’t twist my words, I’m telling you exactly what you’re telling me.” He gestures irritably. “Does this mean marriage is out of the question, too? Because by your logic—”

“I’m not talking about marriage,” Shouto snaps, yanking the top drawer of his dresser open with a bit more force than necessary. He glares down at his neatly-folded boxer briefs and selects a pair of navy ones, tossing his towel on his bed and pulling them on hastily. “I’m talking about moving in together. The two are mutually exclusive topics of conversation as far as I’m concerned.”

Keiji follows, leaning against the doorway as he rebuttons his shirt. He scoffs, shaking his head. “I
don’t see how. Marriage *usually* requires moving in together. And since you’ve always spoken so adamantly against marriage—"

“My opinions on marriage don’t enter into it!”

“Of course they do!” Keiji cries, tucking his shirt into his trousers with sharp, angry movements. He sighs angrily, pushing his glasses further up his nose. “Shouto, I’m okay with never getting married, but if you’re really not keen on moving in together at some point in our lives just because you fear for my *safety*, then I don’t really see this relationship—"

Shouto slams his dresser drawer closed and aims a narrow-eyed stare at Keiji that stops him mid-sentence. “See what?” Shouto demands, tossing a pair of fresh jeans onto his bed. He crosses his arms over his chest and lifts his chin defiantly. “You don’t see this relationship doing what, Keiji?”

Keiji bites the inside of his cheek, jaw flexing. “Nothing.”

“No, tell me, by all means. I’m interested.”

Keiji presses his fingers against his eyelids. “You *know* I don’t like it when you’re sarcastic.”

“Funny,” he says lowly, eyes narrowing into slits. “You know I don’t like it when you base the future of our relationship off whether or not we share a goddamn *apartment*. I’m sorry that what we have right now isn’t good enough for you.”

Keiji heaves a long-suffering sigh. “I wasn’t going to say—"

“Then what were you going to say?”

“Does it really matter at this point?” Keiji asks wearily. He rubs the back of his neck, exhaling slowly through his nose. “We’re clearly not moving in together. When you’ve made up your mind, nothing changes it save for the end of civilization as we know it. I don’t stand a chance.”

Shouto clenches his jaw. There’s a twisting feeling in his stomach, bitter as lead, and it feels a lot like hurt. “It matters to me.”

Keiji sends Shouto a tired, melancholy look that tears at the cavernous space in Shouto’s chest. His hair is messy and his lips are kiss-bitten red, but he’s never looked more exhausted than he does now. Shouto hates it.

After a moment, Keiji hangs his head and sighs, gesturing vaguely. “Let’s table this discussion for now, sweetheart. You have a farmer’s market to get to and I have things to do as well. I’d…” he trails, biting his lip. “I’d rather not fight today, if it’s all the same to you. You understand.”

Shouto blinks. “I thought we were going to the market together.”

“I have a stack of first draft essays in my office on campus that haven’t even been looked at,” Keiji explains quietly, straightening his shirt collar and grabbing his coat where it’s thrown over the railing of Shouto’s loft. He pulls it on, buttoning it securely and tucks his scarf around his neck—it’s the expensive cashmere one that Shouto got him for Christmas. “I’d better call the university back as well. I’ve put that off for way too long.”

Shouto uncrosses his arms, feeling an awful lot like a balloon someone came and let the air out of all at once. He watches in stunned silence as Keiji crosses the loft, drops a feather-light kiss on his cheek, and descends from his loft with careful, quiet footsteps that echoes through his apartment a lot louder than they strictly should, all things considered. There’s the jingle of keys, the turning of
a metal knob, and the gentle click of the door as it closes behind him, leaving Shouto alone in his
loft with his tumultuous thoughts. A flock of pigeons flies past his window as he stands frozen
where Keiji left him; the black hole of bitterness in Shouto’s stomach grows ever wider as his mind
races.

Why does being right always have to feel so wrong?

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Izuku gets a forwarded piece of junkmail that’s addressed to him and Lucy
at their old New York apartment. He has a crisis. It’s not pretty and a very powerful
scene, but he ultimately comes to terms with the fact that she’s gone and she's never
coming back to him. He stops wearing his wedding band a few weeks after the fact.

Tumblr | Twitter | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist
In Death's Dream Kingdom

Chapter Notes

No lead-in for this one, save a trigger warning here and another one down in the end note. Plus, this is a reminder to check tags for this story since I update them every time it's applicable. Warnings for blood, violence, and intense action sequences as well as kinda-sorta character death? Idk how to phrase it. If you're worried, skip to the end and read the last two lines of the chapter plus the warning right below it, then think really about how many chapters this story has before it's done.

They burn the candle at both ends, casting their long days and even longer nights in the sharp lambent light of conflagration. Sometimes the candle flickers, flames disturbed by the sharp breaths that slip between the spaces of their teeth. Other times, the flame burns too brightly for them to stand it, all searing skin and sting with no relief.

There’s really no in-between for them as days turn to weeks and weeks turn to months—but then again, there never has been an in-between for Shouto and Izuku. Not really, anyway.

January fades to February, and February gives way to March. The weather is cold and biting as spring rounds the distant corner, and their winter costumes do little to block the invisible, frost-bitten knives that prick the surface of their skin every time they’re forced to give chase between the towering buildings of the financial district. Purse snatchers, hit-and-runs, armored car robberies, muggings, terrorist attacks—they all blur together and collect beneath the confines of their costumes in winestain bruises and shallow scrapes.

They work hard, capturing villains and cleaning up the streets with a blistering work ethic that puts the other heroes at Shouto’s agency to shame. Six months into their partnership and their arrest rate is already the highest in the prefecture, second-highest in the country. Momo calls it incredible. Izuku calls it “all part of the job.” Shouto calls it sleep-deprived hell. (But he’s pleased with their numbers nonetheless, so he doesn’t complain much. Just a little bit.)

Then things start to change, flames fanning into a wildfire before Shouto even knows what’s happened.

The Asahi Shimbun starts headlining their escapades after they stop a construction site collapse uptown. They make international news in January for a capsized freight ship rescue off the coast that resulted in no lives lost—a near thing, but they managed. They trend on Twitter for two days straight following the rescue of the city mayor from his home, which had been rigged to blow by a few small-time villains Shouto doesn’t even remember the names of. All of a sudden, Shouto sees his own face plastered on every magazine, newspaper, and electronic billboard in a hundred-mile radius, and Izuku’s name is always listed directly next to his. They become household names, never one without the other.

Magazines and morning talk shows start calling the agency after that, requesting interviews with the both of them and guest appearances on shows that Shouto’s never even heard of, much less watched. He gets a few offers for photoshoots and brand deals, too. He says no to almost all of them, citing professional goals and a lack of free time when in reality, he just really doesn’t want to
do them; cameras have never been his forte, after all.

Thankfully, Izuku is usually the one who handles those things with that pulled-string marionette smile of his, teeth flashing and dimples catching shadows with gut-wrenching familiarity as he accepts event appearances here and there. He talks to reporters on the edges of crime scenes, handles pushy paparazzi whenever he and Shouto are seen together outside of working hours. He headlines one or two conventions in Tokyo, too. (Shouto went to the second one. Izuku persuaded him by practically dragging him kicking and screaming, citing, “You’re Number One, Shouto. You’ve gotta inspire the people and—ow, stop hitting me, dude, come on.”)

Admittedly, the con wasn’t… terrible. But that doesn’t mean Shouto would want to do one ever again. Not alone, at least.

It’s no surprise that the media falls in love with Izuku all over again as the weeks drag on and their joint popularity skyrockets. How could they not? He’s magnetic in front of a camera, nearly unrecognizable as he charms reporters and forces laughs that the rest of the world believes are real, eyes crinkling and voice thick with warmth. Shouto watches all this from the sidelines, leaving his sidekick—and doesn’t that feel weird to say—to do the talking for him.

Despite the ridiculous persistence of their new adoring fan base, Shouto actually finds himself… enjoying his work a bit more. He will never admit it out loud to anyone except his niece (who keeps all secrets and will do nothing wrong in her life, ever), but he actually sort of likes working with Izuku in the field again, and the boost in public opinion has certainly helped with the more publicized aspects of his life as a hero. His newfound comfort with Izuku is not entirely surprising; they worked well together in high school, always managing to get slightly-above-mediocre marks from Aizawa-sensei (which basically amounted to top marks because Aizawa never gave anything above a B), and their communication skills on the field of battle were unmatched by anyone else in class, save for Bakugou and Kirishima.

Maybe he’s just a masochist, or maybe he’s been doing this alone for so long that he’s forgotten what it’s like to not feel the entire world on his shoulders. He’s not sure. Either way, he finds himself feeling strangely bereft of… something on those rare days that Izuku leaves their patrol shift early to head to his psychiatric evaluations at the agency.

He tries not to think about it. Soon enough, the provisional time for their partnership will come to an end, and then Izuku will be a full-fledged hero in good standing with the IHA again. Shouto knows better than to get comfortable with this change. He’ll be on his own again soon enough, and things will all go back to normal.

Normal, his brain whispers one day when they’re both perched on a rooftop, legs swinging over the edge of the skyscraper as they wait for a distress call. What is normal?

Shouto doesn’t put much thought into it. He busies himself instead with patrols that go too long, fights that hurt too much, and late nights at the agency that always involve far more paperwork than he and Izuku ever actually anticipate. They check crisply-printed boxes in the dead of night like the dutiful heroes they are, filling out Illegal Quirk Usage forms and sharing containers of lukewarm noodles soundlessly while the clock ticktickticks. Sometimes they take breaks and watch the news or YouTube videos of their friends doing daring rescues in Seoul and Shanghai, Moscow and Almaty, London and Los Angeles. It fills the silence for a short time, at least.

What they don’t do is talk about the elephant in the room—the one that’s been there since that dreadful day in December.

Get out, Izuku had cried with that shattered-glass voice of his, eyes unfocused and disoriented.
Shouto sees broken dishware, toppled boxes, a hole in the wall shaped vaguely like a cell phone. The tableau is burned into the backs of his eyelids, every angle stained sepia with the saturation dialed up to eleven, and he still feels the sting of those post-it notes hitting his chest; it sings through his nerve endings, the echo of a silent gunshot that bit someplace deeper, someplace less obvious.

It’s off-limits, a topic of conversation that isn’t Shouto’s to dig up, no matter how tempting. Shouto’s never been the type for discussions of feelings and emotions, he supposes, but he still has them, dammit. He can relate. Sometimes. If he really wants to. And he does want to, but he doesn’t exactly get the opportunity between the nonstop villain fights and mountains of paperwork that accompany every hour of their lives. The conversation falls to the wayside more often than not, much to his disappointment.

Sometimes Shouto wishes Izuku would bring it up. Just once. Surely it would be simpler to ask the Symbol of Peace, “How are things?” rather than skim the clinical reports from the agency’s psychiatric evaluator and only grow more concerned every time he reads the words “internalized trauma” and “limited support network” every other paragraph. Maybe if Izuku brought it up, Shouto would have the chance to do… something.

But Izuku doesn’t bring it up, so Shouto doesn’t ask. It’s not his place to pry. They fight, they fill out paperwork, and they pretend everything is normal—even when it’s not. And that’s okay because it’s what they’ve always done, isn’t it?

Were the situation different, Shouto would think the ambient light of their relationship almost lovely. He’d relish the warmth and bask in resplendent glow of something small and easily extinguished that he hasn’t held in the palm of his hand since his later years of high school—a friendship he never thought he deserved, and one he never knew how much he needed until it was gone.

If they’re burning the candle at both ends, Shouto has to wonder how long he has until they run out of viable wick. How long until that light is extinguished? How long until he patrols the streets alone? How long until everything falls apart all over again?

The thought isn’t very comforting.

March 13th, 2026

Subways have always felt like liminal space to Shouto. He’s not quite sure why though.

Maybe it’s the darkness that lurks outside the smudged windows as worn bricks and endless tunnels pass by; or maybe it’s the way the floor creaks and shudders with every turn and sharp stop; perhaps it’s the hundreds of people that cram themselves behind the doors just so they can get from Point A to Point B in a timely fashion. It’s all transitory, impermanent. A paper-thin waiting room full of faceless strangers in business suits and cracked plastic seats that haven’t been replaced since 1984.

Shouto keeps his eyes downcast as the subway jostles him out of his reveries, Izuku’s shoulder brushing his own as they’re both shifted in solidarity with the rest of the passengers. Grimacing, Shouto adjusts his grip on the handle overhead. Two stops to go. His arm’s slowly starting to go
numb as the blood drains toward his heart, and he’s sweating beneath the confines of his peacoat. *Too many people.*

On his left, Izuku keeps a firm grip on one of the vertical steel girders by the door as the passing lights in the tunnel cast his freckles in sterile yellow-white lamplight. He’s wearing an Ingenium jacket and mittens with a knit cap pulled down low over his ears, thick-rimmed glasses sitting low on his nose as he scrolls through his phone aimlessly. The tip of his nose is a tiny bit red from the chill that pervades the air despite the warm press of bodies all around them.

It’s instinct more than anything to heat his left side by a few degrees, shifting a few inches closer until their elbows brush. It’s a silent *‘I’m here, let me help’* that they’ve perfected since January. A sort of silent communication that’s still rusty around the edges from years of disuse and neglect.

Izuku glances up when he feels Shouto’s elbow touch his own, eyebrow raised above the plastic rim of his glasses. When he finally feels the tentative fingers of warmth permeate his thin jacket, however, his face softens into something a bit more grateful.

“I thanks,” he murmurs, dipping his head low as he returns to his Twitter feed, hair flopping into his eyes where it pokes out from underneath his hat.

Shouto hums noncommittally, icing over his right arm to balance out the sticky heat beneath the thick wool of his coat. “You know, maybe if you actually bought a winter coat and *wore* it once in a while, you wouldn’t have this problem.”

He shrugs. “Can’t be helped. Five percent body fat, remember?”

“Exactly why you should wear a goddamn coat.”

“And miss out on the chance to use you as a personal furnace? Never.” Izuku huffs a slight laugh, lifting his wrist to pull his sleeve down over his fingers with his teeth while he keeps a firm grip on the metal beam, eyes still glued to his screen. “And I *have* a coat, thanks. A real coat—like, with buttons and everything. It’s… somewhere.”

Shouto gives him a flat look. “Somewhere,” he repeats.

Izuku hums, nodding. “Yeah. I think it’s in one of the boxes at my mom’s place.” He blinks. “Or maybe it’s in my storage unit. I dunno.”

“Maybe you should *find it,*” he urges, jarring Izuku’s elbow pointedly.

“Why would I do that? I’ve got you.” He shifts an inch closer, still distractedly retweeting and liking things with rapid-fire precision while his fingers tremble slightly. “Much more efficient. And comfortable.”

“I’m not a space heater, Izuku.”

“No,” Izuku agrees, glancing up over the rim of his glasses. He smiles slightly, dimple sharpening near the corner of his mouth. “You’re *better*.”

Shouto rolls his eyes and adjusts his grip on the handle overhead, grimacing as his fingers tingle numbly. Their give-and-take is still clumsy at times—sometimes they run on clashing wavelengths, sometimes they speak their own language—but today’s been a better day than most. Having a day off tends to lift spirits, even if that day off has to now be spent on overdue paperwork because *somebody* keeps falling asleep in Shouto’s office at the end of every patrol.
(It’s Shouto. Shouto’s the one who sleeps. He’s not proud of it.)

He stiffly releases the handle and lowers his arm, shaking out his fingers as he moves to lift his other arm to replace it. They only have another two or three stops before they reach Izuku’s apartment, and the messenger bag is beginning to dig into his right shoulder a bit. Why does Izuku have to live so far from Midtown? Honestly, you’d think he’d want a more central location than this place.

Just as his fingertips brush the handle, the train gives a shudder as it rounds a sharp bend. Shouto staggers, off-balance, one hand instinctively shooting out to catch himself on something, anything —

But something reaches him first. A pressure, warm and strong.

Izuku’s hand is on Shouto’s upper arm, fingers curled around his bicep. Those scarred fingers hold Shouto in place with a frustrating amount of ease as the train levels out, brakes screeching and protesting one by one like banshees, and the contents of Shouto’s stomach suddenly feel like rocks or broken glass or sour candy. The lights flicker and the intercom mutters nonsensically in the background; it’s nothing more than white noise to Shouto’s ears. Izuku doesn’t look up from his phone once, lips pursed as he scrolls and scrolls.

Swallowing, Shouto straightens and finds his footing once again, reaching up to grip the handle more securely this time.

“I—” his voice is rough, and he clears his throat. “Erm. Thank you,” he tries again quietly, not quite sure why his voice sounds like sandpaper.

Izuku nods, releasing him. He flexes his hand, knuckles blanching beneath silver-white scar tissue, then grips the same support pole he’d been holding moment before.

“No problem,” he murmurs. His gaze flicks upward for a brief moment, falling on Shouto’s paler-than-normal face, then his arm. He opens his mouth as if to say something, Twitter feed slowly coming to a stop beneath his thumb where it hovers above the screen.

He apparently thinks better of it. His mouth closes, twists. He looks at the pixelated destination display above the door and frowns.

“Our stop’s next,” he tells Shouto, popping one of his knuckles noisily. He inclines his head in the direction of the doors. “C’mon. We’ll get dinner on the way to my place, yeah?”

The remainder of the ride is spent in relative silence. Shouto and Izuku sway in solidarity with the rest of the passengers of the car, and Shouto tries not to think about the burning imprint on his upper arm that sears him all the way through the fabric of his coat. He attempts to distract himself by watching a mother and her young daughter play alphabet games on a tablet near the far end of the train instead; they giggle and smile together, and by the time Shouto’s stop comes up, they’re both engaged in a small tickle fight that has the little girl letting out peals of bright laughter as she squirms on her mother’s lap.

Gradually, the train screeches to a stop. The intercom buzzes, a warbled voice coming out of the dated speakers in a pile of incomprehensible gibberish, and the doors shudder and slide open. Izuku tucks his phone in his pocket, slipping through the mass of bodies in the subway car, and Shouto follows close behind.

The subway platform is small and dark, low-ceilinged with peeling posters on the walls and
smatterings of graffiti here and there, each one more whitewashed and faded than the next. A young, tattooed busker plucks random chords on his guitar on the other end of the platform, nodding his head with a rhythm only he can hear.

Izuku stuffs his hands in the front pockets of his jacket and strolls toward the crumbling concrete steps at the end of the platform, keeping the bottom half of his face tucked into his jacket collar as he walks. A few people do double-takes as he passes by with Shouto in tow, but most glance over them sightlessly—even with hair as distinctive as his own, people have trouble identifying them in public when they’re not wearing their hero costumes. It’s a blessing in more ways than one, he’s found.

“So what paperwork do we have left?” Izuku asks as they stroll the length of the platform, clipping through the turnstiles.

“The Kazuki case, mainly.” Shouto shuffles through next, making sure his messenger bag doesn’t get caught in the metal bars. “Oh, and Momo says we need to re-process that villain with the overgrowth Quirk. Apparently, we miscategorized her.”

“Again?”

“Looks that way, yes.”

Izuku scowls, hunching his shoulders against the crowd of people gathered in the main part of the subway station. The noise is deafening, a constant murmur against a backdrop of honking cars aboveground and screaming brakes as trains pull into nearby platforms. “Figures,” he mutters, slipping through a crowd of chattering girls with shopping bags looped over their arms. “This is what we get for doing our paperwork when we’re both tired. It’s— I don’t know. Divine punishment or something.”

“We were both half-asleep when we filed that case,” he reminds Izuku, shrugging. “Mistakes happen.”

“‘We’?” he parrots incredulously, turning around to walk backwards as he looks at Shouto with amused disbelief etched into every feature. A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth, but he struggles to keep it down. “You were the one who fell asleep in the middle of that third report the other night. Unlike some people, I’m actually capable of staying up past ten o’clock on a school night. Shocking, I know.”


“Semantics?” he echoes, laughing lightly.

“Yes, semantics,” Shouto insists, smiling. His chest is stuffed with feathers, veins full of helium and a thousand other things that feel like the beginning of laughter. “And I could stay up past ten if I wanted to.”


“I could.”

“No, no, I believe you. Totally.”

Shouto rolls his eyes. “Oh, for the love of— will you turn around already? You’re going to trip.” He shoves lightly at Izuku’s shoulder until he wheels around and resumes walking normally, falling into step on Shouto’s left out of sheer habit. “One of these days, I’ll stay up until three or
something. Just wait."

“I have a feeling I’ll be waiting a long time for that, but okay. Sure. Whatever you say.” Izuku chuckles and shakes his head, pressing his smile against the inside of his jacket collar like a secret. In the yellow lamplight of the subway station, his freckles look like tiny flecks of amber on the ridges of his cheekbones. “Hey, do you remember in school when we moved into the dorms our first year? All you wanted to do was sleep the second we got there, and I swear it w—"

Abruptly, a few people shove past them both as they walk past the ticket kiosks. The strangers’ paces are brisk and most of them have phones clutched to the sides of their heads in white-knuckled grips, each one babbling senselessly. Izuku shoots them annoyed looks when one clips his bad shoulder with a little too much force, and his steps stutter as pain tightens his expression. Shouto opens his mouth to ask if he’s okay. It’s knee-jerk, nothing he really thinks too much about. Izuku beats him to it though.

“Jesus. And I thought New Yorkers were rude,” he mutters under his breath, reaching up to massage his fingers into the pliant muscle between his neck and shoulder. He rolls the joint, being careful to avoid the people who brush past him like there’s not enough time in the entire fucking world. “I swear, it’s like manners don’t exist anymore. Call me crazy.”

“You’re not crazy,” Shouto tells him, walking a little bit closer as more people begin rushing toward the platforms in all directions. He frowns, noting one girl in particular with a pale face and trembling fingers who’s doing her best to dial a number on her mobile. She looks—

She looks terrified.

Red flags pop up one by one in the back of his mind, littering his mind with intangible warnings he can’t quite identify but he knows are there all the same. Even Izuku stops, one foot frozen on the first concrete step that will lead them to the street above, and his gaze sharpens with attention as they both come to the same realization. All of a sudden, the details set like ink stains, each one bleeding into sharp blacks and sterile whites as the air goes strangely still.

The world holds its breath. They wait.

Sirens.

The noise is sharp and piercing, digging deep like a razor blade into the sinuous fibers of his fight-or-flight instinct. Izuku immediately drops into a defensive position, eyes sharp and scanning the environment, and Shouto swears every inch of his body freezes over as both of them pause amongst the mounting chaos that swarms around them—the panic begins to catch like wildfire, and soon, every person in the station is swarming the turnstiles in hopes of fleeing something none of them can see. Women shriek, men trip over themselves as more and more people begin flooding the stairs, running from… something.

Izuku looks at Shouto over the heads of people swarming past them on all sides, his steely gaze asking a question neither of them thought they would ever have to answer on their day off. Shouto clenches his jaw, nodding in assent.

They bolt.

They push past people, shoving and forsaking apologies in favor of getting one step higher than they were before. Shouto grits his teeth, elbowing past strangers who scream and swear as they flood from the street toward the relative safety of the subway tunnels, each person more crazed and
panicked than the last. It’s like swimming upstream in a river that’s perfectly content to drown each and every one of them without a second thought. The higher Shouto climbs, the louder the sirens become. He smells smoke and the metallic scent of electricity, tastes them on the back of his tongue like bitter medicine.

When they finally burst through the crowd and onto the sunlit streets of the lower east district, Shouto and Izuku can do little more than gape, breathless for all the wrong reasons. Cars are stopped in the streets, crashed into lampposts, rear-ended near intersections. People sprint down the sidewalks in a panic, their faces soot-covered and marked with tear tracks that gleam silver against the carnage. A few people poke their heads out their apartment windows, holding up their phones in front of their faces as they all look north at the enormous plume of black smoke that rises over the rooftops in the far distance.

Something’s burning. Whatever it is, it’s large. A thought tickles the back of Shouto’s mind, but he dismisses it. *Impossible.*

The crowd parts around them on either side of the sidewalk like they’re little more than stones in a stream. Izuku blinks rapidly, fists clenching and unclenching as his breath comes out in little puffs of frosty air, his eyes aimed skyward and wider than saucers. Lighting skitters across his skin erratically. He looks bewildered. Horrified.

“That’s—" he starts, voice hollow and very, very small. He shakes his head in disbelief. “No. No, no, no. This can’t be—"

“*Don’t,*” Shouto says sharply, pulling his messenger bag over his shoulder and tossing it toward a nearby brick wall where he freezes it in place with a flourish of fingers. He cracks his neck, sheds his winter coat, and drops it in a gutter. “We won’t know for sure until we’re closer.”

His gaze is helpless, panic creeping in at the edges. “But—"

“Focus, Izuku,” snaps Shouto, rounding on him. He nods in the direction of that massive, horrible column of black smoke, and holds out a hand for him to take. “There’s no time to think about the details right now. Are you with me or not?”

Izuku stares at his hand, eyes glassy and unseeing. He hesitates. His fists clench inside his mittens, stretching the knit taut over his knuckles.

His gaze suddenly hardens. With sharp, jerky movements, he sheds his gloves, hat, and jacket, dropping his glasses to the concrete and leaving him clad only in his jeans and short-sleeve t-shirt. Izuku grips Shouto’s wrist, locking their arms together.

“So much for paperwork,” he mutters, the muscle in his jaw fluttering beneath tanned skin. He spears Shouto with a look so intense that he feels it all the way down to his toes. “One or two?”

“Two. We need to stay off the ground.”

“Got it.”

And with that, Izuku grits his teeth and pulls, yanking Shouto’s arm so hard he worries his shoulder will pop right out of its socket. The centrifugal force stops his heart, the crushing grip on his wrist nearly enough to snap every bone from elbow to fingertip as Izuku hauls him around, building up speed with one rotation, two, *and—*

A burst of green energy, and Shouto is launched into the air. He feels the wind screaming past his ears, icy and needle-like against his exposed skin as the street below gets infinitely smaller and the
flat expanse of apartment building rooftops greets him like an old friend, each one frost-covered and grey with the frigidity of mid-March weather. He arcs through the air, teeth clenched and lungs in his throat as he reaches the zenith of Izuku’s boost and begins to plummet—just in time.

Shouto wastes no time conjuring his ice the second he finds his equilibrium, keeping his eyes on the horizon to maintain his point of reference. His sneakers touch ice a moment later, smooth and solid, and gravity fills his bones with molten iron as he begins to slide through the air on glacial arches and midair icebergs. He sees the smoke in the distance, the source hidden behind a few taller buildings that surround it, and the feeling in Shouto’s chest grows worse and worse with every passing meter. No, no, no—

In his peripherals, he sees sparks of green energy and hears the heart-stopping boom of Izuku launching himself from the street to follow. Izuku jumps from wall to wall down the length of the city street, eyes narrowed into slits and teeth bared as his feet dig into brickwork and stucco facades. He leaps from one side of the street to the other, building up speed and keeping pace with Shouto’s progress as easily as breathing. Whenever Shouto inevitably begins to decelerate, Izuku is always there to intercept his downward pitch in midair, snatch his wrist, and hurl him even higher than before. They never lose speed, never blink, never doubt. Their eyes remain on the horizon, that black smoke looming larger and larger until they’re right upon it.

Shouto lands hard on a rooftop directly across the street from the affected building, breaking his fall with a graceless roll that would be a lot easier if he weren’t wearing fitted jeans and a long-sleeved tee. He dusts himself off and picks gravel out of his scraped forearms, brushing small sheets of ice off his right shoulder. Izuku lands next to him a moment later with an impact that rattles the lightning rods on all four corners of the building, his face grim and pricked red with windburn. He approaches the edge of the building where Shouto stands, one foot braced against the raised lip of the building.

“I don’t…” he trails breathlessly, One for All sputtering and dying like an extinguished candle beneath the surface of his skin. He gazes helplessly on the building before him, eyelashes fluttering, and shakes his head. “Why? Why would they— what did I ever do to—”

“I don’t think it matters why,” Shouto says grimly. “It matters that they did.”

Izuku’s apartment building is in flames. The blaze is scalding, even from this distance, and the flames reach high as they explode outward from the heart of the building. There’s a gaping hole right around the halfway point of the building—the vicinity of Izuku’s apartment, Shouto knows—where the flames burn white and steel girders glow red against the encroaching darkness of evening. The building is little more than a skeleton at this point. An explosion? A bomb or some kind? An accident?

Shouto dismisses that thought immediately. This is no accident. He can tell that much just by looking at it.

Shouto glances over the edge of the building they’re on, noting that the first responders are gathered by the dozen on the street twenty-five stories below. Helicopters patrol the air around the building, spotlights illuminate the parts of the building the fire trucks are attempting to extinguish with jets of water that don’t reach nearly far enough. The center of the tall building is little more than a blackened skeleton of steel at this point. An explosion? A bomb or some kind? An accident?

“Some kind of bomb, I think,” Shouto mutters, eyeing the shattered panes of glass that line the building and the cracked, weakened appearance of the central part of the skyscraper. He points at torn steel rebar and shattered stone near where Izuku’s apartment used to be. “Explosion came from the inside.”
“They were targeting me,” Izuku intones numbly, gazing expressionlessly at the fiery gash in the side of his building that used to be his home. “Why would they target me now?”

Shouto hums, freezing his fingertips solid. “Pissed anybody off recently?”

“What, you want a list?”

“Fair point,” Shouto says, brain already kicking into overdrive. He sees the melted glass, the red-hot rebar, the crumbling stones that look weaker and weaker as the second tick past. They don’t have much time. “It doesn’t look like the building’s been evacuated. We need to get the people out first, then worry about containment. Any ideas?”

“I can feel the heat from here,” Izuku says dazedly. “I won’t be able to get close. Not in civvies.”

“Leave that to me,” Shouto says, clenching his fist until the ice on his hand cracks. He jabs a finger overhead at the top of the building. “Start at the top, work your way down. I’ll try to have the fire down to a manageable temperature by the time you get there, all right?” He expects a sharp, “Got it!” or a stiff head nod, at the very least; it’s his usual response in situations like this.

But this time, Izuku says nothing, his head craned back as he looks hollowly up at the top of the building like there’s no life in him at all. His fingers are lax at his sides, eyes shining a dull green color Shouto hasn’t seen in weeks.

Shouto glances nervously at the crumbling, scorched building. He feels every second in his throat, every passing moment like sand in an hourglass they’ll never be able to flip over. Shouto swallows, then tries again.

“Izuku,” he says firmly, touching the inside of Izuku’s wrist with icy fingers. It does the trick, startling him out of his reveries, and Izuku looks down at him with a shuttered expression and tears in his eyes. Shouto hates the bitterness on his tongue. “We don’t have time for you to be upset about this. You know that.”

Something settles into place in Izuku’s expression, edges sharpening beneath a glassy layer of placidity that shouldn’t be half as disturbing as it feels. All of a sudden, Izuku brushes off Shouto’s touch, then takes a few preparatory steps away from the edge of the building and bends his knees.

“I’m not upset,” Izuku says quietly, bracing his feet against the gravel rooftop. He looks up, narrowing his eyes on the building across the street, and Shouto feels his stomach twist at the cold expression etched into his chiseled features.

“I’m angry,” he says, and leaps for all he’s worth.

The wind that follows him rips the oxygen from Shouto’s lungs. Izuku slices through the air, faster than a bullet, and dives through one of the intact glass windows on the top floor of the building. Shouto watches the trail of green electricity that follows him, mouth dry and heart aching for some indiscernible reason.

Shouto shakes the feeling off. He’ll worry about Izuku later. Right now, he has a job to do.

It’s madness the second it all begins, one moment tied to the next with iron cables pulled impossibly taut. Shouto sends sheet after sheet of ice crawling up the sides of the building like glaciers, contorting his fingers and clenching his teeth until his gums begin to protest. He feels the ache of his Quirk beneath his skin, telling him to get closer, to work with smaller areas; he ignores it. Every sheet of ice evaporates as soon as it gets within ten meters of the flames, but Shouto only grits his teeth and pours more of his power into it, damned be the consequences. He can handle...
As he works to cool the blaze down to a manageable temperature, Shouto spots Izuku darting in and out of the building with unbelievable speed. He’s always got at least two people in his arms every time he emerges, sometimes upwards of four or five, and he’s setting them on rooftops past the police perimeter that’s been set up six blocks out. Floor by floor, heartbeat by heartbeat, they work like a well-oiled machine. A few of the helicopters turn their spotlights on Shouto’s rooftop position, and the first responders all begin to cheer when they finally notice Izuku emerging from the building every few minutes with more and more people in his arms. The reporters and newscasters in the media helicopters shout encouragements to Shouto. He doesn’t spare them a glance, focus too crowded with thoughts of *please don’t get frostbite, please don’t get frostbite, oh, god I think I’m getting frostbite.*

Once the flames die from white to a more manageable orange, Shouto drops his hands and sucks in a deep breath, setting his left shoulder ablaze as he shivers. Izuku’s almost to the damaged section of the building, and the first responders have been slowly but steadily getting other people out from the bottom floors as best they can. The building looks more delicate than spun glass, its core all charred metal and scorched cinderblocks. It doesn’t look stable at all.

Shouto flexes his stiff right fingers and plunges them into the bright blaze on his shoulder, rubbing his senseless fingertips together to spur more feeling back into them. He’s not *done,* dammit, he has to hold out a little longer.

Moments later, Izuku bursts out of a window above the charred hole in the building, careening through the air toward Shouto. He lands hard on the gravel nearby, stumbling as he comes to a stop and rolls onto his back, breathing laboriously and gasping through his teeth. His face is covered with sweat-smeared soot and his hands are peppered with weeping blisters of varying sizes, and his hair is matted to his forehead.

“How—” he wheezes, coughing spasmodically for a brief moment. He wipes at his mouth and spits off to one side, dropping his head back against the gravel with a *thunk.* “How’re things on your end?”

“I’m managing,” Shouto grunts, rubbing a blazing palm over all the spots of frostbitten skin on his right forearm. He hisses at the sharp temperature differential, feeling it sear his skin like a thousand tiny needles, but he can’t afford to heat himself up slowly at this point. “You?”


“It’s bad in there?”

“Really bad,” he confirms, pressing a blistered palm against his eye. He grimaces, then sits up, wincing with the movement. “First responders have the bottom floors evacuated. I’ve got three left near the blast zone, then I’ll sweep below to make sure they didn’t miss anyone on accident.”

“Better make it fast,” Shouto tells him, brushing the charred remnants of the left side of his shirt off; the ashes are carried away by the acrid wind. “Don’t know how much longer the building will hold.”

Izuku nods. “Surrounding areas have been evac’d just in case.”

“One less thing to worry about.”

It’s fully dark now, the moon having risen what feels like hours ago. Shouto doesn’t actually know
how long it’s been—time tends to become a bit fluid when imminent destruction is on the brain. He looks at Izuku—his hair limp and blackened with soot, face pale beneath the ashes on his cheeks—and glances down at himself. He probably doesn’t look much better.

Shouto lets out a shallow laugh, shaking his head as he puts out his own flames. “Think we’ll get paid overtime for this?” he asks, glancing up at the starlit sky.

Izuku chuckles humorlessly, dragging himself to his feet. He comes up on Shouto’s left, falling in behind him like always.

“Doubtful,” he says, bumping Shouto’s shoulder. “But the optimism is definitely a nice change.”

“Gotta take it where we can get it.”

And for a brief, exquisite moment, the world ceases to spin. A pause, a catch-breath, each second trapped between time as Shouto turns to look at Izuku and feels oddly… content. He’s Quirk-exhausted and frostbitten and sore, sure, but he’s okay with all that because at least he’s not the only one with those problems right now. It’s a stunning moment that sings in his veins—a snapshot in time Shouto thinks he’d like to remember, if the world would give him that chance.

Quite a naïve thought, in retrospect.

It happens in slow-motion at first, each second sticky and stretching. The building shudders, groaning beneath the weight of itself as rebar snaps in fifteen different places and a downpour of heather-grey ash and concrete dust rains down to the now-empty street below. Glass shatters, louder than anything Shouto’s ever heard before in his life, and yellow flames shiver, flare, and roar ever louder as the building finally begins to fall.

Shouto feels crushed glass in his throat, steel in his veins as he moves. He feels something snap deep within himself as ice materializes out of nowhere—the crystals are larger than airplane hangars, larger than anything Shouto’s ever tried to build before in his life—and his heart stops beating as they come up on every side of the tilted top half of the apartment complex. Ice pierces cinderblock and steel, flooding each empty floor with enough ice to keep it in place—barely. The top half of the building is tilted precariously, held in place by several huge icebergs that span the distance between nearby buildings and the ground below.

There’s a ringing in Shouto’s ears and his arms shake as the immense weight of what he’s doing lands squarely on his shoulders, permeating his consciousness like a flood. I can’t hold this, he realizes as he feels the blood vessels in his right arm burst, then freeze beneath his skin in blue-violet fractals. The building is going to fall.

Somewhere, Izuku’s shouting. He feels hands on his outstretched arms, hears his name. Shouto, Shouto, Shouto—

“Go!” he grits out between his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut as every cell in his body is pulled in fifty thousand different directions. His blood screams, hotter than fire and twice as painful as the pull of that black hole in Geneva, but he feels the delicate balance he has on this knife’s particular edge. He can’t lean too far one way or the other, and he definitely can’t bend.

Izuku’s still saying his name. He doesn’t hear anything else.

“I can’t—fuck—I can’t hold it!” Every word is agony, each syllable a trial by fire. His teeth crack in his mouth. He thinks his arms are shaking. “Hurry, go!”

He forces himself to crack one eye open long enough to see the horrified look on Izuku’s face for a
split second before he leaps off the edge of the building, careening through the air and through a broken window. Shouto feels his added weight, no matter how slight, and his knees tremble as he struggles to hold the building up.

Shouto gets flashes here and there—a blur of green, the pale white cracks that ripple up the length of his ice supports, the rhythmic sound of helicopter blades around him, the burning brightness of spotlights against his frozen skin—but none of it makes sense when he puts it together. There is only this and now and pain and oh, god, this is the dumbest thing I’ve ever done before in my entire fucking life. Shouto feels his knees bite into gravel as his joints give way, but his fingers remain rigid against all odds. He shakes, he shudders, he sobs. But he does not let go.

Come on, he begs silently, feeling each blood vessel in his right arm burst and freeze over as the seconds pass with agonizing slowness. His breath is nothing more than a shallow puff of frost, slipping between his teeth. He can’t be sure, but he thinks his tongue is frozen inside his mouth. He attempts to breathe a little warmth into his—

A deafening crack, and one of Shouto’s ice structures shatters into a thousand pieces of colorless crystal. He lets out a choked sob that feels more like a wheeze, clenching his fist with a cry. He feels the skin around his knuckles tear and crack—too frozen to stretch that far without breaking. His blood is little more than crimson slush as it slips down the inside of his wrist and onto the gravel rooftop. He doesn’t feel the pain at this point, only numbness as his right arm slowly turns blue and black.

The building starts to tip, glass raining and flames burning brighter, but Shouto manages to call upon the final vestiges of his power to make a small, narrow ice support to pin the building in place delicately. Izuku’s in that building somewhere, saving the rest of the civilians. He can’t let the building fall until he’s sure they’re out.

Just a little longer, he prays as the building tips forward precariously, casting Shouto’s rooftop vantage point in shadow.

Save the day already, he prays as he watches Izuku come bursting out of the far side of the building with an elderly woman clutched in his blistered, burned arms.

Almost there, he prays as his vision begins to go black around the edges and his body slowly stops its violent shaking.

Save me, he thinks one last time as his body gives out.

The building falls, ice exploding in a thousand directions like deadly fireworks. The shadow of the tipping building casts Shouto in total darkness as he slumps forward onto the gravel rooftop, spent and shivering. He doesn’t feel anything. Not even the pain. Not even the sense of failure that he maybe didn’t hold the building long enough, maybe there are still people inside, maybe Izuku didn’t get out—

He feels the tickle of glass as it rains down on the thawed parts of his skin, barely cracking an eye open to watch the building plummet toward him. He sucks in a breath and throws his hands in front of his face. It’s pointless. He’s going to die, and all of it was pointless.

—he sees Central Park at midnight and Mizuki’s smile and stars, so many stars, maybe we should have done things differently when we were—
(Death reaches out Her hand.)

(Shouto answers with a dream.)

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: graphic violence, blood/injury, and intense action sequences. Also, Shouto maybe sorta dies a little bit at the end there. Whoops.

Tumblr | Twitter | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist
I've included a link in the first word of the bottom third section of this piece. Click on it if you'd like to listen to a very fitting song when you get to that part. Can't miss it. ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He doesn’t see the building drop. He doesn’t see the fireworks of broken glass and melted ice burst like supernovae above the city street, and he doesn’t see the billow of ash that accompanies the sudden drop in elevation as the building collapses in on itself. There’s the creak and groan of torn rebar and stripped steel, the crunch of cinderblocks and sheetrock as loud as gunshots. The top half of the building begins to tip and shift.

Izuku doesn’t see any of it. He doesn’t care. All he sees is Shouto on that fucking rooftop, drowned in the looming shadow of the taller building while his eyes roll back into his head, limbs turning boneless. He collapses in a heap. He does not move.

Power rips through Izuku’s veins and he leaps, arms outstretched as horror crests in the pit of his stomach. He feels glass nicking his skin like tiny needles as he shoots through the air toward that fucking rooftop. Horror and bile and a thousand other bitter things collect in the back of his throat. He’s not going to make it, Shouto’s going to die, there isn’t enough time!

The behemoth of glass and concrete crumbles into a shapeless mass of flames and embers as it falls directly toward Shouto. Izuku sees him weakly put his arms up to protect his face—and oh, god, what happened to his arm?—but the thought leaves him almost instantly. He’ll worry about it later. Right now, all that matters is speed and trajectory and I can’t lose him, too.

Don’t think about it don’t think about it don’t you dare fucking think about it—

Izuku grits his teeth and pours one hundred and ten percent of One for All into his legs, worrying his body won’t be able to take the strain and not giving a single shit about it. Debris and glass sting his face, slicing open the blisters on his arms like razors. He’s bleeding in one place, or perhaps several. He doesn’t feel the pain.

With a cry, Izuku reaches out, scarred fingers splayed wide and tearing open blisters by the dozens. He prays to every deity, everyone and everything he’s ever known or cared about as he reaches. The inches dwindle. He holds his breath.

Please, let me save him, he prays as the gap between the falling building and rooftop grows narrower and narrower. Please, let me do this one thing right.

He grabs Shouto’s wrist, fingers encircling delicate bone and frozen eggshell skin. He pulls for all he’s worth.

There’s a snap and a groan as Shouto’s shoulder leaves it socket with the sudden change of direction, but it’s hard to hear or care about such a minor thing as the building makes contact with the roof like a tidal wave, rocks thundering and disintegrating upon contact. It’s madness, darkness surrounding them from all sides, but Izuku refuses to let go. Still slicing through midair like a
bullet, Izuku yanks Shouto closer and pulls the unconscious hero to his chest, curling in around him and twisting so his back takes the brunt of the debris shower. It’s deafening, disorienting. Izuku can’t make sense of any of it. He just knows he’s flying forward, away from the destruction, and as long as he’s doing that, he supposes nothing else matters.

The second they break through the curtain of ash and debris, the intact building immediately gives way beneath the sudden weight, falling as easily as a house of cards beneath the strain. Izuku only has time to process another shift in his peripherals as ash overtakes the air like a thick, billowing, poisonous cloud of dying embers. The wind whistles past his ears. He feels gravity begin to take hold as they start to descend, arcing through the air in a tucked mess of limbs.

Izuku can’t see where they’re going or how fast—he braces himself for the worst, wondering if he’ll hit the side of a building of the street below. He wonders if he’ll even survive this kind of landing. Curling his arms around Shouto even tighter, Izuku tucks his head close and holds on for dear life, letting his back and shoulders take the brunt of whatever damage awaits them.

Izuku’s back hits glass first, the burned remnants of his t-shirt shredding open as the shards slice into his skin in a thousand different places. They careen through the side of the office building, smashing through cheap empty cubicles, desks, and computer stations with enough force to rattle their teeth. Izuku barely has time to slip a hand around the back of Shouto’s neck to keep his spine stable as they tumble gracelessly together, gradually rolling to a stop amongst all the smashed computers and composite wood dividers that populate the catastrophic office space.

For several seconds after they stop rolling, the world continues to spin. He sees a burst of orange flame in the distance, the sound of death all muted and warbled as if heard through a layer of cotton. He feels glass digging deeper into his back, accompanied by the hot rush of blood as it flows freely down the curve of his spine. He relishes the pain—it means he’s still alive.

Izuku’s fingers grip the back of Shouto’s neck with bruising force while the world rights itself once more. He keeps Shouto’s face pressed against the relative safety of his chest while Izuku’s other arm remains wrapped snugly around his waist. Izuku’s body is curled protectively around the unconscious hero. He doesn’t dare let him go—not yet, not yet, not until he knows they’re safe. Hell, he’s half-expecting this building to spontaneously crumble beneath their feet because that just seems to happen a lot around them these days, and he’s a realist at heart.

But the building doesn’t crumble. A sudden stillness overtakes the air, accompanied by the whistle of wind past the window they just crashed through, and for a moment, Izuku simply… breathes.

He hears sirens and distant screams of civilians; there’s the beat of helicopter blades, the pounding of his own heart. Shouto shivers in his arms, teeth chattering louder than machinegun fire. Izuku hears his own gasped, mangled breathing, and he quietly wonders if it’s possible to be both dead and not dead at the same time because that’s exactly how he feels right now.

With aching tenderness, Izuku slips his arm out from around Shouto’s waist and sits up slowly, wincing as bits of glass loosen from where they were lodged in his back. He gently lays Shouto to one side on the utilitarian carpet, being careful not to jostle him too much.

Shouto shakes violently in his sleep, eyes closed as his breath comes in short, frosty bursts with the occasional snowflake escaping between his teeth. His skin is white as snow, lips blue, lashes frosted over with ice crystals that glisten like diamonds in the darkness. Izuku feels the oxygen leave his lungs in a rush as he studies Shouto right arm—or what’s left of it. Feather-fractals stained a disturbing deep violet traverse up and down his frostbitten flesh, the color significantly more concentrated at his trembling, frigid fingertips than it is at his elbow and beyond; the frozen bruises continue to curl up the inside of his delicate wrist and muscled forearm like gnarled,
geometric claws, fanning out wider and wider as they reach his elbow where they finally disappear beneath the hem of his tattered shirtsleeve.

The worst part, Izuku notices with gut-churning horror, is his hand. Bile rises in the back of Izuku’s throat as he carefully uncurls Shouto’s icy fingers, noting that the skin over his knuckles has shattered like the ice on top of a frozen lake. He sees frozen bits of blood and sinew around the sharp, cracked edges of the wound—Izuku even spots a hint of bone when he turns Shouto’s hand into the moonlight at just the right angle.

He’s a mess. He’s in Quirk Shock and he’s a mess and he’s dying, but he’s alive for right now and that’s what matters.

Izuku just has to make sure he stays that way.

Gritting his teeth past the frigid blood sluicing down his back, Izuku staggers to his feet and waits for the spots to disappear from his vision before reaching down to sweep Shouto into his arms. Shouto shudders and shakes, eyes moving rapidly beneath translucent lids as he instinctively curls closer against Izuku’s chest, trying to leech warmth as best he can. His breathing is irregular, heartbeat erratic. He doesn’t have much time.

Holding him close, Izuku steps toward the edge of the shattered, gaping window. The mid-March breeze bites into his skin and smells like flames, but he has eyes on the horizon, the man in his arms, and very little else because nothing else in the world matters.

“Hang on, Shouto,” he whispers, pressing his lips against the soft tendrils of Shouto’s ashen hair. He feels a knot in his throat and swallows it down, ignoring the sting of saltwater in his eyes as everything crashes down around him with the indomitable weight of reality. “Please, just… hang on. For me, okay? A little while longer, that’s all. You’re gonna be okay. You’re— you’re gonna be fine.”

I promise.

Shouto is cold.

He stands in the center of a manicured pathway lined with neatly-trimmed hedges on either side, staring at the 1-A dorm building as it looms above him in all its glory. Each window glitters in the sunlight and the columns that line the front of the building gleam like ivory beacons without a single speck of dirt on them. The grass is verdant and lush, trimmed precisely two inches tall, and the sun should, by all definitions, be warm upon his skin.

Except that it’s not.

Shouto exhales slowly, and his teeth crackle with the promise of frost, a small flurry of snowflakes passing his lips like a miniature blizzard that melts the moment it meets sunlight. His school tie feels a bit too tight around his throat, and he reaches up absently to loosen it. He fumbles with the
knot awkwardly.

Odd, he thinks, lifting his right hand to frown at it. His fingertips, each one pink and soft, are strangely numb when he rubs his thumb across them. He presses against each one, digging his thumbnail in until he bleeds. Still, nothing.

The crunch of gravel underfoot and a voice startles him out of his reveries.

“You’re dying,” says a woman from someplace behind him. Shouto turns sharply and sees her with her hands in the pockets of her jeans, a pitying smile on her face as she regards him from several feet away.

He blinks, then glances back at his dorm to make sure the building’s still there. Shouto thinks he sees a stir of activity through one of the windows. Kaminari on his way back from the kitchen, perhaps. Or maybe it’s Bakugou chasing down Sero for hiding his laundry like he did last Tuesday.

“No, I’m not,” he tells the woman dumbly, frowning. “I can’t be. I have school tomorrow.”

“You’re dying, Todoroki Shouto,” she says, voice overlapping with the sounds of sirens that sound distant and indistinct. Her eyes are green, reflective—like sea glass, all chipped and glittering. “You just don’t know it yet.”

The second Izuku bursts through the door to the emergency room, he shouts himself hoarse, demanding for help. Whether his words are in Japanese or English, he’s not altogether sure, but the staff on duty seems to understand him all the same. People in blue scrubs swarm him by the dozens almost instantly once they realize just who he is and who he’s carrying in his arms. Orders are barked—white noise, all of it, indistinct and fuzzy to Izuku’s ears—and a gurney is rolled out seconds later. Strong hands carefully remove Shouto from Izuku’s arms, setting him on the gurney where he continues to shiver, blood now thawed and flowing freely from his ruined hand onto the floor.

Before Izuku can even process what’s happened, Shouto is wheeled past two large double doors and down a sterile white hallway with a respirator held over his face. Nurses and techs jog alongside him, babbling medical jargon and other things Izuku’s too panicked to understand. He feels two nurses poking and prodding at him, too, asking questions and waving bandages around while they talk and talk and talk, but Izuku only has eyes for Shouto as he’s whisked around a corner and out of sight.

Cold, irrational panic grips Izuku. He starts to follow, feet moving before he can even think about what he’s doing, but a small hand in the center of his chest stops him short.

“You can’t follow him,” says a nurse in green scrubs with wrinkled, olive skin. She holds up a roll of fresh gauze and glances pointedly down at Izuku’s burned, blistered forearms, lifting an eyebrow. “But you can follow us. C’mon, hero,” she tells him, jerking her chin in the direction of an empty examination room. “Let’s get you cleaned up. Those are some nasty-looking blisters.”

Izuku allows himself to be led away, dazed and so very, very tired as everything catches up to him. The nurses tell him to strip the tattered remains of his t-shirt, and they ask him banal, mindless questions as they clean, disinfect, and wrap his arms from palm to bicep in fresh white gauze.
There’s a framed photograph of an owl on the wall that he finds himself staring at, his smoke-dried eyes seeing nothing but flashes of fire and ice, blue and orange, red and white, grey, grey, grey painted on the backs of his eyelids.

He answers the nurses’ questions mindlessly, not thinking about the answers or what they’re even asking in the first place. The clock strikes eleven at some point. He thinks he tells them what happened, the extent of his own injuries, and that they were the heroes who responded to the terrorist attack downtown even though they weren’t on the clock. He’s fairly sure he tells them other things, too, but exhaustion sinks its teeth into his pliant, spent flesh and refuses to let go.

“With a mass casualty in the area, we can’t let you sleep here,” the nurse practitioner tells him. She’s thin and her gaze is soft, pitying. “Your injuries aren’t severe enough to warrant it. We need all the rooms we can spare right now. I’m sorry.”

Izuku holds up a hand, wincing as his wrappings tug against his raw skin. “No, that’s. Um. It’s… it’s fine. I’ll just go—”

But then it hits him: he can’t go home. His home was destroyed.

He has nowhere to go.

The nurse seems to sense his strife. She glances from side to side, biting her lip nervously before quietly offering, “Look—you can stay in the ICU waiting room, if you’d like. It’s not very comfortable, but at least it’s in the building. I’ll ask the receptionist to look the other way tonight.”

“That sounds great,” Izuku tells her hoarsely, forcing a tight smile that doesn’t meet his eyes. His relief is palpable, but his pain wins over. “Thank you.”

“You saved my husband once when he was stationed overseas in Beirut. I should be the one thanking you,” the nurse explains quietly, leading him down long hallways with beige walls and beige carpeting. When they reach the small, secluded waiting room, Izuku is greeted with a few plastic chairs and a Formica countertop in the corner with a coffeemaker sitting on top of it. She grimaces, glancing at the uncomfortable-looking chairs and the peeling wallpaper. “I know it’s not much, but it’s better than the public waiting room, at least. You might be able to sleep.”

Izuku doesn’t tell her that sleep is the furthest thing from his mind right now. He doesn’t tell her that he dreads closing his eyes because he knows he’ll see it all over again—the fire, the glass, the tendrils of frozen tissue snaking across Shouto’s right arm, the way he just dropped like his bones couldn’t support him any longer—

“It’s perfect,” he tells her, settling into one of the uncomfortable seats on the far wall. He smiles tiredly up at her. “I appreciate this.”

“Of course,” she blusters, inclining her head in his direction. “If there’s anything you need, anything at all, just ask.” She turns to leave, but Izuku stops her.

“Will you tell me when—” the words get caught in his throat, tangled around the knot that feels an awful lot like the blade of a knife. Swallowing thickly, he forces his eyes to remain dry. “W-Will you tell me when he’s… when…”

The nurse’s face softens, and she nods. “I’ll come straight here the second we know anything.”

Izuku nods, choking on a sob he refuses to let free. “Good. Good, that’s… great,” he exhales shakily, rubbing a bandaged hand over his scraped, stinging face. “If I’m asleep when it happens, wake me up. Please.”
“Absolutely,” she tells him, eyes sincere.

The second she slips out of the room, the knot in Izuku’s throat unravels thread by thread. His hands begin to tremble, his shoulders shake. Tears, hot and salty, spill from his eyes, and he chokes on a sob. He clutches at his bad shoulder, fingers digging into scarred flesh through the thin material of his ruined shirt, and he curls in on himself as he cries.

My fault, he thinks as sobs wrack his body and bones. Exhaustion seeps in, pulling him beneath the waves. It’s all my fucking fault.

The scene shifts. Everything is cut glass and polished steel, high-rise apartments and a sprawling park that stretches for miles right in the heart of the city. Central Park, Shouto remembers as he stares down at the orange and yellow leaves from the balcony of Izuku’s apartment. He likes New York City in the fall—there’s just something about the colors and the slow death of old things that makes him feel at home.

It’s a bit colder than it should be for mid-October, he thinks, but maybe that’s just because he’s up high. There’s no wind to speak of, not even a breeze, and the city is utterly silent below him, devoid of the honking horns and screeching brakes he’s come to associate with large cities like this one. It’s almost... peaceful.

Shouto leans his elbows on the balcony guardrail and takes a deep breath, feeling ice spread across his numb lips as his gaze follows the razor-sharp teeth of the city skyline in the distance. It’s noon and midnight, afternoon and early morning, evening and midday all at the same time, hours wrapped up and tied in knots. He sees the sun, the stars, the full moon.

The fingers on his right hand begin to tingle, a thousand needle-like sensations piercing his skin without drawing a drop of blood. Shouto glances down at his hand, turning his numb fingers over and flexing a fist. The tendons in his wrist pull taut like bowstrings.

“You could come inside, you know,” says the woman again. She’s sea glass, smiling, cut from something strange.

Shouto glances over his shoulder to the opposite end of the balcony, noticing the door that’s propped wide open, inviting. Inside, he sees a crossword puzzle spread out on the living room coffee table, half-finished, and a cup of steaming coffee that hasn’t been touched. A pair of red shoes sits near the door just on the other side of the threshold.

Shouto’s never really cared much for coffee before. Or crosswords.

“Think I’ll stay out here,” he tells her quietly, turning back to the breathtaking view and inhaling in a lungful the sharp, acrid scent of the city. “For just a little while longer, at least.”

“You’re not too cold?” she asks, coming to stand beside him.

Shouto flexes his stiff hand, noting the fine layer of frost that overlays every knuckle like silver tattoos. As he studies each ice crystal, purple fractals fan outward from his fingertips, snaking beneath the surface of his skin like tendrils of poison overtaking his body.

He blinks once, twice. His arm looks normal once again.
“I am a bit cold,” he says honestly, glancing back out toward the city. His eyes follow the paths that cut through Central Park like pale grey scars. “But I like the view.”

“It’s warmer inside. You could watch through the windows, if you’d like.”

Shouto looks back at the open door, eyes lingering on the handle for half a second too long. The crossword puzzle on the table has a few more words filled in now and the coffee is almost gone from the cup. Those odd red shoes haven’t moved, each one spaced two inches apart from the other and scuffed from years of use.

Shouto’s right arm prickle oddly, and his fingers burn. He hears a steady thrumming in the distance like a heartbeat, echoing off the sides of the skyscrapers that surround him on all sides. The leaves in Central Park stir and flutter miles below the apartment balcony, colors changing from orange to red to green to ash and back again within the space of a single moment. He feels a pressure on his chest, cold air in his lungs. Something niggles at the back of his mind, small and persistent.

I promise.

He knows that voice. Knows those words.

I promise.

Why does he know those words?

Shouto’s skin begins to freeze and crack, shattering over his knuckles like paper-thin sheets of glass. The stars are out tonight, sparkling like diamonds against an inky, infinite backdrop. He remembers rock quarries and rooftops, infomercials and bad jokes.

He remembers the color green.

“I’d like to stay out here,” he tells the woman softly, feeling his words reverberate in the hollow spaces of his own chest. Something sweet and faintly sour sits on the back of his tongue. “I think… I think there’s something I need to do first.”

She looks at him, eyes soft and see-through. “All right,” she tells him. “I understand.”

“I’m sorry,” he replies, and means it. Guilt eats at him, tearing him from the inside out. The pain settles in his joints, along his skin, underneath his fingernails, and he fights a grimace. “I’ll come inside soon. I promise.”

The woman smiles down at him, eyes sharp and intelligent against a face that isn’t really there. For a moment, Shouto thinks she looks familiar, whoever she is. The thought disappears just as quickly as it comes.

She places her hand on Shouto’s right shoulder, squeezing lightly.

“No,” she tells him with warm certainty in her voice. “I don’t think you will.”

Behind her, the door closes slowly, latch clicking with a finality Shouto feels deep in the aching atriums of his heart. Overhead, the stars twinkle. The sounds of the city return one by one, breeze light and warmer than it was before. Suddenly, his arm begins to ache.

Shouto doesn’t think New York City has ever looked more beautiful.
Here's some amazing art by a dear friend of mine of when Izuku grabs Shouto from beneath the falling building. It's powerful shit, y'all. *plz appreciate kthnx*

{Tumblr | Twitter | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist}
Shouto awakens slowly, each heartbeat sedate and slogging as he muddles through the heavy veil of morphine in his blood. There’s a bitter taste in his mouth, his head feels like it’s been stuffed from ear to ear with candy floss, and his body feels twice as heavy as it should be. And his arm—

Well, he can’t feel his arm.

With considerable effort, Shouto cracks open one eye, then the other. Sunlight sears his retinas and he winces, lifting his left hand to cover his eyes from the offending brightness. He feels the tug of an IV needle in the crook of his arm, the starched sheets of a bed scraping against his skin. The smell of antiseptic floats on the air, acrid and entirely awful as his eyes slowly adjust to the pale-yellow light that slants through the blinds of a nearby window. His body clock is flipped upside down and backwards, turned inside out with all the cogs shifted, but the pale blue sky outside and the position of the sun makes him think that it’s early morning.

Blinking hard, Shouto lowers his hand from his face and looks around the pale blue walls of the room he’s in. He’s… definitely in a hospital, he determines confusedly, glancing out a small window on his left that looks out into a hallway full of rushing nurses and doctors. His gaze catches on the needle jammed and taped into his left elbow, eyes following the clear tube all the way up to the bag of saline fluid that hangs overhead. The pillows beneath his neck are thin and smell frighteningly sterile.

(He remembers things in fragments: the tinkle of shattered glass, the muffled sound of an explosion, words without a voice. He remembers sea glass and Central Park, too. He’s not altogether sure why.)

Then, turning his head slowly to the right, Shouto’s gaze falls on his right arm.

Ah, he thinks, mind fuzzy with pain medication and something else he can’t quite identify. That’s… not good.

His arm is wrapped in layers upon layers of loose white bandages, starting from the tips of the fingers and travelling all the way up above his elbow. His arm is suspended from a padded sling attached to a support machine at his bedside, keeping his bloodless arm well above his heart. Experimentally, Shouto tries wiggling a few fingers just to gauge how bad the damage actually is beneath those bandages, fighting the shapeless, spongy block that’s wedged between his mind and his motor functions.

Moments pass. He sees his fingers twitch infinitesimally, shifting bandages mere millimeters as he grits his teeth and fights to do the most basic thing possible. Slowly, his index finger curls inward, twitching and shaking like a leaf.

He… doesn’t feel it.

He doesn’t feel anything, actually.

Maybe it’s the morphine, or maybe it’s the bone-deep exhaustion that’s settled into his marrow like solid concrete, but the panic that grips him is a slow, insidious thing. It creeps up the inside of his ribcage like curious vines, twisting and curling into every crevice they find as the realization hits
him through layers upon layers of drug-induced disorientation. His breathing remains normal even as his heartbeat stutters in his chest.

He can’t feel his fingers. He can’t feel his fucking fingers.

Pressing his head back against the sharp-scented pillow, Shouto lets out a shaky breath and stares up at the acoustic tiles that line the ceiling, counting each row of them one by one. There’s nothing he can do, nothing at all right now. Maybe the doctors just have him numbed to prevent any further pain… or something. There are lots of explanations for what’s happening, surely.

Shouto remembers shattering skin and feather-fractal bruises and pain, oh, god, the pain—

Abruptly, a small shift of fabric catches Shouto’s attention, as fuzzy and scattered as it is with half-panicked thoughts trailing slowly through his brain. His gaze falls away from his ruined arm, slipping down toward the foot of his bed. It takes his eyes a moment to focus.

Midoriya Izuku sits down at the end of Shouto’s bed in an uncomfortable-looking chair, his head pillowed on his arms as he sleeps soundly near Shouto’s blanket-covered feet. His hair’s a mess and there’s telltale puffiness around his closed eyes, and each one of his arms has been wrapped in thick gauzy bandages much like Shouto’s—blisters, he remembers suddenly, and winces in sympathy. Nasty injuries Shouto knows far too much about.

One of Izuku’s hands seems to have shifted in his sleep during the night; it now rests at an awkward angle with his fingers curled limply over the dip in Shouto’s left ankle where it’s covered by the crumpled hospital sheets. Eyes flit restlessly beneath translucent eyelids. His lashes are long and dark against his soft cheekbones, freckles paler than normal beneath the deep shadows under his eyes.

He looks like absolute hell, but looking like hell is a lot better than looking dead, so Shouto can’t exactly find it in himself to feel anything except crushing relief.

The dull ache in Shouto’s ruined arm wanes as he lets out shaky exhale after exhale, staring at Izuku’s sleeping, peaceful face. He has lines pressed into his windburned cheeks from the bedsheets, and his breathing is soft and soothing against the steady beep of Shouto’s heart monitor. He shifts in his sleep as Shouto watches in stunned silence, murmuring something inaudible and half-formed under his breath.

Shouto remembers late nights in the common room with textbooks spread out on carpet, tired eyes, unsolved math problems, and too much coffee and tea than could ever strictly be considered healthy. Izuku used to fall asleep on his textbooks in his room all the time—he’d even occasionally miss dinner without realizing it if he had a big test the next day. Sometimes Shouto would find him hunched over his desk in his room, cheek pressed up against microbiology diagrams and English conjugations with eyes shut and fingers curled halfheartedly around a dull pencil. Soft edges. Softer snores.

Simpler times.

Almost as if Izuku can feel Shouto’s gaze upon him, he suddenly stirs in his sleep, brows furrowing and face pinching in distaste. His eyes flutter open hesitantly, sunlight reflecting off those tiny flecks of gold buried in his eyes like secret pieces of amber, and for half a moment, Shouto thinks he’ll slip right back beneath the waves of slumber as if he’d never been disturbed at all. Shouto doesn’t move. He doesn’t speak. He only watches, holding his breath.

Then Izuku’s bleary eyes find his own. He blinks up at Shouto slowly, lazily, his head still
pillowed on his arms and fingers draped over the gentle slope of his ankle with a feather-light touch he doesn’t seem aware of. It’s a careful moment, stretched thin like gossamer thread.

“Hi,” Izuku breathes quietly after a moment. His fingers twitch, pressing lightly against Shouto’s skin through the sheets.

“Hi,” he whispers in reply, suddenly not really minding the fact that he can’t feel his fingers.

All at once, Izuku’s eyes suddenly snap wide open at the sound of Shouto’s voice and he spasms, bandaged arms flailing as he lets out a squawk. He falls from his chair in a graceless heap, seat tipping over with a crash. Shouto winces as Izuku bumps his elbow against cold tile.

“You’re awake!” he gasps. His hands gesture wildly and he looks around the room like a man possessed, hair all mussed and tangled. “Oh my god. Oh my god, you’re awake, I need to— I need to find somebody and tell them! Like, now. Right now. Oh my god.”

Shouto opens his mouth to stop Izuku—to tell him to slow down and breathe because at this rate he’s going to give himself a heart attack and end up in the room right next door—but before he can say anything, Izuku has already skidded out the door with arms wheeling for balance, the soles of his charred sneakers squealing horrifically against the shiny tile of the hospital floor. Shouto watches him disappear past the edge of the window that looks out into the hallway in a blur of green and gold. Shouto’s ankle suddenly feels very cold beneath the starched sheets that cover his legs.

It doesn’t take long for Izuku to skid back into Shouto’s room with a harried-looking doctor in tow, and for the first time, Shouto abruptly notices that Izuku’s still wearing his ruined clothes from the night before—black t-shirt covered with a myriad of bloodstains and burned holes and dark wash jeans that have a few savage-looking tears through the knees. (Or at least, he thinks it’s the night before. His grasp on the passage of time is fuzzy at best right now, so he’s not going to assume he’s the most reliable source of information in the room.)

The doctor, a man with thinning hair and a stethoscope around his neck, approaches Shouto’s bedside with a tablet in hand and proceeds to check all his monitors one by one, humming under his breath and marking things down as needed. Izuku, meanwhile, lingers near the open doorway of Shouto’s room like a specter, practically vibrating on his toes and staring directly at Shouto like he expects him to disappear the second he looks away. Shouto finds that he can’t maintain Izuku’s intense gaze for very long; something like shame creeps continually up the back of his throat like cold, coiled iron. It tastes bitter, almost like failure.

After a moment, the doctor locks his tablet and looks at Shouto with a grim face and deep lines etched around his eyes. “Well then, how are you feeling this morning?” he asks, voice gruff but not entirely unfriendly.

Shouto’s gaze flickers to his own arm, to Izuku, then back again. He swallows. “I think you probably know the answer to that question better than I do.”

The doctor nods tightly. “Straight to the point, eh? I suppose I can respect that.” He swipes a finger across his tablet and pulls up Shouto’s chart, pursing his lips as he scans the fine print. He takes a deep breath.

“Well,” he starts slowly, chewing on his words, “you were admitted by your partner here with a bad case of Quirk Shock—some of the worst I’ve ever seen, actually. You really pushed yourself past your limits.”
There’s a knot in Shouto’s stomach, crushed glass in his veins. “How bad is it?” he croaks.

The doctor glances pointedly at Shouto’s bandaged right arm where it hangs limply in its sling. “I’m not going to sugar-coat it for you, son. The frostbite in your right arm is…” he trails, grimacing. “Severe.”

Shouto feels like vomiting. “How severe?” he manages to ask, fighting the way the floor tips and warps like the waves of an ocean. He wants to scream the question, demand an answer, but he also never wants to hear the answer because he already knows how severe it is, dammit. Hearing it out loud is the only thing he needs to make it real.

The doctor continues to scroll through the information on his tablet, eyes skimming words and charts and numbers that don’t fucking matter while Shouto waits for the pendulum to drop and swing. After a moment of thoughtful deliberation, he spears Shouto with a look that feels almost pitying, all soft around the edges and sad in the worst way possible.

“It’s always hard to tell with frostbite this early on,” the doctor tells him quietly, locking his tablet with a gentle click. He tucks the device under an arm. He sighs. “Until we know more from our observations, I can’t speak in certainties because every case is so different, and I—”

“Just fucking tell me already,” Shouto snaps through his teeth, glaring malevolently up at the doctor.

The man’s eyes soften imperceptibly, and his shoulders slump beneath his crisp white coat. “Shouto, I’m…” he starts, lacing his fingers together. “I’m afraid you damaged a lot of the nerve endings in your fingers when you overexerted yourself. We can’t tell how far the tissue damage extends up your arm, but at the very least, you’re looking at permanent loss of all feeling in your fingers. You… you might even lose that half of your Quirk. We’re just not sure yet.”

His words echo in the empty void that fills the hospital room, each syllable muffled and padded with cotton. Everything goes blurry. Shouto thinks he stops breathing.

When the doctor’s words finally sink in, there are no fireworks like Shouto expects. There are no flames, no boiling tempers or gut-wrenching realizations. No, there is only the framed picture on the far wall of the room that Shouto finds himself staring at with unblinking eyes, memorizing every inch of the artwork like it’s the last thing he’ll ever see. Motel art, Fuyumi would call it. Spectacularly unspectacular in every way, painted in sun-bleached watercolors that he thinks are supposed to be calming but really only look like a muddled mess of pigment on paper.

Movement out of the corner of his eye. Shouto’s gaze falls from the framed art to Izuku, who cuts an imposing figure off to one side. His eyes are wide and searching as he stares at Shouto’s face, and he’s pale beneath his freckles—but he doesn’t look surprised. The doctors must have told him the news earlier, Shouto supposes.

Reality comes crashing in like a deafening tidal wave, and all the blood in Shouto’s body evaporates in an instant. He can’t breathe. He can’t feel his fingers and he can’t breathe.

His left hand begins to tremble, skin going suspiciously hot like a griddle. “Get out,” he whispers dangerously, eyes blurring as he stares blindly at the far wall. He blinks hard, but his vision does not clear.

The doctor hesitates, then looks at Izuku concernedly, asking a question neither of them can hear. “Erm… Todoroki-san, I actually need to perform some small tests to—”
“I said get out!” he roars, glaring up at the doctor with seething vitriol.

The doctor jumps back with a startled yelp and cowers behind his tablet, taking the generous opportunity to scurry out of the room like a mouse. Shouto sucks air in through his teeth and tries to calm his pounding heart rate. He has half a mind to leap out of the window on his right and escape the sterile air of the hospital that suddenly feels suffocating, but his arm unpleasantly reminds him that he’s trapped here, tied down with invisible straps and a tingling not-quite-there sensation in his fingers.

His left shoulder begins to smoke steadily beneath his thin hospital gown, and his fingers spark and sputter against the sheets. His breathing picks up, his heart monitor chirps out of control. Panic sinks its claws into his chest, digging deep into a place Shouto hasn’t visited in years.

A singular tear slips down his left cheek, evaporating into steam just as it touches the corner of his mouth. He tastes salt, bitter and acrid.

“Shouto?” comes a voice, distant and muddled past the pounding of Shouto’s heartbeat. “Hey, breathe with me for a second. Breathe. I think—I think you’re going into shock.”

He knows he’s going into shock; he doesn’t need Izuku to tell him that. He feels it in his bones, hears it in the shallow breaths that pass his lips, sees it in the smoldering sheets crumpled in his left fist. He knows.

“Hey,” comes Izuku’s voice again, this time closer and more concerned. Nerve damage, no feeling, frostbite. The words loop endlessly, getting louder and louder and louder as his pulse continues to thunder. “Hey, stop it. Breathe. Look at me, you’re going to hu—Shouto, stop!”

His heart rate stutters, stops. His breathing ceases, mid-exhale, and the heat of his skin dies almost immediately. Like he’s been doused with a bucket of ice water.

He feels rough calluses rasping across either side of his face, long fingers tangling in the ends of his hair with a gentle, familiar strength. Viridian stains his vision, and he sees freckles—lots and lots of freckles. Izuku’s hands cup Shouto’s face with aching, familiar gentleness that drowns Shouto alive, tugging him down, down, down to Earth with an indomitable pull that rivals gravity’s own grip.

The seconds pass. His heart monitor evens out, his breathing shortens into small, shuddering gasps. Another traitorous tear slips down his cheek this time, but before it can evaporate, Izuku brushes it away with a thumb and a small, sad smile.

“M’sorry,” Shouto gasps, hating how strangled his own voice sounds. He shakes his head, but Izuku doesn’t let go. “I didn’t mean—”

“Breathe,” Izuku tells him softly.

“But I can’t—”

“Breathe.”

Shouto sucks in a sharp lungful of air and lets it out slowly, hating how his shoulders shake. He tries curling his fingers again, this time biting through the pain to make them move further than before. He still doesn’t feel it, but with Izuku’s warm hands on either side of his face, he at least feels a little more stable in other places.

They sit like that for a few more moments as Shouto catches his breath. Izuku is perched on the
side of Shouto’s bed, hands steady and so, so warm against Shouto’s face as he pulls himself
together piece by piece. It’s a messy, arduous process, but at least he’s not doing it alone.

Finally, Shouto nods and Izuku releases his face carefully, but not before wiping away a third tear
that managed to escape at some point. Izuku’s thumb brushes the bottom edge of Shouto’s scar in
the process; he’s far too strung-out to pull away from Izuku’s searing touch when it happens. He
finds he doesn’t mind it too terribly.

Izuku’s weight on the left side of the bed crumple the sheets further, pulling them taught across
Shouto’s flat stomach. Izuku sucks in a deep breath and runs a hand over his face tiredly.

“This is my fault,” Izuku says quietly, his voice rough around the edges with exhaustion. He stares
down at the tiled floor with a look of gut-twisting remorse that sits sourly in Shouto’s veins. “I
should’ve… I mean, I didn’t—”

“You got me out.” It’s not a question. His voice is brittle glass, chipped diamonds.

Izuku’s expression turns pained for a brief second. Then he nods. “I— yeah. It was a near thing,
but… yeah. I did.”

Shouto’s chest is empty, echoing. He finds himself picking at the edge of the bandages near his
elbow absentmindedly. “Are the civilians okay?”

Was it worth it?

Izuku nods carefully, still staring at the floor. He traces the ridges in the bandages that wrap his
own arms from fingertip to elbow. “Yeah, I got them all. Lots of smoke inhalation and minor
injuries, and a few are stashed in ICU right now. But everyone’s going to be fine, I think.”

Shouto twitches the fingers on his right hand. Everyone except me.

Izuku senses Shouto’s inner thoughts almost as easily as he senses danger, and Shouto almost
wonders if he said those words out loud. Izuku pins him with a firm look that brooks no argument.

“Stop that,” he tells Shouto. “You’re alive. That’s all that matters.”

“I can’t feel anything,” he replies quietly, gaze drifting to the limp, curled digits in question. He
swallows. “I can’t— I’m never going to be able to—”

“Stop.” Izuku leans to one side, snagging Shouto’s line of sight practically by force. “It’s still
early. The doctors said you might regain some feeling in a few months once the tissues recuperate
properly.” He chances a small, stilted smile. “And hey, at least you still have your fingers. It
could’ve been a lot worse.”

Shouto doesn’t know if he really believes that, but he lets it slide. It’s not something worth arguing
about—not now, maybe not ever.

“I’m… glad it wasn’t,” he says quietly after a moment, curling his fingers again. There’s a twinge
of pain in the region of his knuckles, but it’s fuzzy and indistinct.

Izuku glances at Shouto’s hand. His eyes look shinier than they did a moment ago.

“Yeah,” Izuku agrees. He tries for a tight smile. “Me too.”
Izuku leaves Shouto’s hospital room with murmured promises of stolen pudding cups and smiles that feel twice as forced as they should be. There’s an air of electricity between the two of them every second they’re in that room together, emotions pulled taut like a rubber band ready to snap. And Izuku… doesn’t know what to do about it. He doesn’t know how to help. The only thing he can think to do is leave Shouto in peace for a few hours so he can get some decent rest, which he direly needs.

As he slips out of the room and closes the door behind him, Izuku turns and takes a moment to memorize the expression on Shouto’s face from the other side of the observation window. He mentally traces the angle of Shouto’s nose, the pinched line of his lips, slight downturn of his brows as he stares at his dead, senseless hand in its sling. The blank, despondent look in his eyes is an odd one, dulling that familiar blue to something dusty and forgotten. Izuku feels a clench in his chest and a knot in his throat.

His eyes burn, and he turns away down the hallway. He’s not sure where he’s going—he’s unfamiliar with this hospital, but all hospitals are the same if you know how to squint—and eventually he finds himself in a wing that lacks lots of activity—someplace near the rear part of reception, he thinks. A few nurses mingle here and there, some janitorial staff push heavy carts laden with supplies and mops down the length of the hallway, but patients are few and far between and more of the doors are locked tight.

Izuku, feeling a familiar sting in his eyes, finds a blank wall, presses his back against it, and sinks to his feet. Before he knows fully what he’s doing, he’s already pulled his phone out of his pocket and dialed his mother’s number, fingers catching on all the cracks in the shattered screen.

She picks up after three rings. “Izuku?” she asks breathlessly, voice already tight around each vowel. “Sweetheart, is that you?”

“Hey, Mom,” he says quietly, pulling his knees up to his chest. There’s a yawning cavern where his heart should be. He presses his forehead to his knees, hunching in on himself to block out the rest of the world.

Inko blusters on the end of the phone wordlessly. In the background, Izuku can hear the tear of cardboard and packing tape. “Oh, good. I was just about to call you. Do you want me to bring the navy shirt with the Edgeshot decal or the purple one with Best Jeanist’s logo? You just have so many shirts here, sweetie, I’ve been trying to—”

“Edgeshot’s fine,” he whispers, feeling the tears spill over onto his cheeks one by one. He swipes them away angrily. “Honestly, just bring a few with you when you come. No idea how long—” he choked “—how long I’ll be here, anyway.”

Inko hears the trembling in his voice and the rustling on the other end of the line stops. “Izuku? Is everything—”

“He woke up,” Izuku blurs. He shakes his head and clenches his fist to keep his fingers from trembling. “He— he woke up and he’s… not. He’s not okay, Mom. And I don’t know what to do.”

“Oh, sweetie,” she says sadly, voice flooded with sympathy. “There’s not much you can to do right now. This is something Shouto has to cope with in his own time. He’s always been strong. I’m sure he’ll pull through this.”

“You don’t know that,” Izuku says dejectedly. “You didn’t see him when the doctor— when he
heard. Oh, god, Mom, I’ve never seen him like that before. He’s…” Izuku trails, biting his lip. “He’s not okay.”

“You don’t sound one hundred percent okay either,” she tells him gently, concern touching her tone with hesitant fingers. There’s a pause, and Inko sighs sadly. “Maybe you ought to call Dr. Kubo this morning, dear. I don’t think you’re—”

“I don’t need Dr. Kubo,” he says stiffly. He swipes at the stubborn tears on his cheeks, annoyed at their presence. “This isn’t about her. Or—” her name gets caught in his throat, and he feels the familiar burn in his shoulder. “This isn’t a problem Dr. Kubo can help with.”

“Izu—”

“Mom, please. Just…” he trails, suddenly feeling winded. He rubs a hand over his face and exhales slowly through his teeth. “Just drop it. Okay? I’m fine. I’m a little strung out right now, that’s all. I promise.”

It’s a lie. It’s a blatant, bald-faced lie, and it slips beneath Izuku’s skin like a thousand needles the second it passes his lips. He doesn’t take it back.

Inko takes a breath as if to say something but stops short, biting her words back just in time. She offers a defeated sigh in its stead.

“If you say so,” she tells him quietly, and they leave it at that.

It’s hardly a concession—Izuku knows his mother’s ‘we’ll talk about this later’ tone better than he knows All Might’s professional career milestones—but it’s a temporary white flag at least. Sinking back against the wall, he closes his eyes and tries to focus on the sound of his mother rifling through moving boxes, zeroing in on the zip of torn packing tape and every huff of annoyance that comes with each newly-opened box.

“It’ll be a little while before I can get to the hospital,” she tells him distractedly after a few moments. Her voice is exasperated, but fond. “None of these boxes are labeled correctly, you know. I just found another one of your All Might toys in with all your summer clothes. Honestly, Izuku, you know better.”

Izuku winces, thinking about the hurried way he’d sorted his things after that emotional episode in December, more worried about getting the stuff out of his apartment than the way in which it was organized. (“No son of mine will live in conditions like these,” his mother had told him resolutely the day after his disastrous breakdown. She’d made him katsudon and stayed the night to make sure he didn’t do anything stupid, and they spent the rest of the week organizing bookshelves and unpacking things. Superfluous boxes and sentimental items had gone to a storage unit downtown and the closet in his mother’s apartment, ready to unpack at a later date.)

He bites the inside of his lower lip and tastes blood. “Sorry,” he tells her, eyeing the receptionist down the hall who doesn’t seem to notice that he’s there. “Luce was the organized one, not me.”

“Well, I had hoped her neatness would rub off on you at least a little bit over the years. I suppose that was a smidge optimistic of me, wasn’t it?”

Izuku recalls Lucy’s Saturday morning cleaning sprees in their apartment, flaxen hair tied up in a messy bun and mismatched socks on her feet as she dusted, sorted laundry, and vacuumed the carpets in the living room. She’d always enjoyed the monotony of housekeeping—claimed it was a welcome reprieve from her hectic weekdays at the hospital.
A small, wistful smile curls his lips at the memory, despite himself. His wedding band sits heavily on the steel chain around his neck, and he touches it through his shirt absentmindedly. “Maybe a little bit.”

“Ah, should’ve known.” Inko huffs in amusement, shaking her head. Then, she pauses thoughtfully. “Honey, are you absolutely sure these shirts still fit you? Some of them look a little, erm… small.”

Izu sucks in a deep breath and tilts his head back against the wall at his back. “Only one way to find out, I guess. Not like I have a lot of options at this point.”

She sighs, and there’s a shuffle as she switches ears with the phone. “Well then, I’ve got six shirts that might fit you, three pairs of sweatpants, those limited-edition All Might undies—”

“Mom,” he protests, feeling his face heat.

“—and some socks with no matches,” she finishes lightly, ignoring him. “You’ll have to make do with the shoes you have until I can run out to get you some. I can bring a new pair over this afternoon if I have time. Can you last with the shoes you have right now?”

Izu glances down at his toes, noting the half-melted rubber soles and charred shoelaces of his red sneakers. “Yeah, I can manage. I think.”

“Good.” She takes a deep breath. “All right then, I’ll go ahead and pack these up and get ready to—”

Abruptly, the end of her sentence is cut off by a muffled crash down the hallway as the double doors to the ICU are shoved open by a man in pressed trousers, a rumpled button-up shirt that’s half untucked, and a tweed cardigan with fashionably patched elbows. He’s young and lithe, his cheekbones look sharp enough to kill, and his eyes are wide and crazed. Several nurses look up at the disturbance. A few gasp, some jump in surprise. Izuku immediately loses track of what his mom is telling him over the phone because the man looks like he’s seen a ghost, or perhaps witnessed a murder. Izuku’s hero instincts snap into overdrive of their own volition, and he finds himself watching carefully from a distance as the strange man skids to a stop in front of reception.

He says two words that stop Izuku’s heart dead in his chest.

“Todoroki Shouto,” the stranger gasps, clutching at the desktop in front of the wide-eyed receptionist. He swallows, waiting for the receptionist to say something in response. When she doesn’t, he slams his hand on the countertop and tries again. “I’m looking for Todoroki Shouto. Is he here? Please, you have to—”

“Sir, please step away from the window,” says the receptionist quietly. “We can’t give out information like that, so if you’d please file a—”

“Bullshit,” the man snaps. He shakes his head and rips his glasses off, rubbing a hand over his face. “I’m his boyfriend, all right? Th-The news said he might be here, I have to— god, I have to see him. He hasn’t answered his phone since yesterday. Please understand, I don’t—”

“Sir, we really can’t tell you whether or not—”

“Please,” he begs, voice cracking. There’s a panicked sheen to his eyes that Izuku knows all too well. “Please let me see him. I need to know if he’s alive.”

Izu stares. His mom continues to speak, voice tinny and indistinct through the speaker of his
phone, but all he hears is the panicked half-pleads and demands of Shouto’s—

*Boyfriend.*

“Mom,” Izuku breathes quietly, eyes still glued to the panicked man at the counter—*Keiji*, his mind supplies. (At least, he’s *pretty* sure that’s the name he’s seen flashing across Shouto’s phone screen during those late-night rooftop stakeouts they handle together. Shouto keeps his love life a secret for reasons Izuku knows all too well.) He clears his throat and tries again. “Hey, Mom, I’ve gotta go. Talk to you later, okay? Something’s come up.”

He vaguely hears a soft *goodbye, I love you, see you soon* and murmurs something incoherent in return before locking his phone and slipping it in his pocket. His heart thunders, gut twists. Pushing himself up to his feet, he lumbers down the hallway toward reception and the panicked man claiming to be Shouto’s *boyfriend*—like this isn’t the most surreal thing that’s happened since last night.

“Sir, I’m sorry,” says the receptionist, voice tight as she tries to placate him, “but it’s hospital policy that we can’t give out names unless the patient themselves or guardian of the patient gives express permission to be put in our database. Now, I’m going to have to ask you to either leave or file a complaint with—”

Keiji grits his teeth and rakes a hand through his wavy hair, pushing away from the counter with a frustrated noise that’s strained through the spaces between his straight teeth. He’s breathing rapidly, eyes scanning the bland waiting room and its connecting hallways like a man devising a strategy—not that Izuku blames him one bit. He admires Keiji’s tenacity, if nothing else.

Apprehension grips Izuku as he approaches, invisible fingers tightening around the column of his spine. He comes to a stop a few feet behind Keiji, footsteps quiet against the tile. He’s not sure why he’s nervous—old habits die hard, he supposes.

Hesitantly, Izuku clears his throat.

“You say you’re Shouto’s boyfriend?” he asks quietly, voice rough and low with the vestiges of smoke inhalation.

Keiji stiffens slightly at the sound, shoulders going rigid beneath the soft lines of his cardigan. Slowly, he begins to turn, eyes narrowed in suspicion, and Izuku fists his hands in his pockets, holding on tight to absolutely nothing in preparation for something he can’t identify. He doesn’t breathe. He doesn’t move an inch.

Keiji blinks slowly when his gaze falls upon Izuku’s six-foot frame, taking him in from head to toe in a single sweeping glance that doesn’t miss a thing. There’s a cool intelligence behind his dark eyes, a silent sort of judgment in the set of his mouth and the way he bites the inside of his cheek that sets Izuku on a knife’s edge, precariously balanced and ripe to tip either way.

Izuku feels flayed open, pinned down on a piece of foam like an insect in a collection. His breath stops short in his chest. Fight-or-flight kicks in, and for all his familiarity with the sensation, this time feels strangely… foreign.

Recognition flickers faintly in Keiji’s eyes before his expression shuts, flattening into something unreadable that sends bolts of solid steel through each of Izuku’s joints. “You’re… Deku,” Keiji says carefully, voice controlled. It leaves no room for questioning; it’s merely a simple statement.
of fact.

Izuku leans hard against his toes and drops his gaze to the carpeted floor between his half-melted shoes. “I—” he starts awkwardly but stops short; he sighs quietly instead. “Yeah. That’s me. You’re Keiji, right?”

The name fits awkwardly on his tongue. He doesn’t really know why.

Keiji lifts his chin as his eyes narrow behind square-framed glasses, cheekbones catching the sterile fluorescents overhead and casting sharp shadows across his face. Objectively, Izuku can admit that Keiji is attractive in this moment—attractive in a cold, aloof way, at least. Like an ice sculpture come to life, all sharp edges and cold crystals.

“I am,” Keiji answers crisply. His accent is clean and proper, and suddenly Izuku feels three inches tall in front of this put-together, intelligent man. He looks down his straight-bridged nose as Izuku, eyes narrowing slightly. “I’m assuming that if you’re here, Shouto can’t be far.”

His words are faintly barbed, spearing, and to the point. Izuku feels them dig deeply. “He’s here, yeah.”

“Where?”

Izuku jerks a bandaged thumb over his shoulder. “ICU. I can take you there, if you want.”

Keiji sucks in a breath and lets it out through his nose, glancing pointedly at the receptionist, who appears to be bracing herself for another volatile verbal explosion. Izuku feels a stab of pity for the young woman.

After a moment, Keiji turns back to Izuku and nods sharply. “I— yes. Thank you.”

They walk abreast down the length of the beige hallway, Izuku with his hands in his pockets and Keiji with his arms crossed over his chest. It’s silent between the two of them as they slip past bustling nurses, round corners, and navigate the twisting hallways of the hospital that never seem to end. Izuku feels every footstep in his throat, every half-breath of silence like the swing of a sword that cuts deep. His heart thobs, knuckles stretch, blisters burst. Skin stinging, Izuku remains silent as panic sets in.

He knows he knows he knows he has to know

Izuku finds himself recycling every watercolor frame of that last night in New York City, sifting through them with shaking fingertips: he remembers the nightclub with its blue flashing lights, Central Park and the chill that pervaded the air, the balcony of his own apartment, and the fight that tore it all down brick by fucking brick. He doesn’t think of that night very often, but in the presence of Shouto’s boyfriend, the memories haunt him with startling brilliance. He remembers a temperature differential flaring beneath his fingers, swallowed smiles, secrets spelled into mouths. The taste of something he could’ve had once upon a time.

He knows.

As they round a corner into the heart of the ICU, Izuku catches the stiff line of Keiji’s shoulders out of the corner of his eye, noting the white-knuckled grip the man has on his arms where they cross over his chest. His lips are thin, gaze lethal, and he stares straight ahead as if Izuku isn’t there at all. He sees sleepless shadows beneath Keiji’s eyes. A glint of panicked desperation that Izuku’s frighteningly familiar with.
They approach Shouto’s room at the far end of the hallway silently, coming to a silent stop in front of the observation window that looks into the private space. Sunlight streams through the window next to Shouto’s bed, casting him in slanted strips of pale gold that fall across his serene features and conform to his chiseled cheekbones. He’s sleeping, eyes closed, breathing slow and steady as his heart monitor beeps quietly nearby. There’s a nurse inside checking his vitals and replacing his IV drip, adjusting his arm where it sits in its sling with careful touches. Izuku feels guilt gnaw away at him from the inside out as he stares at Shouto’s prone form, hating the bruises on his neck and the scorch marks on the sheets near his left hand.

“What happened?” Keiji breathes, taking a step toward the window. He reaches out, pressing a hesitant fingertip against the glass, shoulders rigid. “The news said— I saw him try to—”

“I can’t go into specifics,” Izuku says regretfully, rocking back and forth on his heels. He winces. “But he sent himself into Quirk Shock trying to hold up my apartment building when it fell. Saved me and a lot of other people in the process, but…” he trails off, unsure how to explain this. He grimaces. “His right side took most of the strain.”

“His arm,” Keiji says quietly, eyes wide and horrified as his gaze falls on Shouto’s curled, bandaged fingers in the arm sling next to his bed. “Oh my god, what did he do to his arm?”

“Frostbite.” Izuku’s voice is strangely strangled as nausea twists away in his stomach. “He— he gave himself frostbite. The doctors don’t know if…” Here, he trails off, swallowing down bile and a billion other things he doesn’t dare to name. “They don’t know if he’ll get feeling back in those fingers.”

The silence that follows sounds louder than the ringing in Izuku’s ears. It echoes, drowning out the noises of the hospital hallway like a tidal wave—he doesn’t hear the murmur of nurses, the scientific babble of doctors and technicians; he doesn’t even hear the sound of Shouto’s heart monitor, steady and strong and so very reassuring. He hears nothing except the sound of his own breath, the thudding of his heartbeat, and the way Keiji’s fingers squeak as they curl against the glass observation.

“Saved you,” Keiji repeats lowly. He doesn’t turn to look at Izuku, eyes trained on the frame Shouto cuts beneath his thin hospital sheets.

The sheer vitriol in his tone catches Izuku off-guard. “What?”

“You said he saved you.” Keiji turns to look over his shoulders, glaring at Izuku over the rim of his glasses with enough icy hatred to make Izuku feel a chill all the way down to his toes. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Deku,” he says, spitting the name like a curse, “but I didn’t think that was in my boyfriend’s job description. Saving other people, certainly. But not you.”

Izuku’s hands slip out of his pockets, fingers curling into empty air as Izuku stares at Keiji, stunned. He glances down the hallway, noting a few nurses thirty feet away and a doctor lingering near a doorway at the corner, but aside from them, there’s no one else around. He swallows thickly, tasting acid. “Um, I don’t think—”

“This is your fault,” he hisses, and Izuku’s mouth goes dry in an instant.

There’s this horrible feeling in his stomach that reminds him of free-falling through the clouds. His stomach lurches up into his throat, his insides twist and tie into knots like ribbons. Fingers shake, breath stops short.

“No,” Izuku protests weakly. He shakes his head, gaze slipping past Keiji to spy Shouto’s prone,
sleeping form through the observation window. “No, I didn’t— I’d never put him in danger intentionally, I swear—”

“Isn’t it your job to protect him?” Keiji demands, jabbing a finger in Shouto’s direction.

Izuku’s breathing picks up. His skin feels hot and his pulse thunders. “I mean, yeah, but I also have to follow orders when he gives them and I—”

“You let this happen!” he snaps viciously, eyes burning with frigid anger. “You did, not anybody else. This entire goddamn arrangement was meant to keep things like this from happening to him, and now look where we are.” Keiji gestures angrily at Shouto. “Can you honestly say you’ve helped him in any way by being his sidekick?”

He shakes his head. There’s a burning sensation behind his eyes. “I didn’t mean for him to get hurt,” he says weakly. “I didn’t, I swear, it just—”

“Just what? It just happened?” Keiji shakes his head incredulously, letting out a bitter, breathy laugh. His face is twisted and sharp, eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. “Things like this don’t just happen.”

Izuku say nothing. He’s horrified, he’s panicked, he’s a million and two emotions he can’t identify past the roaring rush of blood in his ears and the never-ending chant of ‘he’s right, he’s right, he’s right, oh my god he’s right’ that loops endlessly in his head. Izuku is frozen, stock-still in the middle of a beige hospital hallway with no end.

“I…” he trails, choking on his words. He tries to fill his lungs with air, but to no avail. “I tried to save him. I swear, I didn’t want him to hold the building, but he told me to go and I just— I couldn’t—” His voice cracks, and saltwater blurs his vision. “I wasn’t… fast enough. I’m sorry.”

Not fast enough, never fast enough, his mind whispers. He remembers the New York City skyline and the stars that watched in cold silence as his wife bled out in his arms. He remembers the news reports, the magazine articles, the way his pen had run out of ink in the middle of signing his letter of resignation on that large oak desk in his superior’s office.

He remembers how long it took to get Lucy’s blood out from beneath his fingernails. He remembers the way that knife tore through the fibers of his shoulder muscle and how he felt like he deserved so much more than pain alone.

Izuku’s silence ticks on. Keiji lets out a hollow laugh that’s tinged with bitter victory, and Izuku flinches away from the sound.

“I think it’s best if you leave now. Shouto needs his rest. You being here will only upset him more,” he says, turning toward the closed hospital room door. Keiji reaches for the handle, but before he pushes through, he aims one more disgusted, disappointed look over his shoulder in Izuku’s direction.

“You weren’t even fast enough to save your own wife, hero,” he mutters under his breath derisively. “I don’t know why Shouto ever thought you’d be able to save him.”

And—

And Izuku sees red.

He doesn’t feel himself move or even notice that he’s reached out his hands until his fingers curl and crumple the collar of Keiji’s button-up shirt. Izuku’s veins sing, noise whites out into a wash of
nothingness paired with the thudding bassline of his heartbeat, and before he can even fully comprehend what’s happened, Izuku’s gritted his teeth and slammed Keiji up against the wall with unrelenting force. Sheetrock caves in; plaster dust falls like snowflakes. He feels blisters tear and weep beneath the bandages on his arms, but he pays them no mind as he hoists Keiji six inches off the ground like the man weighs nothing more than a handful of feathers.

Vaguely, Izuku thinks he hears startled gasps of the hospital staff in the background. He ignores them and pretends he doesn’t see the nursing staff calling security with panicked, jerky movements. He doesn’t see anything, really, save for the man he has braced up against the wall, his dark eyes rimmed with white in shocked horror. Izuku’s brain is in overdrive, senses dialed to a million and pulse thundering louder than gunshots.

He wants to hit Keiji. (Blood on his hands, scarlet and staining.)

He wants to throw Keiji all the way to Shanghai and never think twice about it. (His apartment’s empty and he’s empty and he’ll always be alone.)

He wants to tell Keiji how Shouto’s the only thing that really matters to him anymore because he has nothing else left worth saving. (It’s his fault, it’ll always be his fault, he brings death to everything he touches.)

He...

He doesn’t know what he wants to do.

Suddenly, Izuku feels hands grasping at his shoulders, arms, elbows. They proceed to pull his trembling, white-knuckled hands away from where he grips Keiji’s collar, and the second his fingers are pried loose, Keiji slides to the floor with a gasp and a gagging cough. Izuku watches him stagger away with horror etched into his angular face, cheeks flushed red. He stares at Izuku with terror in his eyes.

Only villains have ever looked at Izuku like that.

Oh, he thinks as the implication of what he did finally hits him. Oh, god.

All at once, noise returns in a deluge of stimuli meant to drown him. Izuku hears gruff security guards demanding answers that Izuku can’t give them, he hears the concerned murmur of nurses and doctors as they watch the scene unfold in high definition right before their eyes. Guilt and horror curl lowly in Izuku’s stomach, and suddenly the walls seem too close, the air too damp and cloying. He can’t breathe.

“I’m sorry,” he gasps, pushing away from the security guards’ reaching hands. He backs up slowly down the hallway, stunned gaze trained directly on Keiji’s petrified expression. He shakes his head, squeezing his eyes shut. “I’m— I’m so sorry, I didn’t… mean. I didn’t. This wasn’t supposed to…”

The sentences die in his mouth as saltwater brims in his eyes, hot and stinging. With the pressure of a dozen sets of eyes on him, Izuku turns around.

He runs.

Chapter End Notes
When Shouto awakens, he does so in pieces.

He comes into his body bit by bit, filling out the shadowed crevices between his bones like molten metal in a cast, and fights the urge to slip back beneath the waves of unconsciousness despite how tempting it is to do exactly that. Even through the gentle haze of morphine, he can make out the throbbing pain in his right arm that radiates upward from his wrist and into the bones in his elbow like the reverberation of a church bell, and his body is twice as heavy as it should be, weighted by iron. That bitter taste from before is still in his mouth—but at least he knows why this time around.

Experimentally, he tries moving his fingers beneath their bandages before he dares to crack open his eyes. He still feels absolutely nothing below his ruined knuckles, and disappointment tears through him like a soundless sob. There’s pressure where his ruined muscles and tendons tug beneath his skin like thick, braided cables and piano wire, but where he expects searing pain and agony, he feels absolutely nothing instead. A slight discomfort here and there, maybe—nothing more than an echo, a phantom reminder of something that once was.

Perhaps his mind is simply being generous for his sake. He’s not altogether sure.

Fighting to open his eyes, Shouto feels the shift of weight down at the end of his bed and hears the sharp intake of breath. There’s a warm pressure on his knee, then his thigh. A large hand. A familiar hand. Warmth. He feels himself relaxing automatically beneath the touch, melting into it despite the shadowed parts of his mind warning him against it, whispering, each one a half-heard echo of a voice he doesn’t recognize.

“Izuku?” Shouto mumbles under his breath, grimacing as pain ripples up the length of his spine when he tries to sit up, but to little avail. Exhaustion overtakes him like a heavy wool blanket in summertime, dragging him back down amongst the sheets. “I didn’t—” but he hisses through his teeth suddenly when pain carves its way up his shoulder, biting in between his muscles like liquid flame.

Pressure on his chest, warm and firm, pushes him back against his pillows with gentle strength. He doesn’t fight it. He can’t; he’s too drained.

Then the person speaks.

“Not Izuku,” comes the voice Shouto never expected to hear. Suddenly awake, his eyes snap open in surprise and he zeroes in on the fuzzy figure of Keiji standing at his bedside, hair mussed and glasses perched on top of his head. He looks rumpled and tired and his mouth is pressed into a thin,
terse line that Shouto can’t discern properly in his current state, and—

And he’s here.

Shouto stares, dumbfounded. “You—” He chokes, clearing his throat. He reaches up with his good hand to rub the sleep from his eyes, blinking hard. “You’re… here?”

Keiji sighs softly, glancing dejectedly down at the tiles between his feet. He shifts his weight. “I’m here,” he says, smiling stiffly.

“How?”

He blinks, frowning. “Sorry, what?”

Shouto struggles with his words, looking around his boring hospital room like the answer lies somewhere within the faded, scuffed beige walls. His tongue feels large for his mouth, pressing against the backs of his teeth in all the wrong ways. “How did you know I was here? Did you—When—?”

“I heard about what happened from the news this morning. Cancelled my classes and got here as soon as I could,” Keiji answers, running a hand over his weary face. He sinks into an uncomfortable-looking chair that’s pulled up to Shouto’s bedside, shoulders slumping. “I mean, I assumed something had happened since you weren’t answering your phone all night, but I never expected…” he trails off, glancing at Shouto’s right arm in its sling with a pained expression. “I never expected this.”

Shouto feels shame curl low in his belly. He drops his gaze, clenching his right fist experimentally and not minding when the open wounds on his knuckles pull and stretch painfully beneath sterile stitches. “Well,” he says roughly, clearing his throat, “if it makes you feel better, I didn’t exactly expect it either. So.”

“How did this even happen?” he breathes, leaning his elbows on the edge of Shouto’s bed. Keiji shakes his head slowly from side to side, staring at the tile floor. “I just… I don’t understand. Quirks aren’t supposed to hurt their users, right? It doesn’t make sense to—”

Up close, Shouto notices that the collar of Keiji’s button-up is slightly torn and one of the top buttons hangs loosely from the shirt by a single thread, dangling precariously near his left collarbone. He focuses on that button instead of Keiji’s face for the time being—it’s easier this way, he tells himself.

“I overexerted myself,” Shouto mutters, feeling vaguely like a chastised child in Recovery Girl’s office. He flexes his fingers again, wincing when the pain radiates up and down his palm and wrist, but it stops at his knuckles with an abruptness that sours his stomach. “Didn’t have my bracers on at the time.”

Keiji’s face screws up. “Why did you even try if you knew you couldn’t do it?”

Shouto blinks at his tone, frowning up at him. Keiji looks nothing less than impatiently expectant. “Uh,” he says eloquently, glancing sidelong. “Because it was my job?”

“But you were off-duty last night,” he protests, gesturing helplessly.

“I don’t stop being a hero the second my shift ends, Keiji.”

“Well, maybe you should’ve let the other heroes take care of things for once. Someone who was
actually *on* duty.”

“There were no other heroes,” he retorts stiffly, rusty vitriol tying his throat in knots. Exhaustion drags him down beneath the waves, sending his heart monitor stuttering on his right, and he struggles to take a deep breath. “Izuku and I were the only professionals in the area. We didn’t have time to be picky. Any second we delayed could’ve cost somebody’s life. We couldn’t take that chance.”

Keiji shakes his head stubbornly, mouth pinching. “No, no. Don’t give me that self-sacrificing bullshit. Not every crisis is yours to solve, Shouto. You need to learn to take a step back when you have to. You can’t just charge off and do whatever you feel like because you’re a h—"

“I’m sorry, are you really going to lecture me about this while I’m in the hospital?” Shouto asks, incredulous. He looks around the room, blinking past a droplet of sweat that drips into his left eyelashes, and half-wishes Izuku would walk back through the door just so Shouto could have somebody on his side for this. “Look, I’m the one who made the decision to help those people, and I’d do it all again if I had to. End of conversation.”

“I’m just saying that this all could’ve been avoided if you’d only—”

His left side heats uncomfortably, evaporating the sweat from his body with a hiss of steam as his temper flares and fluctuates. There’s the soft pull of morphine in his veins, the haze around his head like morning fog he can’t quite see through, and he exhales, sinking back into the hospital bed.

“*Stop,*” Shouto exhales quietly. He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose until it stings, counting to ten in the ringing silence of his own head. “Just… stop. Please, Keiji. I know you’re upset and worried and— and—” he struggles for words. “I do not need to hear this. Not now, not ever. Okay?”

Keiji hesitates like he’s going to argue. Shouto braces himself for the worst, heart monitor beeping steadily while the surface of his skin sizzles beneath his hospital gown, the sudden heat drying his eyes out unexpectedly and leeching the air from his lungs. He fights to regulate his own internal temperature, counting the seconds in sets of *two, four, six, eight*...

But in the end, Keiji simply closes his mouth and nods quietly, sitting back in his chair with his back ramrod straight against uncomfortable plastic. That loose button near the collar of his shirt swings dangerously with the movement, and the circles under his eyes look ten times darker than they were the last time Shouto saw him—a week ago, perhaps? He can’t quite remember with the painkillers in his body and the tingly not-quite-there sensation in his ruined fingertips. Shouto feels a pang of guilt prick the dead center of his chest like an arrowhead, but he ignores it in favor of sucking in breath after breath, attempting to cool himself off. It doesn’t really work.

The silence that falls over them is palpable and cloying, sticky as syrup, stretching between the seconds like strings of half-dried glue. Shouto contents himself with rubbing his left thumb and forefinger together, shifting uncomfortably as his skin clings to his hospital gown and the thin sheets that cover the lower half of his body. Sweat trickles down the valley of his spine one droplet at a time, hissing and popping like oil in a pan.

“You look feverish,” murmurs Keiji, frowning in concern. He reaches forward, pressing his fingertips to Shouto’s forehead experimentally. His eyes widen. “Shouto, you’re burning up.”

“I feel fine,” he mutters, flinching away from his touch. “I always run a little warm.”
Keiji gives him a look. “I like to think I at least know your resting body temperature.” He stands up from his chair and smooths down the front of his rumpled shirt, eyeing the observation window on the far wall. He glances back at Shouto. “I’m going to go get the doctor really quick.”

“I don’t need a doctor—”

Keiji cuts him off with a sharp gesture. “You do, actually. Is there anything I can get you while I’m out there? Some water maybe?”

“No.” Shouto closes his eyes and presses his head back against the pillows, exhaling through his nose in a puff of steam. “I’m… fine. Thank you.”

Keiji hesitates, eyeing the door and Shouto’s bedside warily. Eventually, he nods tersely and excuses himself out into the hallway, slipping between the nurses that bustle up and down the corridor nonstop.

The second Keiji’s dark hair disappears from view, Shouto lets out a heavy sigh. His body aches, his mind is muddy, and yeah, all right, he feels a little bit warmer than he usually does, but there’s probably a perfectly logical explanation for it. He half-wonders if maybe the heating system in the hospital has just been cranked up to a million, but he dismisses it just as quickly. After all, Keiji hadn’t complained about being warm.

Maybe…

Experimentally, Shouto lifts his left hand to his face, flinching when his fingertips touch his forehead and hiss loudly like the shimmering surface of a hot skillet. He yanks his hand back, grimacing and glaring down at the reddened pads of his fingers. His eyes trace every loop and whorl of his prints, every bloodied hangnail and bruised nail bed that mar his fingers like burgundy tattoos. His body is close to boiling, blood pumping a little faster than normal beneath the trappings of his skin. He tries to breathe.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Shouto glances around nervously, checking for any prying eyes out in the hallway through the observation window. Seeing none, he hesitantly ignites the tip of his index finger, wincing in pain as the use of his Quirk tickles and tugs someplace deep inside of him while he struggles to maintain singular focus. His brain is fuzzy, instincts dulled with prescription painkillers, but the flames spouting from his fingertip are blue and steady despite it all, the air searing hotly against the damp skin of his face as he watches for any irregularities in the blaze before him. Sparks float in the stale air of his room, carried by a breeze Shouto can’t feel.

He glares at his left hand, igniting another finger just to make sure he can. Sure enough, the flames catch and spread, rippling over his skin like wildfire, and he stares at the bruised lengths of his fingers as they’re slowly but surely consumed by blue flames one by one. The inferno leeches the oxygen from the room; it dries his eyes. Nothing out of the ordinary there. In fact, the sight of it is almost reassuring, in an odd way. Familiar.

Just as Shouto’s about to extinguish his hand and accept the fact that he simply might possibly have a normal fever for the third time in his life, the flames between his fingers flicker and spark, sputtering brightly like a firecracker for half an instant. His mouth goes dry. White embers explode in a sudden burst as if a log has fallen in a fireplace, the abrupt flurry of sparks floating weightlessly to the floor below as they cycle from blinding white to blue, then orange, and finally fading to black ash as they touch the ground.

Shouto stares, wide-eyed at the spaces between his digits. He blinks once, swallows. Flexes his fingers.
Sure enough, blue flames, steady as they’ve always been, coat his hand. There are no temperature spikes, no color changes, no sunbursts or solar flares—just his Quirk as he’s always known it.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shouto sees movement on the other side of the observation window—Keiji and the older doctor from before, tablet in hand with a pinched look on his weathered face. They’re speaking in hushed tones, Keiji biting his lower lip as the doctor talks to him quietly, both of them slowly approaching Shouto’s door.

Hurriedly, Shouto closes his left fist, extinguishing the flames, and plunges his hand beneath the covers of his hospital bed to hide the tendrils of smoke still emanating from his skin. He wishes he could fully extinguish his own heat with the ice of his right side, but his ruined arm cruelly reminds him that it might not be the greatest idea to test out both halves of his Quirk just yet.

He’ll worry about it later.

The daylight hours melt and gradually grow pliant, each one folding and kneading into one amorphous mass of time that sits on Shouto’s chest like a fifty-pound weight. He watches wordlessly as his IV bags are changed on the hour, listens as the doctors drone on and on about physical therapy and prognoses for his frostbite, and ignores the steady voice whispering in his ear that everything is his fault. His heart monitor beeps steadily in the background of it all, providing a not-so-calming lull in those sparse moments of silence. It’s the type of tranquility he’s never really appreciated, even now.

Keiji keeps him company for most of the day, talking him through a few Sudoku puzzles and flipping channels on the tiny TV mounted on one of the walls of the room. His face is patient, but the lines of strain around his eyes cast longer shadows than normal. They don’t talk much, save for the occasional murmur of a number or a softly-worded request for a different channel, and it’s almost enough soft padding to content Shouto for the time being.

“Four doesn’t fit,” says Keiji just past noon, the end of a plastic pen in his mouth as he frowns down at the Sudoku book folded open in his lap. He looks up, eyebrows raised in silent question. “Any other guesses?”

“Try seven,” Shouto tells him, sinking into his pillows with a sigh. “Nine if that doesn’t work.”

Seven fits. They move onto the next tiny square, the next column, the final quadrant, and they try not to think about Shouto’s dead arm where it hangs in the bedside sling. It’s all quite comforting in its predictability, at least.

As the slats of sunlight seep through the blinds and grow longer across the tile floor, he finds himself watching the observation window over Keiji’s shoulder more often than not. It’s been at least three hours since Izuku left, lips curved with the promise of a stolen pudding cup or two and his shattered cell phone in hand. Maybe he met up with his mother and got that change of clothes he’d been talking about, or maybe he headed to the disaster site downtown to help with cleanup. It seems like something he would do, after all.

_Maybe he went to sift through the ashes of his apartment_, his mind offers somewhere in between an old rerun of *Friends*. The mental image of Izuku elbow-deep in the remnants of his own destroyed belongings leaves a sour taste in Shouto’s mouth, and he pushes the thought from his
mind almost as soon as it arrives, choosing instead to focus on the canned laugh track and how ridiculous it sounds against his beeping heart monitor. He has no idea where Izuku is going to live now. Maybe the agency can relocate him for the time being? He reminds himself to ask Momo about it next time he sees her.

(Internally, he fidgets and counts the seconds. Izuku wouldn’t have left the hospital without saying goodbye, right? The doubt lingers like a cloying cloud in the back of Shouto’s morphine-muddled mind and he tries not to tear at the seams of his own impatience.)

Shouto considers asking at one point, though he’s not sure Keiji would know the answer to that since he’s never met Izuku in person before; the doctors and nurses probably wouldn’t be much better informed, either. In the end, he refrains and instead inquires about his family. They’re due to arrive within the city limits soon, he knows. He’s not sure why or even how they found out about his sorry state (though he suspects Momo may have had something to do with it), but he’d be lying if he said the thought of seeing his family again didn’t fill him with some small amount of anticipation.

But waiting has never been one of Shouto’s strong suits. By the end of the seventh Sudoku puzzle and the tenth episode of Friends, he’s ready to crawl the walls, frostbitten arm notwithstanding.

“This is stupid,” he tells Keiji, glaring up at the ceiling tiles that he’s counted three times already —there are forty-seven of them, if you count the two little half tiles near the doorway. He looks at Keiji, who hasn’t moved from the chair at Shouto’s bedside for a good three hours. “How much longer until I’m discharged?”

Keiji glances up from his novel—Wuthering Heights, one of his favorites—with a raised eyebrow. “Hopefully not for a while. You need your rest.”

“But I’m bored,” he mutters, picking at a frayed edge of his sheets absentmindedly.

Keiji scoffs. “You’re bored?”

“Is that really so hard to believe?”

“Harder to believe that you’re complaining about that and not everything else, but sure, whatever.” Keiji places his bookmark between the pages and closes the novel, setting it on a nearby table. He picks up the Sudoku book instead. “Another puzzle?”

“God, no,” Shouto says, pulling a face. “I swear I’ll stab myself in the fucking eyeball with that pen. Put it away.”

Keiji’s expression sours, eyes narrowing and mouth pinching. “Shouto—”

He sighs wearily, letting his eyes drift shut. “Oh, don’t do that. It was a joke.”

“It was in poor taste.”

Shouto considers saying that all of this is in poor taste—the hospital food, the astringent morbidity that floats on the air and permeates the bland, beige walls, the hushed words of doctors who all seem to think that he can’t handle the truth about his prognosis. He wants to rip his arm from its sling and vault out the goddamn window, discharge papers or no discharge papers. He just wants to breathe.

Pressure on the inside of his undamaged wrist. Shouto looks down to see long fingers pressing against the tracery of his veins beneath vibrant bruising, blunt nails dragging slowly, reassuringly.
Keiji’s touch is familiar, but cold against his heated skin.

“I know you hate it here,” Keiji tells him softly after a moment, drawing small shapes into the softness of Shouto’s inner wrist, “but you won’t be here for much longer. Another day, maybe. Two at the most. It’s for your own good, all right?”

Shouto’s skin warms pleasantly. His lips, dry and cracked, curve into a small smile, unbidden.

“Want to help me break out early?”

Keiji’s expression softens a fraction and he releases a small laugh between his teeth, sinking back into his chair. “Tempting, but no. Drink your orange juice.”

“Mm,” he hums, eyeing the tray of cold food nearby. He wrinkles his nose at the untouched cup of yogurt. *Disgusting.* “You know, sometimes I wish you weren’t so reasonable.”

“We both know that’s a lie.” Keiji picks his book up once again, peeling the pages apart to resume where he left off. He holds the end of the plastic bookmark between his lips as he leans back in his chair. He shrugs. “*One* of us has to have some sense, and we both know it isn’t going to be you.”

“A lot of people would disagree with you there.”

“Well, a lot of people don’t know you the way I do, Mr. Number One Hero.”

They trade flat looks over the top edge of Keiji’s book, eyes narrowed in annoyance. There’s a moment of silence, a half-heartbeat of something soft—then their lips twist and they both exhale at once, laughing under their breath at a joke that isn’t particularly funny. It simply *is.*

Across the room, the door out into the hallway opens wide and the pressure in the room fluctuates, echoing in the hollow atriums of Shouto’s heart like the intake of a large bellows. A short nurse comes bustling in, blonde hair in a messy bun on top of her head and nails bitten down to the quick, nametag bedazzled with pink and purple rhinestones. Shouto’s seen her around before—she’s changed his IV bags a few times since he was admitted. He doesn’t remember her name.

“Creat—” she gasps, breathing hard as if she’d just run up a flight of stairs. She shakes her head, cheeks puffing, and braces her hands on her knees as she tries to catch her breath. “Oh… jeez… I shouldn’t have… run. Oh, god.”

Keiji and Shouto look at one another. Shouto shrugs.

After a moment, the young nurse straightens up, cheeks flushed, and tries again through her labored breathing. “The hero, sir—Creati. She’s here to see you.”

“Momo’s here?” Shouto asks, sitting up a little straighter in bed. He glances at Keiji, whose eyes have gone wider than normal behind his glasses, fingers curled around the edges of his book.

The nurse bobs her head, a few strands of blonde hair falling around her face with the motion. “Yes, sir. I told her she wasn’t on the approved list of visitors, but she wouldn’t take no for an answer and now she’s on her way up and I *tried* to slow her down, but she’s just too—"

“Can’t she wait?” Keiji asks suddenly, looking at Shouto with a plea etched into his expression. “Surely whatever the agency needs can hold on a little longer. It’s barely been twenty-four hours.”

“She might be here as a friend.” Shouto turns to the nurse, waving vaguely with his good hand. “You can send her in. Thank you.”
The nurse lets out an exasperated sigh and gestures wildly toward the open doorway behind her. “Well, that’s what I’m trying to say, sir. She’s coming up here whether you like it or not because she’s just way too—”

**Intimidating**, Shouto supplies as soon as he sees Momo on the other side of the observation window, strutting down the hallway of nurses and doctors that all seem to part before her like the Red Sea. **Intimidating is definitely the word I’d use.**

She enters the room behind the small nurse, slipping in behind her with graceful, soundless steps that shake the Earth beneath her feet one by one. Her black designer trench coat flutters around her legs and is tied loosely at the waist, signature Bluetooth earpiece glowing in the flat fluorescence overhead where it clings to the curve of her ear. Her hair is pulled back in a sleek ponytail today that hits the muscled dip between her shoulder blades, and Shouto swear's he spies a flash of lean, tanned thigh and maroon Kevlar underneath the lush coat that clings to her figure. Burgundy combat shoes are zipped securely over her feet, lightly-armored kneepads in place as usual.

“Thank you, miss…” Momo trails, squinting down at the nurse’s nametag. She frowns. “Akane. I’ll need some time alone with my agency’s hero now, but I’ll be sure to find you if we need anything else.”

Akane blinks, glancing at Shouto, then back to Momo. She hesitates. “Are you sure it’s—?”

“All right, fine,” Shouto interrupts, holding up a placating hand. He tries for a smile, channeling as much of Midoriya’s energy as possible. He’s not sure it really works, but whatever the final result is, it’s at least better than his usual resting facial expression. Akane’s shoulders sink in relief at the sight of it and she nods, stepping out of the room with a murmured thank you that Shouto almost misses.

The second the door slams shut behind her, leaving the three of them in the room alone, Momo’s bravado slips off her frame like a second skin and she sinks into the nearest empty chair on the far wall of the room. Knees spread, hands limp in her lap, head tilted back tiredly, she lets out a long exhale that rings with the echoes of exhaustion.

“Long day?” Shouto asks, cocking an eyebrow in her direction.

“All right, long day. The longest,” she agrees. She begins peeling the black gloves off her hands finger by finger, tossing them to the floor uncaringly as soon as they’re off. She sighs. “I’ve forgotten how awful patrol is on slow days.”

“When was the last time you even had patrol?”

She purses her lips, thinking. “I don’t know. Six months, maybe?”

“Jesus.”

“Tell me about it.” She tilts her head lazily to the side, looking over at Keiji where he sits frozen in his chair at Shouto’s bedside. She blinks, almost as if she didn’t notice he was in the room until just now. “Oh. Hello, Keiji.”

He smiles tightly; it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Good to see you, Yaoyorozu.”

“Mm,” she hums, blowing a long breath out through her nose. She sits up and rubs at a sore spot in her neck, pressing her fingers on the inside of the high collar of her costume to knead the stiffness away. “Wish it were under better circumstances, but yes. It’s nice to see you, too. Been a while.”
“Since August, I think,” he says.

Shouto eyes Yaoyorozu’s less-than-pristine condition from his side of the room, noting the deep shadows under her eyes and the weary set of her shoulders. She looks thinner than usual—she must’ve been using her Quirk to help with the cleanup downtown earlier this morning. She’s probably starving.

“They didn’t give you a partner for patrol today?” he asks, frowning.

Momo shrugs tiredly, hands fiddling with the tie of her coat. “Agency’s stretched thin with the disaster cleanup downtown. We couldn’t spare the manpower, especially not with you and Midoriya out of the picture. It’s pretty much the only reason they sent me in at all.” She tilts her head up then, pinning Shouto with an intense look. “Which actually reminds me: where is your partner?”

Shouto blinks. “What?”

“Midoriya,” she clarifies, sitting up. She braces her elbows on her knees and laces her fingers together. “I figured the two of you’d be attached at the hip after what happened.”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he admits. Next to him, Keiji doesn’t look up from his book, eyes trained on the fine print with unshakable focus. “He left this morning. Said he’d be back after he called his mom about something, I think.”

Momo’s brows creases. “And he hasn’t come back yet?”

“Not that I know of. I’ve been falling in and out of sleep for a while though.”

“He hasn’t been here since I arrived,” Keiji mutters, not looking up from his book.

Momo sounds contemplative in her silence. She bites her lip, considering. “I see. That’s… not like him.”

A chill travels up Shouto’s right arm, burrowing deeply into the sore muscles of his shoulder. “He wouldn’t just leave,” he insists, but it sounds hollow to his own ears.

Momo shakes her head. “No, he wouldn’t.”

“You think something happened?”

“Maybe,” she says, chewing on her words. She rubs a fingertip over the ragged end of a broken nail, pursing her lips. “Hard to tell with him. I’ll have to do some digging when I get out of here.”

“Why are you here?” Shouto asks, tapping his fingers against the siderail of his bed. He tilts his head to the side. “I know it’s not just because you wanted to see me out of the goodness of your heart.”

“Ouch, rude.” She smiles wryly. “Would you believe me if I said it was for both business and pleasure?”

“Momo, come on.”

Momo grunts as she shifts her weight, reaching inside her coat to pull out her cell phone. She unlocks it with a swipe of her finger and begins typing something rapidly, thumbs moving faster than Shouto can keep track of them.
“A couple things,” she says after a moment, eyes scanning back and forth as she sorts through important government-classified emails and documents. “First off, I’m here to sort out your health insurance with the hospital. They’re being annoying about your deductible again. Second, I came to see you. The news wasn’t exactly giving us promising reports of your well-being for a while there, you know. Some outlets thought you were dead, some were claiming Midoriya dropped the building on you on purpose—don’t give me that look, they’re all bullshit. I know. But the agency wanted me to check anyway.”

“I’m touched,” he says dryly. She sticks her tongue out at him.

“And the third thing was to debrief the two of you unofficially. The agency’s questioning the safety of your living arrangements, so we were going to try to lay some preliminary plans for the near future. I’m here to throw a couple options your way.”

“My living arrangements?” Shouto echoes, confused. He glances at Keiji, who has gone suspiciously white and frighteningly still. “What about them?”

Momo aims a sympathetic look his way. “I know it’s probably the last thing you want to hear right now, but the agency wants you to move apartments. Just for a little while. Until we’re sure you’re not being targeted.”

“Targeted—?” he starts to protest, but he cuts himself off as the implication sets in. Apartment, bombing, fire. Right. He flops back against his pillows and heaves a frustrated sigh, rubbing a hand over his face and ignoring the pull of the IV needle in the crook of his elbow. “Oh, come on, you can’t really expect me to move.”

She puts her hands up in mock surrender, eyebrows raised. “Hey, don’t look at me. This decision came from higher up. You’re the Number One hero and somebody clearly targeted your sidekick. Until we know for sure that whoever did this isn’t coming after any other heroes, we can’t take any chances.”

Keiji looks up from his book with a shrug. “He can stay with me for a while, if that’s what he needs.”

All at once, clawed fingers of panic rise up in Shouto’s chest, spreading and tearing him apart from the inside out. They scrape across the trappings of his rib cage, drag down the bumpy column of his spine. He can picture it all in startling clarity: waking up next to Keiji in his apartment every morning, doing Sudoku puzzles with him, wishing him a good day of teaching at the door, cooking dinner together every night. Both of them playing the parts of two matching puzzle pieces of domesticity, trapped in a position Shouto’s never ever wanted.

No, he thinks helplessly as the threads of possibility pull tightly and choke him. No, no, no, it’s not safe, it’s not what I want—

It’s at that exact moment that Shouto sees movement on the other side of the observation window. Familiar movement.

Keiji and Momo look up as Natsuo pushes open the door to Shouto’s hospital room, broad shoulders taking up almost the entire doorframe and then some. His hair is flat today and slightly messy—unkempt; what a rare sight that is—and he looks tired. His brow is pinched, mouth pressed into a grim line bracketed with the first signs of age on either side like thin parentheses around the two ends of a sentence. But the second he sees Shouto across the room, the shadows disappear from his face in an instant, replaced with sweeping relief in soft shades of rose. He lets out a stunned exhale.
“Hey there, Squirt,” he says softly, and for once in their lives, punching Natsuo in the face is the furthest thing from Shouto’s mind.

“Natsu-nii,” Shouto greets in reply. His vision turns blurry, and he blinks it away. “Ah… long time no see.”

Behind Natsuo in the doorway, there’s a soft gasp. Natsuo lets out a sharp hiss of pain and a muttered curse as Fuyumi jams her elbow into her brother’s ribs to shove past him unceremoniously, spilling into the room in a flail of limbs. She stumbles, a large tote of… something hooked over one shoulder and hair tied up in a knot at the base of her neck with a few strands falling out here and there. The second she sees Shouto, her grey eyes begin to water and lets out a choked sob.

“Oh, Shoucchan,” she exhales, covering her mouth with one hand. She shakes her head back and forth. “Oh my god, you idiot, how could you even think of trying to hold that stupid building when you weren’t even—”

Shouto lets out a wheezing laugh and bites back a smile, hating the way his eyes sting and burn against his will. “Nice to see you, too, nee-san. I’m feeling much better now, thanks for asking.”

“You idiot,” she repeats, but this time with less conviction. She sniffles. “You big, dumb idiot. I’m so mad at you.”

There’s a whisper-soft chuckle behind her, light as freshly-fallen snow. Shouto’s spine stiffens. His heart warms.

“Fuyumi, dear, have a care,” says his mother as she steps into the room, cable-knit sweater hanging loosely off her frame and pale hair braided over one shoulder. She’s got Mizuki braced on one hip and the lines around her eyes are deeper than usual, but her smile is soft and her gaze doubly so—if a little watery around the edges, admittedly.

And just like that, Shouto feels his resolve crumble all at once. He fists the sheets in his left hand, shaking, forgetting how to breathe. He’s suddenly six years old, not twenty-seven, and he’s curled against his mother’s side while they watch old news reruns of All Might’s greatest rescues in the family room. There’s the scent of soy and soba in the air, ginger tea, his mother’s sweet perfume, and there is no scar on his face. His arm is hale and whole. Nothing in the world has ever harmed him.

Shouto feels a scalding tear slip out, singular and hotter than molten steel as it traces its way down his face. It sizzles and evaporates into steam before it reaches the point of his chin, but he pays it no mind.

“M-mom?” he whispers, knuckles blanching bone-white as he crumples the sheets cruelly between his fingers.

His mother reveals her own tight, watery smile—the same smile that mirrors his own in every way, every curve, every single millimeter because she’s the one who gave it to him. “Oh, sweetheart,” she murmurs, looking him up and down from her spot in the doorway. She steps closer, handing Mizu off to Fuyumi, and crosses the room to Shouto’s bedside. She glances right over his arm, choosing instead to look at his face, eyes skimming every new scar, burn, and scrape he earned the night before.

Slowly, she reaches out. Her fingers are icy cold against his heated skin, and she rakes her elegant fingers through his hair to push the worst of it away from his face, gently working through the
tangles.

“Shouto,” she says softly after a moment, shaking her head. “When was the last time you trimmed your hair? You look positively homeless.”

He wheezes out a reed-thin laugh and leans into her touch ever so slightly, leeching the chill from her fingertips as best he can. “I’ve had, ah— other things on my mind. I guess.”

She hums lowly. “Maybe for your next birthday I’ll buy you barrettes and hair elastics instead of socks. More practical.”

“I’ll try to get it cut soon.”

“No,” she says. She pulls him forward with gentle strength, pressing his forehead against her shoulder while she continues to smooth his hair down. She tugs and detangles the two-toned strands as she goes, fingertips soft and oh-so familiar in their frigidity against his scalp. “I think I’ll like it once it gets a little bit longer.”

“I’ll leave it, then.” Shouto curls his good hand around one of her small forearms, half-worried he’ll break her delicate bones with the slightest twitch of his fingers. The coolness of her skin cancels out his left side in the most soothing way; Shouto finds himself leaning into her shoulder, eyes drifting shut of their own accord. “I missed you. So much.”

“My sweet boy.” Rei murmurs against his hair. She lets out a shuddering breath and squeezes him a little tighter for good measure. “God, I was so scared. When the agency called, we didn’t know whether or not you were—”

“I’m okay, mom.” He means every word of it, damaged nerve endings or no. He swallows thickly. “It would’ve been a lot worse if Izuku wasn’t—” he chokes on his words and tries again. “If he hadn’t—”

“But it wasn’t,” she interrupts firmly. “It could have been worse, yes, but it wasn’t. That’s what matters.”

“I should’ve—”

“No.” Her voice is firm yet warm, soft around the edges and cored with solid steel. She looks down at him. “You’re alive, Shouto. That’s all I care about right now. Do you understand me, young man? That is all I care about.”

“Right.” Shouto lets out a shuddering breath and sinks into his mother’s embrace once again. “You— yeah. You’re right.”

Rei hushes him softly and presses a kiss to the top of his head, settling her hands on both of his shoulders to lean back and have a look at him. She presses a cool hand to his cheek that Shouto sinks into, sighing. “I think… that I’d like to meet this Izuku again. To thank him properly for saving my son.”

“You and everyone else in the civilized world, I think,” quips Momo, who has since stood up from her chair with a congenial smile stretched across her tired face. She bows slightly in Rei’s direction. “It’s so nice to see you again, Todoroki-san. It’s been a long time.”

Rei releases Shouto and turns with a smile, holding out a hand for Yaoyorozu to squeeze. “Oh, Momo,” she says warmly, looking her up and down. Rei’s eyes are bracketed with fine smile lines. “You’ve grown up so much since I last saw you. Your parents must be proud.”
“I like to think so, yes.”

“You’re in management now, I hear?”

“Mostly. But they ship me out for disaster relief now and again though.” She shrugs, smiling sheepishly. “I can’t really complain.”

A scoff draws Shouto’s eyes back to the doorway. “Oh, I bet you have plenty to complain about,” Natsuo says as he pushes further into the room, dropping a small duffel bag of stuff at the foot of Shouto’s bed. He crosses his burly arms over his chest and nods in Shouto’s direction, grin twice as crooked as his sense of humor. “You manage this moron, don’t you? You’re probably overdue for a raise at this point. Or several.”

Fuyumi rolls her eyes. “Oh, shut, up, Natsu.”

“Shuddup,” echoes Mizuki, who clutches her stuffed green kappa creature closer to her chest, sticking near her mother’s leg. Natsuo almost looks halfway offended.

On his left, Keiji suddenly rises from his chair and sets his novel aside, brushing the front of his trousers off before bowing in Rei’s direction. “Todoroki-san,” he greets stiffly, face aimed toward the floor at his feet. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

Rei turns, eyebrows raised. She blinks at Keiji for one second, two. Then recognition dawns. “Oh, goodness,” she blusters, putting a hand to her cheek. “Keiji. I almost didn’t recognize you, dear. I’m so sorry about that.”

He smiles a little more tightly than before. “It’s perfectly all right, Todoroki-san.”

“Call me Rei, please.” She smiles softly at him, her voice warm at the edges. “You’ve been part of my son’s life for almost a year now; I think we’ve reached that point, don’t you?”

Keiji smiles, eyes crinkling at the edges, but the set of his shoulders remains stiff beneath the soft lines of his knitted cardigan. Natsuo, however, doesn’t look convinced.

“Wait, who’s this guy?” he asks abruptly, jabbing a thumb in Keiji’s direction. He glances from Fuyumi to Shouto, Mizu to Momo. “I’m missing something here.”

Fuyumi smacks him upside the head. “Quit being dumb, Natsu. Keiji is Shou’s boyfriend. He came to your wedding, remember?”

Natsuo pauses a moment, then blinks. “Nope.”

“What do you mean ‘nope’?”

“It means exactly what you think it means, nee-san.”

Fuyumi looks at him, dumbfounded for several moments. Then she slowly begins to shake her head. “Oh my god,” she breathes out. “You are… so dumb. It’s almost amazing sometimes. Really.”

“I’m not dumb.” Natsuo scowls down at Fuyumi and huffs. “I’m forgetful. There’s a difference.”

“Dumb,” Mizuki repeats, eyes wide as she stares up at the acoustic ceiling tiles overhead with her thumb in her mouth, eyes wide and unsuspecting.

Natsuo opens his mouth to retort, but his expression goes dangerously flat. He jabs a finger in
Mizu’s direction. “All right, she is my *least* favorite niece. I swear to god. You’re teaching her this shit at home, aren’t you?”

Fuyumi’s face turns stormy and she punches his shoulder hard enough for him to suck air through his teeth in pain. “Quit swearing in front of my child!” she hisses.

“Ow, fuck—”

“*Natsuo!*”

Mizu either doesn’t understand Natsuo or doesn’t care—more than likely it’s the latter, though Shouto can’t really be sure these days. For a toddler, she can be incredibly hard to read. As Fuyumi and Natsuo argue about anything and everything, Rei popping in with tired exhalations of ‘*honey, please be nice to your brother*’ and ‘*Natsuo, don’t antagonize your sister,*’ Shouto contents himself with tuning into the sound of something other than silence for the first time since early this morning. It’s almost *relaxing.*

Mizu’s grey eyes are impossibly bright and her hair is a puffed-up mess of silver curls tamped down by familiar pink earmuffs where she stands in the center of the hospital room, cheeks rosy even in the pallid lighting overhead. She’s gotten a little taller since the last time Shouto saw her, baby teeth out in full force and expression molded into something stubborn just like her mother. This time, the tug in Shouto’s chest feels an awful lot like something akin to glowing, red-hot pride as he notes the stuffed amphibian in her arms—a toy he’d gotten her for Christmas this past year.

It takes a while, but when Mizuki finally notices Shouto watching her over the general commotion in the hospital room, her face lights up and she bounces on her toes excitedly.

“Uncle Shou, Uncle Shou!” she cries, tugging on her mother’s sweatpants with a tiny hand to get her attention. Fuyumi looks down at her daughter in the midst of a debate with Natsuo about the probability of Mizu picking up a habit of swearing before she turns seven, then looks up when Mizu points to Shouto with a stubby, small finger. “Mommy, ShouShou Shou!”

Fuyumi tucks a few strands of hair behind her ear and huffs out a sigh. “Yes, sweetie, it’s Uncle Shoucchan. *He*’s a good role model for children, unlike some people.”

“Hey,” Natsu protests weakly.

Fuyumi ignores him, squatting down in front of Mizu instead. “Would you like to see your Uncle Shou? He’s not feeling very good right now, but maybe you and Mister Kappa can make him feel better, yeah?”

Mizu nods, a smile splitting her face that looks an awful lot like her father’s contribution to the gene pool, and she stretches her hands upward in silent request to be picked up. Fuyumi stoops down and scoops her up, but before depositing her on Shouto’s bed, she hesitates.

“Is this…” she trails, eyeing all the machinery and IV tubes connected to Shouto’s body beneath the thin sheets. She swallows. “I mean, is it okay if she—”

“It’s fine,” Shouto tells her, shifting to one side of the bed so there’s enough room for Mizu’s small body. He pats the empty space next to him and tries for a small smile. “Come here, kiddo. Try not to bump my arm, okay?”

Fuyumi hands her over and sets her in the space next to him, and Shouto has to withhold a wince when Mizu accidentally jams the toe of one of her Mary Janes into one of the bruises on his hip while she situates herself. She settles in next to him, shuffling deeper into the blankets on Shouto’s
left, and sets her stuffed animal in the space between their bodies with singular concentration that only a three-year-old can manage.

“Mister Kappa,” she says stubbornly, adjusting his little arms so they’re crossed just right. She looks up at Shouto. “Ouchies go ‘way.”

Shouto bites back a smile and glances over her head at Fuyumi, who is watching the scene unfold with a soft smile on her face. She shrugs helplessly at Shouto when she catches his eye.

Shifting his weight with a faint grimace, Shouto decides to play along. “Is that so?” he asks Mizuki quietly, regarding Mister Kappa with a mock-serious expression. “Well, if Mister Kappa can help me feel better, I’m all for it. Is he a doctor?”

Mizu nods stalwartly, settling back in the crook of Shouto’s arm. Her earmuffs begin to slide off her head crookedly. “Yeah,” she answers slowly, dragging the consonants out. “Doccer.”

Shouto sighs dramatically. “Oh, that’s a relief. Is Mister Kappa going to stay with me for a while until I’m better again?”

“Yep.”

Shouto hums, smiling. “I see. Well, it’s awfully kind of him to do that for me. Was this arrangement your suggestion or his? I need to know who to thank.”

She considers for a moment, face screwing up. “Bofth,” she spits out.

“Both?”

“Mhmm.”

Reaching up, Shouto adjusts Mizu’s earmuffs until they sit straight once again and smooths down her tangled silver curls to press a kiss to the crown of her head. “Well, thank you both for helping. I feel better already. Mister Kappa’s really good at his job.”

Mizu giggles and curls her fingers into the fabric of Shouto’s hospital gown, clinging to his side with all her meager strength. Shouto forces his temperature down to something more manageable—115°, perhaps, or a nice 130° for her comfort. He feels the uncomfortable tug of the needle in his elbow because Mizu’s foot is pulling on the plastic tubing just a bit where it rests on his bed, but he ignores it for the time being in favor of tickling Mizu with the warm pads of his fingers. She squeals and fidgets, babbling nonsensically as he holds her closer to his side. Fuyumi, Natsuo, Momo, and his mother all watch with soft smiles on their faces.

A cough, awkward and punctuated, breaks the tableau into tiny pieces. “Oh, uh—” Keiji points at the spot where Mizuki’s putting pressure on Shouto’s IV with one of her small shoes. His cheeks turn faintly pink. “She’s… um. I think she’s messing with the IV. Sorry.” He approaches, pushing his sleeves up a bit, and plasters a cardboard smile on his face that is probably supposed to look warm and inviting. “Mizu, sweetie, can you—?”

“No,” she says stubbornly, clinging to Shouto like her life depends on it. She glares at Keiji as fiercely as possible—that is, to say, not very.

Keiji flinches back as if he’s been burned. He glances from side to side helplessly, mouth forming words with no sound, and he drops his arms. He rubs the back of his neck. “Sorry, I’m not—erm, great with kids.” He points at the twisted IV tube around her foot. “But seriously, she shouldn’t be on his IV like that. Can someone…?”
“I’ll get her,” Fuyumi says, gliding across the room. “C’mon, munchkin. Up, up, up. Your uncle needs his fluids.” Fuyumi slips her hands beneath Mizuki’s arms and hoists her up despite her whimpered protestations, detangling Shouto’s IV with nimble fingers before she steps away. Keiji then slips in behind her and lays the clear tubing flat across his crumpled bed sheets once again.

“Thanks,” Shouto murmurs, not quite sure if he actually means it. His left side feels cold and empty without the familiar weight of his niece, without the warm reassurance of familial touch and the soft flowery scent of her spider-silk hair.

Oh, well. At least he has Mister Kappa. Sighing, he tucks the stuffed cryptid in next to him, drawing up the sheets over his fluffy green legs because he knows Mizu won’t stand for anything less than model hospitality. After all, he is a doctor.

Whisper-soft footsteps draw his attention. Rei slowly approaches the right side of Shouto’s bed and looks down at his arm where it’s suspended in its sling, still wrapped from fingertip to elbow in thick bandages interspersed with thin IV tubes flowing full of prescription pain medication and blood thinners. Her fingertips brush over the edge of the sling with feather-light touch.

“What’d the doctors say?” she asks, glancing up through her pale lashes. There’s a glimmer of fear in her eyes surrounded by impossible, deep shadows that almost scream I know the answer already, but I want to hear you say it.

All around him, the hospital room has gone suspiciously quiet. Momo stands against the back wall, fingers frozen over the keyboard of her phone as she watches Shouto with pity. Fuyumi holds Mizu against her hip, knuckles blanched white where they grip the back of her soft pink jumper. Even Natsuo looks anxious, lines carved in deeply around his eyes and mouth as he awaits the news. They’re all frozen, stock-still, trapped in time. Waiting for the pendulum to swing.

Shouto swallows, suddenly feeling for all intents and purposes like his throat has been newly-lined with sandpaper. “It’s... hard to know for sure right now,” he manages to say. “Too early to tell for sure what the long-term effects will be. That’s what the doctors said, anyway.”

There’s a gentle pressure against his palm as Keiji slips his hand into Shouto’s, squeezing tightly. He finishes Shouto’s thought for him. “Worst case scenario, he loses every nerve ending below his knuckles. He won’t be able to feel anything.”

“Gonna lose the fingers, too?” Natsuo asks, bracing his elbows against the railing along the side of Shouto’s bed.

Shouto shakes his head. “They don’t think so.”

“What about your Quirk?” Fuyumi asks quietly.

Shouto bites through the inside of his cheek. “No idea. Too scared to try it.”

“But if you had to guess?” his mother asks, setting a reassuring hand on his leg.

“If I had to guess...” Shouto fights the nausea in his stomach, ignores the twisting ribbons of nerves in the center of his chest that fray and snap apart relentlessly. He swallows. “If I had to guess, I’d say it’s— not there. Anymore. My ice, I mean. I’ve been running a fever eighty degrees higher than normal for the past few hours. I think my Quirk is compensating for the sudden imbalance between the two halves of my body by overheating me. Or something. The doctors aren’t sure.”

His mother’s hand flies up to cover her mouth. She looks ready to cry, eyes brimming with unshed
tears that glitter like diamonds in her waterline. Fuyumi looks physically ill, clutching Mizuki to her body like she’s the only thing anchoring her to the spot. Momo looks sorrowful where she’s leaned against the far wall, but altogether unsurprised; the agency must have told her as much when the reports first came in from the hospital this morning.

Natsuo’s eyebrows fly up into his hairline and he pushes off the side of the bed, rocking back on his heels as he lets out a long breath through his teeth. He cards his fingers through his pale hair. “So— what, you’ve only got your fire right now? That’s what you’re telling us?”

Shouto grits his teeth and drops his head back against his pillows. “I don’t know. It’s all conjecture at this point.”

“You do feel awfully feverish,” his mother says, reaching up to press the pads of her fingers against Shouto’s sizzling forehead. She pulls her hand away, shaking out the warmed digits with a grimace. “Much warmer than normal.”


“They haven’t given you suppressants for your Quirk yet?” Fuyumi asks. Her brow creases in confusion, mouth pitching down at the corners in annoyance. “If you’re running a fever, they need to give you something to keep your body fluids from boiling, otherwise you’re going to get air in your bloodstream. Dad always said—”

“They’ve got me on a low dose,” he assures her, slipping his hand out of Keiji’s grasp to touch his own cheek experimentally. He grimaces at the heat radiating from his skin. “I’m sitting at 180° right now, I think. I should be fine until things level out.”

“And when will that be?” Natsuo asks.

Shouto feels the razor-sharp talons of panic ply his skin apart sheet by sheet as he considers the possibility of never. He thinks of his job, and how hard it will be to save people with only his flames at his disposal. He thinks of cooling off his morning tea, of sitting comfortably outside in winter without a heavy coat. He thinks of snowflakes, and how he won’t be able to make them anymore for the person he loves most in the world.

Mizuki is watching him from across the room, small hands fisted in her mother’s hair for stabilization. Her mouth is parted, eyes wide and shining with wonderment at everyone and everything around her. She doesn’t feel his fear floating in the atmosphere—she only feels gentle comfort in the presence of her family.

Shouto doesn’t want to think of what her face will look like when she finds out he can’t take her sledding in summertime anymore. A fate worse than death, certainly.

“I don’t know,” he says quietly, dropping his gaze to his lap. He fists the sheets in his hand and wishes he could tear them to shreds, fingers trembling ever so slightly with tamped-down frustration. “I don’t know.”

The silence that falls is heavy and crystallized, too fractured to make sense of in his current state. He feels Fuyumi’s disappointment and Natsuo’s resigned acceptance, Momo’s sorrow and his mother’s horror all at once, pricking him from all angles with needle-sharp edges. He doesn’t know what to say that will comfort them. He hates the truth, but he can’t lie—it simply wouldn’t be fair to anybody involved. And he especially can’t lie to himself.

Shouto doesn’t feel the comforting chill of his right side anymore, though he’s loathe to admit such
a thing even within the confines of his own thoughts. No, that part of his identity lies locked in a small wooden box that’s been buried deep underground, just out of reach. He claws and screams and struggles to dig it up and smash the box wide open, to release the arctic chill that’s made its home in the marrow of his bones since he was three years old, but no matter what he does, the box only sinks deeper and deeper into the earth. Impossible to reach, especially with only one arm at his disposal.

He knows that half of his Quirk is gone. Hiding, sunken someplace deep amongst the shadowed recesses of his chest like an anchor lost within the deepest trenches of the sea. He knows this.

But he’d sooner die than say such a thing out loud. I don’t know, he repeats over and over again, like it makes everything okay again even though nothing could be further from the truth. I don’t know.

Across the room, the sound of hinges squeaking startles Shouto out of his reveries. He feels the pressure in the room shift, the murmur of doctors and nurses outside his room flooding every corner of the space around him. He looks up with a half-snarled, “Get out,” poised on the tip of his tongue until he realizes who’s there. The words die, unvoiced.

Midoriya Izuku stands in the threshold, scarred fingers curled around the metal doorknob, eyes twice as tired as they’ve ever been before as he observes the collection of people standing around Shouto’s bed. His clothes are clean, a simple white All Might t-shirt stretched tightly across his chest and black joggers in place of the burned, torn jeans he’d been wearing this morning. His hair looks freshly washed—it’s a bit damp at the ends still, hanging limply in front of his eyes that reflect murky emerald in the pale lighting overhead. His skin is pale beneath his freckles and mottled with vivid bruising around his cheekbones, jaw, and hairline, and beneath the sleeves of his zip hoodie Shouto can still see tightly-wound bandages covering the multitudinous burns on his hands and forearms.

He also has a fresh butterscotch pudding cup clutched in one hand, seal unbroken and perfect. It’s a welcome enough sight that Shouto nearly starts weeping right then and there.

“Oh,” Izuku stammers, blinking as he takes in everyone standing in the room. “I… oh, god. S-sorry. I’ll come back later—”

He begins to slink back out into the hallway, but Shouto sits forward abruptly, jostling every IV tube hooked into him. “Izuku!” he calls out, wishing he had something to throw at the back of the hero’s head for good measure. “Hey, come back. Oh, for fuck’s sake— Izuku.”

Izuku freezes in the doorway, the breadth of his shoulders filling the space from edge to edge. He glances over his shoulder nervously. “Um.” He fidgets, turning halfway back around. “Y-Yeah?”

Shouto jabs a finger at the pudding cup in Izuku’s hand. “I’ve been waiting hours for you to come back with that. What, did you get lost on the way downstairs or something?”

Izuku clenches his fingers around the pudding cup and opens his mouth to speak, trapped in the gravitational pull of the doorway like a planet without any particular alignment. He turns slightly, looking around the room for a moment. He nods at Momo, Fuyumi, and Natsuo in silent greeting and offers a deeply respectful bow to Shouto’s mother. He even wiggles his fingers slightly at Mizuki, offering her a tight smile of familiarity.

Then his gaze falls on Keiji. In an instant, his expression shuts like someone flipped a switch somewhere. Gone is the awkwardly-endearing glint in his eyes and the nervous set of his mouth, replaced with harsh lines and sharp shadows of utter inscrutability. Shouto frowns in confusion,
looking up at Keiji only to find that he has also gone suspiciously stiff beneath the soft lines of his cardigan, fingers gripping the siderail of Shouto’s bed with crushing force. The two men study each other, muscles coiled, ready to spring.

Shouto wonders if the doctors upped his pain medication and didn’t tell him. Weird.

Just as Shouto opens his mouth to ask what the hell is wrong with them, Izuku blinks, looking away and shattering the illusion all at once. He instead offers Shouto a smile that probably looks real to everybody else in the world.

“Right, sorry,” he apologizes, stepping back into the hospital room with a crooked grin. “Got a bit sidetracked for a while there.”

“A while?” Shouto asks. “It’s been hours. That’s a little longer than a while.”

“Well, I figured you weren’t exactly going anywhere. No offense, dude.” He closes the door behind him with his foot, sealing himself inside the room with everyone else. “Head’s up,” he says and tosses the pudding cup to Shouto, which he snatches out of the air with his good hand.

“Thanks,” Shouto says, immediately tearing the plastic top off with his teeth like an animal. Keiji hands him a straw from his lunch tray. “Did your mom get you new clothes?”

“Some temporary stuff, yeah.” Izuku leans back against the closed door, one foot braced behind himself and arms crossed over his chest. He’s the picture of relaxation. “Had a few things in storage. I can manage for a while.”

“Apartment?” Shouto asks around his straw.

Izuku winces. “Doubtful.”

“S’possible though.”

“Hardly. Trust me, I walked by earlier this morning.” He shakes his head. “Gonna need a plan B.”

Shouto shrugs. “You could still—”

“Not a damn chance.”

They look at each other for a moment, heartbeats stacking up in sets of two. Then they huff out soft bubbles of laughter. It’s nothing like their normal laughter, all bright and soft around the edges with enough cynicism to drown the world, but it’s still laughter and Shouto supposes that’s all that matters. He’ll take what he can get.

Fuyumi and Natsuo trade confused looks. Keiji’s grip on the siderail of the bed hasn’t lessened. Momo, on the far wall, lets out an annoying, long-suffering sigh between her teeth.

“You guys know I hate it when you do that,” she says flatly, a smile curving the corner of her mouth. She rolls her eyes, gesturing to the number of confused faces in the room. “Speak Japanese, if you would. Do us all a favor. Your shorthand language nonsense benefits absolutely no one.”

Izuku shrugs. “I don’t know about that. It benefits me just fine.”

“And me,” pipes in Shouto.

Momo rubs her temples, closing her eyes slowly. She looks over at Natsuo and Fuyumi, who look just as confused as Momo feels. “Think they’ll let me retire at twenty-seven?” she asks them.
“Probably not,” Shouto interrupts, slurping his pudding through the straw noisily. It sort-of works. “Worth a shot though. They might give your pension early.”

“Try it. Let us know how it works out,” Izuku says, smiling. His gaze shifts from Momo over to Fuyumi and the toddler in her arms. All at once, the hard edges of his face soften into something considerably less lethal. “Hey there, Mizu-chan. Do you remember me? We played together last Christmas when you were a whole lot smaller.”

Fuyumi hitches Mizu a little higher on her hip, brushing a few strands of hair out of her eyes. She huffs a laugh. “I’ll be surprised if she does, honestly. I swear, she has the memory of a frigging—”

“Zuzu!” Mizu shrieks, flailing her arms as a wide smile splits her face in recognition.

“—goldfish,” Fuyumi finishes lamely, staring in shock.

Mizuki struggles in her mother’s hold until Fuyumi has no choice but to put her down. Eyes wide and baby teeth flashing amongst pink gums, Mizu stumbles over her own feet as she pushes past Momo and Keiji uncaringly to reach Izuku where he stands near the doorway.

Izuku smiles and squats down, opening his arms just in time for Mizu to collide with the broad expanse of his chest. He scoops her up in an instant, lifting her like she weighs nothing and bracing her against one of his hips.

“Hey, kiddo,” he greets brightly, dimples deepening to swallow some of his freckles whole. Shouto feels his temperature spike at the sight of it. Izuku blows a raspberry against Mizu’s neck, loud and obnoxious, and Mizu’s resulting peal of giddy laughter is loud enough to rattle the windows in their frames. “Goodness, you’ve gotten so big since I last saw you. When did that happen, huh?” Izuku touches the flat part of his hand to the crown of her head and presses lightly. “Gonna have to put a brick on top of your head to keep you from getting any taller. Think your mom will go for that?”

“Her mother will not ‘go for that,’ but I appreciate the offer,” quips Fuyumi, biting back a smile as she watches the display. Even Natsuo is smiling from the other side of Shouto’s bed. Rei’s hand settles on Shouto’s knee, squeezing gently through the thin sheets, and even Momo looks touched. Keiji looks nauseated.

Shouto feels Fuyumi’s gaze on him, burning and steady against the side of his face as he watches Izuku tickle, laugh, and converse in total gibberish with Mizuki on the far side of the room. He hoists her up on his shoulders, keeping a firm hold on her small feet as he spins in a circle, not minding one bit when Mizuki tangles her small fists into Izuku’s mop of hair for support. They laugh, they shriek, they glow like solar flares. It’s probably the closest Izuku’s come to looking truly happy since everything happened.

It feels…

Right.

Shouto feels Fuyumi’s gaze on him, burning and steady against the side of his face as he watches Izuku tickle Mizuki in slow-motion. Questioning. She’s the only one who knows about what happened in New York, what happened to their friendship—how it all fell apart right in front of their faces in such spectacular fashion. Shouto had told her a few years back over a New Year’s family get-together that involved one too many glasses of celebratory soju on the front porch of her house down in Kyushu. Fuyumi is watching him, gauging his response.

Keiji, on the other hand, stands unyieldingly at his bedside, straight-backed and blank-faced in the
brilliant light that is Midoriya and Mizuki. His fingers twitch at his sides nervously, pulling at a loose thread near the right pocket of his trousers.

Shouto wonders what would happen if he touched one of those long, twitching fingers.

(He feels like he’d get burned.)

“All right, all right,” Izuku says through his breathless laughter a few minutes later, reaching up to remove Mizu from his shoulders. He sets her down on the floor, holding her by the shoulders to keep her steady, and straightens her earmuffs with a warm smile on his face. “I don’t want to get you too excited. Your mom will kill me if you’re a ball of energy for the rest of the day.”

“Shpeak for yourslelf,” Shouto comments through a mouthful of pudding.

Izuku gives him a pointed look over Mizu’s head. “Hey, nobody asked you. Eat your pudding and be quiet.”

“Yes,” Momo agrees, raising an eyebrow at the both of them. She taps out a few things on her phone, long fingers scrolling rapidly through inboxes and digital file folders alike. “In fact, both of you could use a break from talking for a minute. I have a few things I need to discuss with you two anyway.”

Izuku glances up through his lashes. “Classified stuff?”

“Not necessarily,” she says, pressing her lips together thoughtfully. “It’s actually about your future living arrangements. Both of you.”

Shouto stiffens instantly, molten lead filling his veins. Izuku’s shoulders go rigid beneath his zip hoodie. Mizu scurries away the second Izuku’s distracted, hopping up on the first empty chair she can find near her mother, who hands her a picture book with a cartoon snowman on the front.

Fuyumi pats Mizu on the head quietly, then glances pointedly at Natsuo.

“Uh, we’re going to head down to the cafeteria and grab some coffee,” she says slowly, tugging on Natsuo’s sleeve. “Right, moron?”

He looks down at her. “Wait, we are?”

“Yes. Come on, Natsu.”

Natsuo looks at her blankly for a moment, blinking. Then, his eyes light up. “Oh, right! Yes. We are going to go and… do that. Now.”

“Anybody want anything?” Fuyumi asks, slowly stepping toward the door and dragging Natsuo right along with her. She raises her eyebrows. “Mom, you want some tea?”

“I’m fine, dear,” she replies.

“What about you, Keiji?”

His silence is jarring and cold, a gale force wind that sweeps through the room and presses against the inside of the windows until they’re fit to burst. Keiji bites the inside of his cheek. After a moment, he finally shakes his head. “No, thank you. I think I’ll be fine.”

He sits down stiffly in the chair next to Shouto’s bed, picking up his novel and holding it in his lap with a white-knuckled grip. He doesn’t read it, doesn’t even crack it open. Instead, he watches
Izuku carefully, eyes tracing his form up and down with deliberate slowness. There’s a displeased set to his mouth.

Izuku frowns down at the floor and rises back up to full height as Fuyumi and Natsuo shuffle past him out of the room, leaving the five of them alone, plus Mizuki. He stretches his arms above his head to work out the stiffness in his spine, cracking his neck noisily in the silence that follows. Shouto spies a strip of tanned, freckled skin between the waistband of Izuku’s black joggers and the hem of his t-shirt, complete with a thin trail of hair that disappears between the sharp V of his hipbones.

Shouto’s cheeks heat up suddenly with a small sizzle. His mother turns and gives him a concerned look at the sound, but he waves her off dismissively.

“M’fine,” he mutters, dropping his gaze in shame. “Fever. Sorry. It’s nothing.” He clears his throat. “Momo, you were saying?”

She waves vaguely, sorting through her phone. “Sorry, I’ve got to find the email corporate sent me this morning. I think it’s— oh, there it is. Cool.” She turns her phone sideways, squinting at the display. “All right, so as things stand currently, one of you is homeless and the other might be a target of a villain we know nothing about. So.”

Izuku rolls his shoulders, wincing as he approaches the empty seat next to Mizuki. “You’re not wrong, I suppose,” he tells Momo begrudgingly, but before he takes a seat, he stops short, eyes catching on the stuffed animal tucked into bed at Shouto’s side. “I’m sorry—what in the world is that?”

Shouto raises an eyebrow. “It’s Mister Kappa.”

“That… doesn’t answer my question. Like, at all.”

“Oh, haven’t you heard? Mister Kappa is my newest physician.” Shouto sets his empty pudding cup aside and tucks the sheets a little more tightly around the stuffed animal’s stumpy little legs. Shouto inclines his head in Mizu’s direction. “He came very highly recommended.”

Izuku glances down at Mizu, who beams up at him toothily. “Kappa!” she chirps.

Izuku bites back a small smile, the corners of his mouth twitching. He nods along. “Oh, right,” he says, voice rife with suppressed laughter. He smothers his smile against his fist, coughing. “Of course! Mister Kappa. How silly of me. He’s the best doctor in the land.”

Rei smiles softly and sets a hand on her son’s shoulder, squeezing lightly, and looks over at Izuku with glowing fondness in her heather-grey eyes. The braid resting against her shoulder is iridescent in the setting sunlight that seeps through the window on the far wall, sculpting gentle shadows beneath the slope of her cheekbones.

“Mister Kappa is a hero in the Todoroki family, I’ll have you know,” she says softly, her smile sweet and sure. “But I’ll admit it does make me feel better knowing my son is protected by two of the world’s greatest heroes at the moment, not just one.”

Izuku’s stumbles over his feet, one hand shooting out to keep himself from face-planting in a graceless heap of bruised, burned limbs at the foot of Shouto’s hospital bed. He stares at Rei. His mouth parts, moving soundlessly for several seconds.

“I’m— wh-who, me?” he finally asks, voice much smaller than before. He shakes his head frantically. “No, no, I didn’t— I mean, I wasn’t—"
“You saved him,” she interrupts, releasing Shouto’s shoulder to cross the room in front of Izuku, who has suddenly become very pale. She gently touches the bandaged expanse of his forearm. “You saved his life, and I want to thank you for it, Midoriya Izuku. No matter what happens, I will always be grateful that my son has you as a partner and friend. Our family owes you a great debt.”

She bows and holds it, face inclined toward the floor at a very low angle. Izuku stares, wide-eyed at the top of her head. He’s speechless, stunned, horrified. Almost as if looking for permission, he glances over Rei’s shoulder to look at Shouto helplessly.

‘What do I do?’ he seems to ask, half-panicked.

Shouto smiles softly and tilts his head, a few longer strands of white hair catching on the curve of his eyelashes with the movement. He nods. ‘Let her do this much,’ he replies.

Izuku must receive the message loud and clear. Swallowing thickly, he clears his throat. “I, erm—yes. Of course. You’re… welcome. Your son is a great hero and I’d do anything for—” he chokes, grimacing “—to, uh. Help him. Save him. All that stuff. So… yeah.” He laughs awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. “All part of the job.”

Shouto snorts softly, hiding the sound in his hand. Keiji just looks bewildered. Izuku’s face is stained redder than a tomato, freckles dark against his skin.

“Well said, Deku,” Momo quips dryly from behind him, shaking her head as she smiles. “It’s like you’re a public figure or something. Unparalleled speech skills.”

He glares at her over his shoulder.

Shouto’s mother straightens up and smooths out the front of her sweater, laughing sweetly. She reaches up on her tiptoes, dropping a chaste kiss against Izuku’s cheek that makes him sputter wordlessly for five solid seconds. “It’s perfectly all right. I understood you just fine, dear.”

Momo chuckles quietly and shakes her head behind them both, drawing their attention. She waves her phone in the air. “Remind me to get you a new PR person in the morning, hero. And though I hate to ruin the moment, this stuff is a little bit time-sensitive and I have to head back to the office soon. So…”

“Of course, of course,” says Rei, gesturing. She returns to her son’s bedside after pressing the palm of her hand to Izuku’s cheek, smiling warmly. If her eyes leak a little bit when they separate, Shouto doesn’t say anything—though he’d be lying if he said it didn’t warm his heart to see the two of them getting along so well. Parental approval of his friends is never something he’s actively sought, but it’s nice to have all the same.

“All right, Momo,” Izuku says a moment later, clapping his hands and rubbing them together. He smiles tightly. “Are we starting with a classic debrief or what?”

“House stuff first. It’s a bit more immediate.” Momo scrolls through her phone rapidly, glancing up briefly. “We can debrief you tomorrow morning at the agency, if you’d like. Might be easier there.”

He shrugs. “Sounds great.”

“What about me?” asks Shouto.
Momo glances up at him. Her gaze turns sympathetic. “We’ll debrief you tomorrow, probably. I’ll send in a team here to take your statement about what happened. The thing we’re most worried about right now is safety. Midoriya, do you know if you lost a lot of your belongings in the blast?”

“Clothes and some housewares, yeah, but that’s about it. I keep most of my valuables in storage.” Izuku drops heavily into the chair next to Mizu, peering over her shoulder to look at the book she’s reading with vague interest. His brow pinches. Reaching over, he flips the book over so it’s right-side-up in her hands, then turns back to Momo. His face twists. “Hey, is there insurance for if your apartment gets blown up? I didn’t really read the paperwork you gave me when I signed onto your agency—”

Next to Shouto, Keiji huffs in irritation. “Are you honestly going to make light of this situation?” he asks, voice thin. “The entire building collapsed. People got hurt.”

Silence falls, hard and heavy. Momo stops scrolling through her work phone. Mizu glances up from her picture book. Even Rei looks surprised, plucked brows furrowed delicately.

Izuku, however, says nothing, his expression gone suddenly cold.


“I don’t mean to sound rude.” Keiji crosses his ankles and leans back in his chair, arms draped over his lap. He shrugs. “I just don’t think it’s appropriate to joke about it so soon after the fact. People got hurt. Innocent people.”

“There were no civilian losses though,” Momo quips, holding up a finger, eyebrows raised. She looks around pointedly at everyone in the room. “I feel like I need to clarify that.”

“But they could have died,” Keiji says. “It’s still not worth joking about.”

Shouto sighs heavily. “Hey, listen,” he says turning to Keiji. “I really appreciate the gesture, but you don’t have to jump in like that. It’s fine. He was just kidding.”

“Exactly my point. It’s hardly a kidding matter.”

“He didn’t mean—”

“No, no, no. He’s fine. Let him talk.” Izuku placates Shouto with a hand, then laces his fingers together tightly and sends Keiji a flat, unreadable stare that could level the Earth if he wanted it to. “But considering the fact that I was one of those people who got hurt and lost all my shi——” he eyes Mizu warily “—erm, stuff in the blast, I think that gives me the right to insert some humor into the situation.” He shrugs. “It’s a more effective coping mechanism. In my experience, at least.”

Keiji grits his teeth. “Shouto risked his life—”

“That was his choice,” Izuku retorts sharply, brows lowering. “He’s not a child. I watch his back to the best of my ability, but I don’t babysit him. That’s not my job.”

“And what is your job, pray tell?”

Izuku’s mouth thins into a sharp line. “My job is——”

“Why are you talking about me as if I’m not here?” Shouto interrupts suddenly, sitting upright with a scowl. He looks between Izuku and Keiji in irritated bewilderment, waiting for an answer. Momo’s eyes are wide, mouth parted in stunned confusion as she glances between them. Even Rei
looks mildly surprised—her fingers are curled around the siderail of Shouto’s bed. There’s a thin layer of frost spread across the hills and valleys of her knuckles.

Izuku inhales slowly and leans back in his chair, biting his lower lip as he glares at the white floor tiles between his red sneakers. He motions ambiguously for Momo to continue, then rubs a hand over his tired face. Keiji sinks back into his chair as well, dead-silent.

Momo blinks. “Um. All right then,” she mutters awkwardly. She clears her throat. “Anyway, I got a call from the IHA this morning, really high-up. Until we know more about who bombed Midoriya’s apartment, the Association doesn’t want either of you living at home. We highly doubt it was a random attack.”

“No kidding,” Izuku mutters. He slouches in his seat and begins fiddling with the zipper of his jacket. “Who accidentally blows up the apartment of the Number One hero’s sidekick?”

“Someone with a grudge against the former Number One hero, perhaps?” Momo suggests, arching an eyebrow.

Izuku blinks. “Oh,” he says quietly, skin paling ever so slightly.

“Oh, oh.” Momo types a few things out, swiping madly. Her lips purse and she flips her ponytail over one shoulder, reaching up to pull a small plastic stylus out of a small expanse of skin near her collarbone. She taps out a few more words. “Which brings me to my next point, actually.”

“Oh, don’t keep me in suspense,” Shouto mutters under his breath.

“Oh do,” Izuku says, shrugging. “We’re not picky.”

Shouto laughs lightly and so does Izuku, smiling secretively as they share a joke that isn’t particularly funny. Izuku’s shoulders shake, his lips stretch and curve over white teeth, and his eyes glimmer with something warm and familiar behind full, curved lashes. Green eyes, cinnamon-spot freckles, smile lines that aren’t as well-used as they were once upon a time. Shouto used to love seeing how deep he could make those lines. He used to be quite good at it.

He wonders what it’d take to make those lines a permanent fixture in Izuku’s—

“…believes that the best solution to this problem is for you two to live in a small safehouse off-site until the threat has been located and eliminated.” Momo pauses, her words filtering in all at once. “Together.”

And Shouto’s brain short-circuits.

Chapter End Notes

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The building falls.

Wind in his hair, death painted on his tongue. Izuku doesn’t bother to move. The windows shatter apart by the thousands and steel girders tear without a sound, metal twisting into something spindly like blackened, brittle tree branches in the dead of winter. He watches carefully as the building—his building—tips forward on an unseen axis, with no ice to keep it upright.

His skin goes cold as the shadow descends. A concrete skeleton without shiny skin to keep it whole, cinders in its veins, and empty, charred holes where its heart should be. A monolith.

Bits of glass bite into his skin just like before, the spill of scarlet embers and exhalations of ash rolling and billowing out across the glassy surface of infinity that’s held taut beneath his feet like a rippling mirror. His hold on this world is tenuous at best, and he’s shaking. Izuku sees himself standing below his own feet, red sneakers duplicated in the silver reflection, pressed heel to heel, sole to sole. His face is freckled and familiar, creased in consternation.

Overhead, the building whistles, plummets, pulses with a heartbeat that rings hollowly in Izuku’s ears. The air pressure shifts around him, making room for the ruined structure as it prepares to make landing. Someone shouts his name in the distance, the voice hardly recognizable.

“Midoriya,” calls the voice, soft and insistent.

He turns and finds no one there.

He should move. He can feel the sharp sting of glass sinking into the skin of his face, forearms peeling and blackening as the heat becomes unbearable. Sweat seeps through his clothes.

*Where are you*, he yearns to ask. He longs to move, to get out of the way—but he can’t. He stays still, staring upward with no oxygen in his lungs and ice on his fingertips, each crystal burning him alive inch by precious inch. *How can I find you?*

“Izuku,” calls the voice again, this time more urgently. “Izuku, please, you have to wa—”

The building buries him alive. He feels every brick.

(He wonders if he deserves it.)

Izuku’s eyes snap open, skin going cold with residual chill from ice that isn’t there. Sunlight sears his retinas and he winces, lifting a numb hand to cover his eyes until the stars in his vision cease to throb in time with his pounding heartbeat. He breathes through his fingers. Antiseptic clings to the air like a second skin, caustic and cloying.

*Hospital.* Right. He’s… in Shouto’s hospital room. The chair he fell asleep in is uncomfortable, his neck is stiff, and he’s fairly sure his ass has molded the chair’s cushion into a new shape.
permanently by now. He hears the comforting beep of a heart monitor overlaying the soft rumble of the room’s air conditioning system. The small, shitty television in the room softly cycles through the morning news as Izuku collects himself piece by piece; the voices of the newscasters are cordial and coldly informational in the most familiar, comforting way.

“You sleep like the dead,” says a flat, quiet voice, cleaving the silence in two.

Tentatively, Izuku peers through his fingers. Shouto sits upright in his bed on the other side of the room, his hair tousled but freshly washed and curling faintly at the ends. His cheeks have regained some of their color and he no longer wears that god-awful green hospital gown, the garment having been traded instead for a pair of grey sweatpants and a dark blue t-shirt that says, ‘Being a hero is ALL MIGHT!’ in ostentatious font. Most of the wording is covered up by Shouto’s ruined arm, which has been carefully secured in place by a special sling that keeps his damaged fingers cinched above his heart in the region of his left shoulder.

He looks better. Not great, admittedly, but still. Better.

“I’ve been trying to wake you up for a few minutes. Thought you’d slipped into a coma or something.”

Or something. Izuku remembers a building, a voice. Embers. (Failure.)

“Guess I was tired,” he replies quietly.

“Clearly.” Shouto cocks his head to one side, a few strands of pale hair slipping out from behind his ear to hang loosely near the curve of his jaw like strands of weightless spider silk. “You talk in your sleep, you know. Loudly.”

“Pot, meet kettle,” he grumbles, rubbing at his eyes. “What’s it even matter?”

“It doesn’t.”

“Then why are you asking about it?”

“I wasn’t asking anything.” Shouto shrugs, lips curved downward slightly. He huffs. “It just… sounded like you were having a nightmare. That’s all.”

—the heat of the flames, screams of civilians left unsaved in shadowed crevices of a building too unstable to enter, breaths he couldn’t take while cinderblocks and steel buried him alive inch by precious inch, oh, god—

(Not real.)

His mouth tastes sour, his joints are sore, and his skin feels itchy and dry.

(Real.)

Sighing, Izuku rakes his fingers through the snarls of his hair and gestures noncommittally. “Look, dude. I appreciate the concern, but… why are you interrogating me about this? It was just a dream. It doesn’t matter.”
The heart monitor beeps. Outside the window, cars honk their horns in the streets below. The sky is no longer tinged with ash on the horizon. Shouto is studying him from across the room, gaze steadfast, expression unyielding like a puzzle with no solution. Watching.

Izuku holds his breath and waits for Shouto to ask. His mother would ask. Dr. Kubo would ask. Lucy—

Well, she used to ask. Once upon a time.

But Shouto doesn’t. Rather, he simply purses his lips and nods in silent understanding, hair slipping past his ears to hang in front of his eyes with the motion.

“No,” he agrees quietly, turning toward the window on the far side of the room. “I suppose it doesn’t.”

Shouto watches the city skyline with no small amount of yearning in the depths of his eyes, his good fingers idly tracing the purple-black spider-fractals of dead blood vessels that traverse up and down his forearm like horrible lightning bolts beneath the surface of his skin. His expression is unreadable in the harsh lighting of the room, cheekbones sharp against insipid shadows.

For a brief, flickering moment, Izuku considers telling him. He contemplates sharing all the gruesome, grisly details of his newest recurring phantasm: the plummeting building, the voice without a mouth, the steel skeleton of cinderblocks and sheetrock that always looks just as broken as he feels. It’d be easy to tell him everything, Izuku thinks—almost as easy as it used to be back when things were simpler between them and stargazing was their biggest concern on Tuesday nights.

Izuku rubs the back of his stiff neck, massaging muscles with sore fingers. Maybe someday, he tells himself, knowing full well it’s a lie.

(There’s a children’s song, one he doesn’t fully know the words to anymore. Something in English that Lucy taught him a very long time ago. He hears it echo in his memories, sour-noted and tuneless amongst all the rest.)

“Hey, it’s… um. Not a big deal,” Izuku says lamely, forcing a tight smile for Shouto’s sake. His words don’t fill the space the way they’re meant to, falling flat on the cold tiles like lost slips of paper. “There’s nothing to be worried about. Really, I’m fine.”

Shouto glances sidelong and gives him an indiscernible once-over, eyes skimming over the mostly-healed burns peppering his forearms like puckered stars seared beneath his skin. They’re ugly, but then again, so are all the other blemishes on his body.

He doesn’t know why these scars feel so different from the rest.

(Ashes, ashes.)

Shouto’s fingers curl in the paper-thin hospital sheets, ruining the perfectly-folded corners near the footboard. He drops his gaze to his feet, snapping the invisible cord strung tautly between them like wire. Tension bleeds. Those unspoken words stay silent just a little while longer.

“I never said I was worried,” Shouto tells him after a moment, picking at a seam in one of the sheets with his long, nimble fingers. His expression is meant to look bored, but Izuku can see the sharpness in his gaze, the low dip of his lashes.

“Curious, then?” Izuku guesses, kicking back in his seat a little bit. Levity, try for levity. “Or would
“annoying be a better word?”

He knows the joke doesn’t land as soon as the words are past his lips, but there’s little he can do other than watch the fallout. Shouto tugs hard at a thread in the sheets and creates a run that bunches from hem to hem. He’s not smiling.

“How’s there a difference?” he asks after a moment, voice low.

Yes. Izuku’s mind jumps to a million different conclusions all at once, none of them very good.

No, then. He supposes it’s all just semantics, when it comes down to it.

Maybe?

Jesus, he doesn’t know.

Izuku knows he’s playing a match with Shouto and losing ground rapidly, patches of grass and shards of shalestone disappearing beneath his feet with every mismanaged word he utters. He can’t win. Rather than put his foot in his mouth again, Izuku presses his tongue against the back of his teeth, memorizing their shape down to the specific angle of his bicuspid, and hopes for the fucking best.

After a moment, he exhales through his teeth and rubs a hand over his face, feeling every punch he’s ever taken deep in his bones. “All right,” he says flatly, tipping his head back against the wall. “So, prescription painkillers make you get all philosophical and shit. Good to know.”

“I’m not being philosophical,” Shouto says simply, tracing his finger over the run in the sheet. “I’m just making observations.”

“Annoying observations,” Izuku corrects, letting his eyes drift shut of their own accord.

Shouto’s face sours. “Well, somebody clearly woke up on the wrong side of the chair this morning.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re cranky.”

Izuku cracks one eye open and glares half-heartedly at him. “And you’re super irritating. We’re square.”

“Oh, just—fine. Whatever. Forget I said anything.” Shouto huffs, disconnecting his index finger from the heart monitor and hopping down from his bed with a surprising amount of grace, considering he’s been bedridden for almost a week at this point. He bends his knees a little bit and winces, stretching his unused muscles. “Do you know what time I’m supposed to be getting out of here?”

“You’re the one who filed your discharge paperwork, not me,” Izuku answers, confused. “The doctors didn’t tell you?”

Shouto shakes his head. “They just said it was today at some point. Nothing specific.”

Izuku frowns. “Huh. That’s… weird.”

“Tell me about it.”
Izuku slips his phone out of his pocket, callused fingers catching on the cracked screen. “Let me text Momo. She’ll probably know what’s up.”

Shouto winces, flexing his damaged fingers inside their brace, and starts shifting his weight from foot to foot, almost like he’s swaying to music nobody can hear. “God, I’m about to crawl the fucking walls.”

“Please don’t,” Izuku murmurs distractedly, scrolling through dozens of unread messages from all sorts of people. “Not sure the hospital’d appreciate that.”

“I need air.”

“And some sanity, obviously.”

Shouto’s gaze is withering. “Oh, ha. You’re hilarious.”

“No, I’m tired. Big difference.” He nods at the chair next to him, still squinting at his phone. “Would you sit down? Please? You’re making me nervous.”

Predictably, Shouto ignores Izuku and continues to lap the room like a caged animal searching for an exit. Izuku eyes the way he shifts his weight from foot to foot every time he comes to an unsteady stop, readjusting to the foreign concepts of walking and standing without the aid of crutches or a wheelchair.

Shouto’s bare feet pad soundlessly across the cold tile floor as he crosses to the window that looks out across the rest of this part of the city. The sky is blue but tinged with grey smog in the way that cities usually are, and the skyscrapers in the distance carve jigsaws into the clouds. The tentative touch of daylight dusts Shouto’s face in strips of pale gold, hugging his sharp cheekbones and mingling in the curved shadows of his mouth.

Nobody should look that good fresh out of the hospital. It’s goddamn criminal.

Shouto cracks an eye open and glances sidelong, almost as if sensing the weight of Izuku’s gaze. Izuku averts his eyes in an instant, choosing to stare down at his phone with singular focus as he key-smashes pure gibberish into his messages to feign a conversation with… somebody. His cheeks feel strangely hot.

“So?” Shouto prompts, turning slightly away from the window. The angle illuminates his lashes and his left eye, deep cobalt brightening to ultramarine in the span of a single throat-closing heartbeat. He says something shortly thereafter. Izuku doesn’t hear a single word.

Izuku blinks hard, shaking his head to clear it. “S-Sorry, what?”

“Did you hear anything yet?” Shouto repeats.

“About what?”

Shouto gives him an odd look. “About when I’m getting out of here. Obviously.”

“Oh. I— oh.” He swallows, sifting through his messages with a bit more purpose this time around, and tries not to drop his phone in his lap. There’s a bright red email notification in the top right corner of the screen that he pointedly ignores—again. “Um. Right. Well, Momo said the car will be here around noon, which is—” he pulls his sleeve back and checks his watch, squinting at the shattered face to parse together the numbers “—oh, shit, that’s. Wow. Ten minutes.” He drops his arm, raking a hand through his hair. “Jesus, Shouto, why’d you let me sleep so long?”
Shouto shrugs. “Figured you needed the rest.”

“We’re gonna be late, dude.” Izuku pushes up from his seat and pulls the sleeves of his zip hoodie over his hands, looking around the room. “You’ve got your stuff ready? We should probably head down to the lobby before the car gets here.”

He lifts an eyebrow, then looks pointedly at the small bag of things at the foot of his bed. “Do you mean the singular set of clothing I wore on my way here? Because if so, then yes. I’m all packed.”

“Oh, now who’s the hilarious one?” Izuku slips past him, snorting softly and brushing Shouto’s shoulder as he moves to grab the bag—it’s horrifically lightweight. Twisting the handles around his hand, he nods toward the door. “C’mon, let’s go. I don’t want Yaoyorozu to murder me for not making you stick to her itinerary.”

“Oh, don’t be so fatalistic,” Shouto says lightly, tucking his hair behind his ear. His mouth quirks. “She’d kill both of us.”

“Right. That makes me feel so much better.”

(A pocket full of posy.)

The drive to the apartment—their apartment, Izuku’s brain reminds him—is uncomfortable, to say the least. They sit on opposite sides of the backseat in the car Momo sends for them, pressed against their respective doors as if molding their bodies to the upholstery will stop any of this from actually happening. Like the cogs of their lives haven’t already been set into motion by unseen forces, gears spinning and teeth meshing in such an irrefutable way that Izuku’d be hard-pressed to stop them, despite all his strength.

Moving in together is uncharted territory for them both—an end result they never expected; the solution to an irrational equation that shouldn’t have a real answer. He can’t really parse together how Shouto feels about the whole plan, but if the set of his shoulders is any indication, he’s just as apprehensive about the situation as Izuku. Maybe even more so.

They pass storefronts and stoplights, colored storefront sunshades and brick-face apartments as muted jazz music filters out of the rear speakers of the car in soft, sour notes. The buildings are shorter out here—they must be approaching the edge of the suburbs, if Izuku’s internal compass is to be believed. The driver’s taken so many seemingly-random turns and detours that Izuku’s not altogether certain where they are, but he at least knows he’s far from where his apartment used to be. He sees more carefully-maintained trees spaced throughout this district, a few bike paths here and there, and flower boxes lining the first-floor windows beneath spindly fire escapes that climb the fronts of apartment buildings like blackened vines. It reminds him of Greenwich Village in some respects, what with the manicured greenery and red brick façades at every corner, each one accented with brightly-colored awnings and seemingly-friendly faces.

Lucy used to dream about moving to a Greenwich townhouse someday.
It feels like so long ago.

“We’re in Koboremi district,” Shouto murmurs after they turn down yet another side street, answering the question Izuku hadn’t voiced at all. Shouto glances sidelong, his cheeks tingling a faint pink color in the warm sunlight. “Sorry,” he says quietly, quickly, glancing down at his left hand where it’s fisted in his lap. “You were mumbling, so I figured…”

“Oh,” Izuku says. The driver in the front seat glances back at him in the rearview mirror, one eyebrow raised, but Izuku waves him off, shaking his head. He laughs awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. “I didn’t even realize. Sorry. I’ll stop.”

Shouto shrugs, sinking back into his seat and closing his eyes as he tilts his head back against the headrest. “I never said I minded.”

Silence falls once again, accompanied by jazz music and the comforting thrum of the engine. Izuku makes a conscious effort to refrain from mumbling the rest of the way there.

When they finally arrive at the apartment, Izuku’s about ready to leap out of his skin and run a lap around the city limits just to burn off his excess energy. The driver stops the car near the curb in front of a four-story apartment building with stone steps, wrought-iron railings, and black flower boxes on the first-floor windows full of neatly-trimmed greenery. The block seems to be completely residential and relatively quiet, even for this time of day.

“This is it?” Shouto asks, leaning over toward Izuku’s side of the car to peer out the window. He frowns. “Looks… quaint. I guess.”

Izuku hums lowly, unbuckling his seatbelt. “Well, it’s not the worst safehouse I’ve stayed in. I’m not going to complain.”

“You’ve stayed in safehouses before?”

He shrugs. “Who hasn’t?”

“Most people,” he replies flatly. “Most normal people.”

Izuku stops short, fingers curled around the door handle. Shouto is watching him, eyebrows furrowed deeply above curious, confused eyes. Izuku fights the urge to reach out and smooth his brow back into placidity.

“Well,” he says, smiling stiffly, “when have either of us ever been normal?”

With that, he pushes the door open, grabbing Shouto’s bag before clambering out to stand on the sidewalk. Shouto hesitates for a moment, then does the same on his side, only struggling a little bit with one arm. The second they’re both safely out of the car, the driver pulls away from the curb without a single word of acknowledgement.

Shouto comes to stand next to Izuku as they look up at the front of their new home, necks craned backward as they take in the sight before them. There’s a decorative red wreath on the front door and brass numbers above the threshold, and the trees overhead rustle comfortably as their branches sway in the gentle breeze.

(Izuku tries his absolute hardest not to think of quiet patrols in Greenwich Village and a townhouse that never belonged to them.)

For several moments, both heroes simply stare at the front door, unmoving as if their feet have
been planted in the concrete sidewalk like weeds. Words fall off the tip of Izuku’s tongue one by one, sliding back into his throat where they belong; none of them seem appropriate enough for the situation. Better to keep his mouth shut for now.

Clearly, Shouto doesn’t have the same compunctions.

“This is… weird,” he says carefully after a moment, squinting at the front door as if it’s somehow offended him. He turns to look at Izuku. “Right?”

“Yes.” He releases a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding and rubs a hand over his face. “Oh my god, yes. Thank you. I thought it was just me for a minute there.”

Shouto purses his lips and plays with the Velcro straps of his arm brace, fingers fiddling idly. “This whole situation is absurd.”

“I know, right?” Izuku gestures wildly, teeth tickling in his mouth as his anxieties crest and fall like a wave. “Like, I get the practicality of it, but there’s gotta be a better way of doing things. Am I crazy? Tell me I’m not crazy.”

“You’re not crazy,” Shouto murmurs, toeing at a small crack in the sidewalk.

“Thank god.” Izuku cards his fingers through his curls. “Like, it’s not that I don’t want to live with you, but. I mean. I don’t think corporate has ever mandated cohabitation like this before. It’s unprecedented.”

Shouto looks thoughtful. “I guess we’re a special case, then. Lucky us.”

In the distance, he hears the trill of a bike bell and the honk of a car over the twittering birds in the trees. Izuku shoulders Shouto’s bag and shuffles his feet, looking at the awaiting front steps of his new apartment building like a criminal on his way to the guillotine.


The words are barbed wire, cinching into the soft parts of his throat. The chain hanging around his neck suddenly feels impossibly heavy beneath the collar of his t-shirt. He hears the echo of his words, each one ringing truthfully against brick buildings and iron streetlamps alike.

*I haven’t lived with anybody since her.*

It gets Shouto’s attention. He looks over, and for a moment, Izuku expects the typical pitying gaze he usually gets from people whenever he mentions his wife, or anything remotely related to his career in America. He’s come to expect that sort of reaction from people these days. Like he’s made of glass, ripe for shattering at the slightest touch.

But Shouto merely watches him, listening. His expression holds no pity, no sorrow. Only attentiveness.

Shouto bites the inside of his cheek, brows lowering. “Izuku—” he starts. Izuku waves him off before he can get another word out.

“Don’t,” he says with a tight smile, all pulled strings and snapped wires. “It’s fine. That wasn’t my point.”

“What was your point?”
It’s not mean or impertinent—just a question, voiced bluntly. Nothing more. Izuku bites through the inside of his lip until he tastes copper.

“I just hope I’m not a terrible roommate,” he says quietly.

If there’s a dictionary definition of average, Shouto thinks that this apartment is it.

Shouto had worried that Momo would lease some ridiculous penthouse in the center of the city for them both. He’d expected large glass windows, sleek black countertops, and enough space for each of them to have their own private wings or something just as extravagant. Momo has always been a sucker for contemporary architecture—having grown up in her family’s classical mansion her whole life, she’d quickly grown bored with butlers and crown molding, tatami mats and koi ponds. Now she likes sharp edges, sleek countertops, and refrigerators that know your name and dietary preferences. Just because they’re different.

Shouto, however, is pleasantly surprised to find that their actual apartment is cozy, low-profile, and small enough to manage. With only two bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchenette, and a living room barely large enough for a sofa, the place floats somewhere in between “absolutely fucking tiny” and “almost livable.” It’s the sort of happy medium Shouto didn’t expect from Yaoyorozu, whose definition of casual dinner involves crystal stemware and a minimum of three courses. He supposes he should be thankful.

Shouto finds himself standing in the middle of the foyer next to Izuku as they take in their new living space in complete silence. There are cardboard boxes stacked against the walls, placed on every countertop, and scattered on top of every flat surface available like someone tossed them through the door and hoped for the best. There’s plastic-wrapped furniture scattered haphazardly throughout the small living room and two brand-new mattresses and bedframes propped up in the hallway that leads to their bedrooms and bathroom.

“It looks like IKEA threw up in here,” Izuku exhales in horror, green eyes wide as he surveys the carnage around them. He shakes his head in disbelief. “Where did all this stuff come from?”

“They raided my loft,” Shouto says flatly, glaring at all the boxes without labels—which is, to say, all of them. God dammit.

Izuku tangles his fingers in his hair. “What, so they—?”

“Looks like it.”

He blinks. “And they actually expect us to—”

“Yes.”

Izuku drops his hand back to his side with a sigh, muttering something along the lines of what else could go wrong? under his breath. Setting Shouto’s bag of things on top of a nearby stack of boxes, he sheds his zip hoodie and tosses it on a hook near the door. He rolls his shoulders as they strain beneath the thin fabric of his t-shirt.

“Well,” he starts, stretching his arms above his head. The hem of his shirt lifts, revealing tanned, freckled ridges near his hipbones. He smiles brightly at Shouto—it might be his first genuine smile.
of the day. “I suppose we’d better get started, then. ‘No time like the present’ and all that. What do you think—kitchen or living room first?”

“Living room, probably.” Shouto’s right hand tingles in its brace as he kicks his shoes off, blue-black fingers twitching. “I’m not sure how much help I’ll be in this state.”

“Don’t worry about it. You can be moral support.” Izuku crosses the kitchen and clears off a space on the countertop. His smile is perfectly crooked; his freckles dance between his dimples like stars. “Come on, sit down,” he says lightly, gesturing toward the empty space. “I’ll do all the heavy lifting. Just tell me where you want stuff.”

Begrudgingly, Shouto exhales through his nose. He considers saying no, that it isn’t fair to make Izuku do all of the work in their apartment.

But then again, Izuku has two working arms.

“Fine,” Shouto tells him after a moment, though the words fight him every inch of the way. “Moral support. I can do that.”

They get to work.

It’s a slow process, tearing open each cardboard box to find whatever was haphazardly shoved inside during the impromptu moving process. They find cast iron pans paired with clean bath towels, table lamps packed in with coffee mugs, and framed photos padded with mismatched pairs of socks. They even find a box full of dirty laundry, half-empty with nothing else in there save for Shouto’s secondary hero costume, a few pairs of boxer briefs, and his compression suits. The movers either didn’t care enough to sort Shouto’s things at his apartment or simply didn’t have enough time to make a proper job of it; knowing how quickly this entire plan came together on corporate’s end, Shouto suspects the latter. Figures.

Izuku begins piling items in the rooms where they’re supposed to go while Shouto sits on the kitchen countertop, offering the occasional direction and dry-witted comment. It takes a while for Shouto to stop feeling bad about ordering Izuku back and forth throughout the flat like some kind of servant—he’s used to giving orders in the field, sure, but not like this—but Izuku assures him time and time again that it’s fine.

“Until your arm heals, this is how things are going to be between us,” Izuku reasons at one point after Shouto brings it up again. He smiles faintly as he lifts a particularly heavy set of boxes, heading toward the hallway. “Might as well get used to it while we can.”

It’s logic Shouto can’t argue with, no matter how much he wants to. The phantom pain in his fingers aches fiercely in response, tingling and burning like his flames.

On the bright side of things, his boring job as Moral Supporter and Interim Apartment Dictator is supplemented a little bit with a Sudoku booklet that Izuku finds for him in one of the unmarked boxes in the hallway. It’s mostly worked through already, pages dog-eared and margins full of blue scribbles and spare numbers, but there are a few harder puzzles toward the back that haven’t been finished yet. He starts there. Shouto’s decently good with his left hand in terms of writing, thanks to his father’s ridiculous training (and doesn’t that make him burn a little hotter).

He quickly learns that he doesn’t have the patience for this sort of thing anymore, however. Not with a fucked-up arm, a missing Quirk, and an apartment that he shouldn’t be living in.

“Oh, for the love of— this is stupid,” he spits when the sun has just started to set over the trees
outside their window, edging the half-bloomed cherry blossoms in gold filigree. He stabs the pen at the page with more force than strictly necessary. “This goddamn row has to have a seven in it. I know there’s a seven in here somewhere. That’s literally one of the rules.”

Izuku looks up from the box he’s currently going through—hand towels and paper-wrapped hero awards, it looks like—and frowns as if he only caught part of what Shouto said. His hair is sticking up in the back. “Sorry, what’s wrong?”

“This puzzle is stupid and I hate it. That’s what’s wrong.” Gritting his teeth, the plastic pen melts a little in his left hand.

Izuku raises an eyebrow when he sees the pen go suspiciously limp in his hand, unable to keep its shape. “Uh. Want some help?”

“No,” snaps Shouto, stabbing the pen nib straight through one of the pages.

Izuku gives him a flat look that says ‘really?’ and rises to his feet in a fluid motion, dusting his hands off on his trousers. He crosses the living room in socked feet, sliding in next to Shouto’s knees where they hang over the edge of the counter. He peers at the puzzle in his lap.

Izuku hums lowly, and Shouto feels the vibration through the countertop. The pen melts a little more. He’s not altogether sure why.

“Have you tried a six here?” Izuku asks, pointing to one of the empty boxes on the left. His elbow brushes Shouto’s thigh, fabric rustling in the relative silence of their apartment. “The four in this row doesn’t fit ‘cause of the eight over there.” He pauses thoughtfully, and Shouto feels warm. “Oh, and this three is wrong. You’ve got it twice.”

Shouto blinks down at the page, numbers falling into place in his mind as Izuku describes them. The solution is obvious, now that Izuku mentions it. Biting the inside of his cheek, Shouto scribbles the proposed numbers in their corresponding blanks, cheeks heating ashamedly at the sight of his messy left-handed scrawl within the tiny boxes.

“It works,” Shouto mumbles, leaning back against the cabinets. His palms are slick, mouth dry, and he sighs in a small puff of steam, letting his eyes drift close of their own accord. He shrugs defeatedly. “So, what. His tone is flat—almost annoyed. “You’re good at Sudoku now? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Mm. Not particularly.” Izuku turns toward the fridge and pops it open, frowning when he’s only greeted with a few cold water bottles and an empty ice cube tray that doesn’t look like it’s ever been used. He snatches one of the water bottles and kicks the door closed behind him, turning to brace a hip against the edge of the countertop while he twists the cap off the bottle and downs half the contents in about five seconds flat. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and shrugs. “Lucky guess, I suppose.”

“Lucky?” Shouto echoes incredulously, shaking his head. He gestures vaguely with the half-melted pen clutched in his hand. “You honestly expect me to believe that you just happened to guess part of the solution to a five-star difficulty Sudoku puzzle? On a fluke?”

“Um…” Izuku gives him a concerned look. “Yes?”

Shouto stares at Izuku in unabashed disbelief—all six feet of him covered in freckles with enough strength straining beneath his skin to hoist the world on his shoulders. He was Number One for seven years straight; he saved the world more times than Shouto can count; he was All Might’s
protégé and the salutatorian of their class. He had *everything*.

And now he’s good at Sudoku.

Fuck.

“You’re ridiculous,” Shouto tells him flatly, snapping the booklet closed and setting it aside with the half-melted pen stuck between the pages. He runs a hand over his face, sighing through his fingers, and drops his head back against the cabinets with a hollow *thunk*. “Sudoku is supposed to be *my* thing, dammit.”

Izuku laughs softly and hops up on the countertop next to Shouto, feet swinging lazily in open air. He bumps Shouto’s elbow with his own. “Oh, I see how it is. We have *things* now.”

Shouto elbows him back, grumbling. “For the sake of this conversation, yes, we do.”

“Right.” He traces a finger around the top rim of the water bottle, pursing his lips. “Well, what’s my ‘thing’ supposed to be, then?”

“Crossword puzzles, obviously,” Shouto explains, crossing his arms over his chest. He slouches petulantly. “We had a system at school, remember? I did Sudoku, you did bullshit crosswords, we both read the comics, and we all went back to our rooms happy.” He gestures vaguely. “Boom, done, over. No loose ends. Balance of the elements and whatever.”

Izuku’s face sours. “And now that’s all messed up just because I guessed and solved your puzzle for you?”

“Yes.”

“Shouto,” he says flatly. “That’s ridiculous.”

“You’re ridiculous,” he counters lamely, mumbling.

Izuku bites the inside of his cheek, lips twitching in thinly-veiled amusement. He’s trying hard not to laugh and doing a poor job of it, if the way his eyes are crinkling is any indication. He coughs into his hand. “All right, I genuinely can’t tell if you’re being serious right now.”

“Don’t patronize me.”

He waves his hands. “I’m not! I’m not, I promise. I’m just…” He bites back another smile, studying Shouto’s face, the pinched set of his lips, the hunched positioning of his shoulders. Realization dawns on his expression. “Oh my god,” he breathes, almost reverently. “You’re *actually* upset about this, aren’t you? Like, disproportionally upset. Over Sudoku.”

Shouto twists his mouth. “Well, you don’t have to say it like *that*.”

“Like what?”

“Like it’s unreasonable.”

Izuku runs his tongue over his teeth, thinking for a moment. His mouth twitches dangerously. “Shouto,” he says slowly. “They’re *puzzles*.”

Shouto’s hand shoots up, gesturing sharply. “No, it’s the *principle* of the thing! Crosswords are subjective and stupid. Sudoku *isn’t*. And those stupid play-on-word questions? God, don’t even get me started.” He huffs, blowing a few strands of hair out of his eyes, and crosses his arms over his
chest like a petulant child. He feels no shame—only vindication and the fiery heat of his own blood as it courses through his veins. “Give me math. Numbers. Cold, hard facts and a solution that makes an ounce of logical sense. Not—” he searches for the words “—not puns.”

Izuku actually looks a little wounded, pulling back. “Hey, there’s nothing wrong with puns.”

“There’s everything wrong with puns, Izuku. They’re a blight on human languages everywhere.”

“I think it depends on the pun, really.”

“No. It really doesn’t.”

Izuku sighs and runs a hand through his hair, shaking his head slowly. “Look, all I’m saying is that maybe you’re being a bit too harsh about—"

“Don’t defend them,” Shouto snaps, glaring heatedly. He jabs his good index finger in Izuku’s face, getting as up close and personal as possible. “Don’t you dare. If crosswords are evil, then puns and idioms and—and stupid goddamn colloquial sayings are the devils who sent them. That’s all there is to it. End of conversation.”

Izuku opens his mouth as if to argue, but Shouto narrows his eyes—it’s a warning, and a formidable one, at that. They study each other carefully, Izuku frozen in place on the countertop with a mostly-empty water bottle crushed in his hand and Shouto with steam puffing out his nostrils in a steady stream. It’s a standoff. Time sits, frozen in midair like an hourglass with no equilibrium.

And then, with no warning whatsoever—

Izuku begins to laugh.

It starts small, the sound little more than a bubble of breathy amusement trapped between clenched teeth, each utterance as precious and rare as the one before it—and before long, it’s blossomed into a full laugh that shakes the Earth beneath their feet. Shouto watches in stunned silence, one by one, as the dominoes begin to fall with each guffaw and giggle: shoulders shake, teeth flash, eyes crinkle like candy wrappers. It’s like watching an old film bleed into full color, an infinite film strip staining bright green and blue and red and oh, how long has it been since I’ve seen him like this?

The laugh is as contagious as the plague itself. Izuku doubles over on the counter, wheezing as tears crest in his eyes and a stitch sews itself in his side. Shouto is stunned speechless. What should he do? Panicking feels like the best thing, given the circumstances.

“You—” Izuku gasps, sliding off the countertop to ease himself down onto the floor. He rolls onto his back, guffaws still seeping between his teeth in waves of the most beautiful, wonderful, natural sound Shouto’s ever heard in his life. “You’re—” another wheeze “—you’re incredible, you know that? I’ve never—oh, god—I’ve never heard someone get so worked up over crosswords before.”

Shouto knows he should try and look annoyed—maybe quip back with a dry one-liner or a petulant comeback worthy of the finest seventh-grade recess yard in all of Japan—but he can’t control his face anymore. Izuku’s laughter is loud and infectious, and before long he finds himself laughing as well, albeit significantly softer than Izuku. The muscles in his face strain with disuse, tugging up into a subtle half-smile. He laughs through his nose, shoulders shaking.

“Shut up,” he says, trying to get his expression to cooperate. He shakes his head and covers his mouth with his good hand, laughing against his palm. “Shut up. You’re ruining ev— Izuku, shut up, this is serious.”
It only serves to make Izuku laugh more. His cheeks are flushed beneath his freckles and his chest is heaving, straining beneath the thin material of his t-shirt. Shouto finds himself laughing harder as well—at what, he isn’t even sure. He lost sight of that a long time ago.

And with his hair pushed away from his face, smile stretched widely across full lips, and dimples flashing on either side of his mouth, Midoriya Izuku is—

Well.

He’s exactly the way Shouto remembers him.

*Beautiful.*

Chapter End Notes

**hi im love with two (2) Somft™ bois**

Also, I released a statement on social media the other day concerning my future in this fandom as a writer and an individual. If you haven't read it yet, please do so [here](#). I'd appreciate your cooperation!

And holy shit somebody made an epic webstrip of chapter 32 when Keiji and Izuku have their confrontation outside Shou's hospital room and it's?? amazing?? Click [here](#) to see it!

[Tumblr](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Roots Fan-Picked Playlist](#)
"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

– *Ozymandias*, Percy Bysshe Shelley

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Shouto’s first days in the apartment pass in a frustrating rush of too many details, too little movement, and no small amount of waiting.

It’s not perfect, this arrangement of theirs. Of course it isn’t. Expecting immediate perfection—two puzzle pieces falling into place, edges seamless and smooth—would be tantamount to Shouto expecting the nerve endings in his right hand to spontaneously blossom into use once again, blood flowing through abandoned, empty veins like it had never been frozen there in the first place. Impossible for a thousand different reasons.

The first week of cohabitation in the apartment is just about as awkward and stilted as Shouto expects, each of them stepping on unseen eggshells and trying not to slam doors too hard when one of them predictably gets up in the middle of the night to make tea. They’re the polar opposite ends of two magnets, constantly pushing the other just out of reach: they keep their showers short, dinners quiet, sleep schedules neat, and do their best not to rock the boat.

It’s a quiet sort of living, built on a mutual desire not to piss the other one off. Roommate assignments are usually like that.

But as the days pass and March bleeds into the cherry-blossomed beginning of April, they slowly start to find their rhythm: the agency fields questions from the press about the fate of Japan’s Number One hero while Shouto gets in the habit of taking evening showers simply because Izuku likes to take his in the morning; articles are published about the longevity of the pro-hero industry infrastructure while Izuku learns the hard way that Shouto’s cardigans have to *lay flat to dry*, not hang; and after a certain amount of time, the Number One spot is handed off to Bakugou over in the United Kingdom while Shouto and Izuku both learn how to steer clear of each other until they’ve each had their respective cups of caffeine in the morning.

It feels like school. It feels like that time they roomed with each other in New York City.

(It doesn’t feel weird at all.)

The agency gives Izuku three weeks off to sort his affairs before he resumes sidekick work in the
field again, this time under the sponsorship of a new hero. He’s out of the apartment more than he’s in it, spending time with his mother at his storage units downtown while they both sort through the remainder of his belongings in order to collect a rough list of everything he might have lost when his apartment building crumbled. It’s slow work and Shouto offers to help multiple times, but Izuku always brushes him off with a smile, reminding Shouto to take his pain medication before he inevitably slips out the door every morning.

Shouto, on the other hand, is given four months of paid medical leave.

Four fucking months.

When Yaoyorozu tells him, he does his best not to melt the phone in his hand in pure rage and unabashed horror. What’s the hell is he supposed to do until July? Take up knitting? Read trashy romance novels until his eyes bleed? Feed the pigeons in the park across the street? There’s not enough Sudoku in the world to fill that amount of time—even physical therapy can only take so many hours of the day.

His career is over. He’s over. All because of some damaged nerves and frostbite.

“I’m going to throw myself into the sea,” he told Izuku numbly from the middle of the kitchen the day he found out, temperature fluctuating dangerously beneath his skin like a volcano on the brink of eruption. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from one of the scuffed knobs on the kitchen cabinet above the stove, tracing every ding and dent in the metal finish like his life depended on it. He half-expected to go full supernova right then and there. How could they expect him to put aside his career, his life for four whole months?

Izuku had been the one to bring him back down to Earth that day, pressing a Quirk suppressant pill into the palm of his hand.

“Nobody’s throwing anybody into the sea,” he’d said, squeezing Shouto’s shoulder gently. “Not even you.”

It hadn’t been much, but it had been enough to shatter the panic-stricken vice wrapped around Shouto’s heart like steel cables. Izuku’s always been good at things like that.

Four months, Shouto had told himself once he got his temperature down to something more manageable. Four months of sitting around, going to physical therapy, and trying to keep his left side in check. It’s not that long, right?

Four months. One hundred and twenty-one days.

I can do this.

April 4th, 2026

The water isn’t boiling.

Shouto stares at the blue flames tickling the copper belly of the kettle on the gas range, glaring with no small amount of ferocity and annoyance. His deadened fingers tingle with phantom pain, each one carefully curled over his heart thanks to the brace keeping them there. His left hand
dangles at his side, just as useless as the right despite its mobility and active nerve endings.

Somewhere in the apartment, a clock ticks.

The apartment is empty this morning, Izuku having gone for a run at the crack of dawn like he always does. With the lack of bright red sneakers near the door and the relative silence that permeates the flat so absolutely, Shouto feels like he’s suspended in midair, frozen on all sides by the inexorable grasp of time. He hears the soft sound of the gas stove, the thrum of his own heartbeat, and the ambient sounds of the city through the open window in the living room. Cars honk. Trees rustle in the breeze. It’s a beautiful, bright Tuesday morning in Koboremi district, all things considered.

(The kettle shudders; pressure builds. The water still isn’t boiling.)

Izuku goes back to work tomorrow, bright and early. His summer costume is pressed and hung in the laundry room—a newer, updated iteration of his classic outfit, courtesy of the IHA, with sharped black accents, more breathable fabric, and an adjusted facemask that fits the contours of his cheeks a little more closely than before. Shouto tries not to be envious every time he sees that familiar green fabric hanging in the laundry room. His own costume sits unused in the silver briefcase beneath his bed, fabric folded and boots stashed someplace he can’t see unless he purposely looks.

He’s not jealous. He’s not. He’s just… not looking forward to being bored for four months straight. That’s all.

Shouto digs the nail of his index finger into the pad of his thumb until it stings, tasting familiar cheek-chewed bitterness on his tongue as he waits for the kettle to whistle the way it’s supposed to. Impatience tickles the back of his mind.

He’s happy for Izuku. Really, he is. Shouto has noticed how antsy Izuku’s been since March faded into April—he’s been pacing the apartment restlessly, tapping his fingers against his thigh in a tattoo that Shouto can feel just by watching it. His green eyes dart a little too quickly from window to window whenever he’s in the living room, almost like he expects someone to burst past the glass and attack them at any time. (Which might be true—the agency was never able to track down who bombed Izuku’s apartment, after all.)

Izuku’s kept himself busy processing reports and analyzing villain activity remotely from his laptop, but it’s not enough to sate him. It’s never enough. There’s too much power bubbling beneath his skin, too much restlessness for any one man to reasonably bear alone. He’s a soda bottle, shaken past the point of no return, and the question isn’t if he’s going to burst—it’s when.

Sighing, Shouto turns the knob on the stove impatiently, elevating the heat until the starter begins to pop rhythmically like sidewalk snappers in summertime. The flame flickers orange around the curved bottom of the kettle, wavering slightly in the breeze from the window.

And the water still isn’t boiling.

Shouto huffs, glancing pointedly at the empty mug on the island. There’s already a tea bag inside, just waiting to be steeped—ginger, a gift from his sister before she took the train back down to Kyushu after he got out of the hospital. He bites his lip, rubbing his thumb against his fingers in small circles, calluses rasping like sandpaper. Maybe…

Grabbing a small stepstool from the pantry nearby, Shouto trots into the foyer and sets it down with a loud thud, climbing on top of the stool to stand on his tiptoes so he can reach the smoke
detector attached to the ceiling. He scrabbles for the front panel and pops it off after a moment of cursing and struggling, prying the battery out with his sparking, sizzling fingers. The little red light on the detector stops blinking almost immediately.

Shouto hops down with a self-satisfied smirk. He flips the secondary lock on the front door—*just in case*, he tells himself—then returns to the kitchen where the water still sits in the kettle, hotter than average but not yet boiling.

Twisting the knob, he kills the gas flame, plunging the apartment into heart-pounding silence. He lifts his left arm and tugs the sleeve of his sweater back with his teeth, tucking the hem just behind his elbow and safely out of the way. His skin is scalding against his lips, already starting to sizzle and smoke, his nail beds glowing like red-hot cinders embedded in his fingertips. The inside of his mouth tastes like smoke from a campfire.

Shouto bites his lip, staring at his left hand. He feels his pulse rabbit and his temperature fluctuate dangerously from neutral to white-hot in an instant, but he is single-minded. He *will* do this. Just because he can’t feel the familiar chill-touch of his right side anymore doesn’t mean he’s useless, dammit.

Taking a deep breath, Shouto channels every ounce of his focus into the palm of his left hand. He’s hoping for a steady warmth to start, or perhaps a sputtering flame that he can cull into something a bit more manageable.

What he gets instead is a surprising spray of sparks, like a log falling in a fireplace. He flinches, fingers flexing, and the heat dies out.

He tries again.

It happens all at once, like a star collapsing in the blink of an eye. One second there’s only the scent of fresh air and laundry detergent wafting from down the hallway, the next there’s only the smell and sound of a roaring bonfire, or perhaps a burning building. Blue and white flames erupt up and down the lengths of his fingers like brushfire, consuming every visible inch of skin up to the middle of his exposed forearm in a blinding flash. It’s powerful, steady like a Bunsen burner, and hot.

Too hot.

Shouto swears and stumbles back a half step, holding his arm away from his body as the heat sears the skin of his face and rips the oxygen from his lungs in a single heartbeat. The flames are bright enough to burn spots into his vision. The curtains in the living room shift with the sudden displacement of air.

Shouto hisses through clenched teeth and tries his best to rein in his focus. He takes shallow breaths of dry air, focusing on supporting the energy spiraling outward from his core—he even thinks back to his flashfire lessons from his father when he was younger, recounting specific techniques for controlling sudden spikes in temperature.

None of them work. The blue-white flames only crawl further up the length of his arm, licking dangerously close to his sweater—his very *flammable* sweater.

“Shit,” he swears loudly, anesthetized fingers spasming in their brace as his body instinctively reacts. There’s a haze of smoke in the apartment now, thick and billowing, making it difficult to see. “*Shit, shit, shit*—”
Stumbling forward, Shouto collapses against the counter near the sink. Hand flaming, air dry, skin sweltering, he reaches out to grab the metal faucet handle and yanks it to one side sharply, bringing on a steady stream of water. He plunges his hand beneath it.

Almost instantly, thick white steam billows out around him as his flames are extinguished, smothered beneath the cold water spraying from the faucet.

Shouto holds his arm beneath the running water long after his flames have died, ignoring the way his hair sticks to his forehead in the thick humidity that now envelops the apartment. He shudders, shakes. He stutters over his own thoughts. His throat is raw and dry like dusty sandpaper, and his body burns from the inside out like the leftover shell of a spent firework after a festival.

Shouto groans and drops his forehead against the edge of the sink as the water continues to pour over his arm, dampening the charred edges of his sweater sleeve where it’s bunched around his elbow.

That was… stupid. Really fucking stupid.

A loud pounding on the front door startles him out of his self-sorrowful reveries. His head snaps up, flames instantly forgotten, and he nearly falls over as all the blood rushes to his head at once. Stars bloom behind his eyelids in splashes of green and violet. His head feels like a spinning top.

At first, horror crests in his stomach in the same wave as nausea. *Did a neighbor hear that? Do the other tenants smell the smoke?*

“Coming,” he calls out, tripping over the word as he attempts to keep himself from falling over with a death grip on the edge of the counter. He shakes his head to clear his vision, strands of wet hair flinging droplets across the kitchen. He rubs his forehead, wincing.

The pounding continues, rattling the door in its frame.

“Oh, for the love— I’m *coming,*” he says again, this time a little impatiently as the knocking becomes more and more insistent.

Shouto staggers across the kitchen and into the foyer, ignoring the cloying dampness of his bunched left sleeve. Peering through the peephole in the door, he squints at whoever’s waiting for him in the stairwell. He’s expecting the crotchety old lady from next door or the guy from upstairs who always smells like weed, or maybe even the landlord. It’s toss-up.

He heaves a weary sigh when he sees who it actually is.

“I thought this was supposed to be a safehouse,” he grumbles, just loudly enough for her to hear through the heavy wood. He presses his forehead against the door and closes his eyes tiredly. “Kind of defeats the purpose every time you come to visit, you know.”

Momo huffs on the other side of the door. He can practically hear her cross her arms in annoyance.

“Well, the agency sent me here, not a bunch of villains, so—”

“Same thing.”

“Are you going open the door for me or not?”

“I thought I wasn’t supposed to let villains inside.”

Momo aims her glare at the peephole, eyes narrowing into annoyed slits. She’s wearing a spring
pantsuit with her hair loose around her shoulders, sunglasses perched on her head to keep the loose ebony locks out of her face. Must be her day off. “Come on, open the door, Shouto. I need to talk to Midoriya.”

“He’s not here,” he mutters, face still pressed against the whorls and loops in the smooth woodgrain. “Went for a run. Don’t know when he’s going to be back.”

“Fine. I’ll talk to you instead.”

“Why?”

She grits her teeth and hits the door one more time with the side of a closed fist, rattling Shouto’s teeth inside his mouth. “Shouto, open the door or I swear I’ll rearrange all the post-it notes in your office.”

He recoils. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t? Why don’t you try me and find out.”

Shouto watches her for a few more seconds, warring with himself. On one hand, the apartment still has a haze of smoke lingering in the air, so he really shouldn’t let her in or else risk her finding out that he’s been playing with his flames when he shouldn’t be. She could call his doctors, tell Izuku, or even have his suppressant medication bumped up until he gets better control of his left side. …on the other hand, he’s attempting to lock Creati outside of his apartment. Even though she’s wearing linen pants and a floral blouse with Gucci sunglasses on her head, she could still kick his ass. A splintered door and a smoke-filled apartment would be the least of his worries. Shouto sighs and leans back, opening both locks with fumbling fingers before swinging the door wide. Momo stands in the threshold, hands on her hips, expression irritated and predictably pissed.

She does, albeit after a moment of stunned silence, and closes the door behind her with a soft click. Toeing off her high heels, she follows him into the kitchen with wide eyes as she surveys the thick smoke in the air and inhales the acrid scent of charred fabric and wet ashes.

Calmly, Shouto returns to the kitchen and flips on the gas range once again, setting his water to heat—the slow, safe way this time. His skin still tingles with residual heat.

Behind him, he hears the jingle of car keys and a purse landing heavily on the island. Momo pulls out Midoriya’s usual stool and takes a seat, bracing her elbows on the countertop.

“You want to tell me what happened?” she asks, studying him closely.

Shouto passes his fingers through the cobalt gas flames where they lick the curve of the kettle, biting the inside of his cheek. “Nope,” he says, popping the sound.

Another sigh, this one softer and sadder than the last. It grates on him. “Shouto—”
“It’s fine, Yaoyorozu,” he tells her firmly, looking over his shoulder. He meets her gaze with narrow-eyed resolve.

Momo raises an elegantly-plucked eyebrow and lifts her gaze to the ceiling where the smoke detector sits, battery panel hanging wide open and empty. She gives him a pointed, knowing look that speaks straight through him.

Shouto turns back to the kettle and tries not to grind his teeth to dust, fingers tracing the numbers on the burner dial on the front of the stove. “Whatever. Just… tell me why you’re here.” It comes out low and bitter, and he hates the way his own voice sounds like a stranger’s.

Manicured nails clack against the countertop one by one, and the relative sound of silence reigns in measured heartbeats of time that slip past them both. Shouto doesn’t turn around, choosing to keep his gaze fixed on the spout of the kettle. He waits for steam to billow.

Momo exhales faintly through her nose. “Well, I needed to talk to Midoriya about something important. You’re Plan B, I guess.”

“It can’t wait until he gets to the agency tomorrow?”

“Not really, no.”

“You could have just called him.”

“Oh, trust me. I’ve tried.” Momo reaches over and digs through her purse, pulling out her phone. She unlocks it with a swipe of her finger and sifts through some screens before holding up her call log for Shouto to see. He reaches out to take it from her, frowning down at the display.

Thirty-seven calls, all to Izuku over the last two weeks. He scrolls through them, noting the time and frequency of each individual call. Every single one of them is red. Missed.

Momo reads the confused expression on his face. She grimaces. “I’m guessing he either broke his phone again, or…”

“Or he’s dodging your calls,” Shouto finishes, voice quiet and contemplative.

She nods, smiling sadly. “I’m more inclined to believe the latter option at this point.”

He hands the phone back to her, perplexed, and leans a hip against the countertop as he mentally cycles back through every interaction he’s had with Izuku for the last two weeks. Admittedly, Shouto hasn’t seen him use his phone much since they moved in, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Maybe he’s just… busy. Busy with his mom, sorting his belongings, tracking villains, watching Netflix, going for runs through the park—

(Maybe he’s not that busy.)

“I don’t understand,” Shouto says, rubbing a hand over his face tiredly. “All he’s talked about for the past week is getting back out into the field. He wouldn’t— I don’t—” Shouto lets out a sharp exhale and gestures helplessly. “This isn’t like him.”

“I know,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest. “And it isn’t just the phone calls, either. I’ve tried email, texting—the whole bit. He hasn’t answered a single one.” She exhales and looks out the window, shaking her head. “Honestly, you’d think he’d want his hero license back. After all the trouble he went through to get his provisional, I really didn’t think he’d hesitate when it came time to reinstate him.”
The kettle begins to whistle.

“What?” he asks softly, spine rigid. His voice is little more than a whisper, voice frayed like rusted steel cables in all the wrong places. His skin feels cold.

Momo starts digging through her purse in search of the tin of cinnamon Altoids she always keeps on hand, not looking up at him. “Well, getting his provisional with you wasn’t exactly a simple process. Government paperwork might look easy from your end of things, Shouto, but trust me when I say that pairing the two of you up was not a walk in the park—”

Shouto shakes his head and waves his hand to stop her. “No, not that. Before. Izuku’s getting his license back?”

Momo stills. She looks up, hand still deep inside her purse, and her eyes are wide, brow puckered. Outside the open window, cars honk their horns and the soft murmur of the city bleeds into rhythm with the thudding of Shouto’s heart, melding into one pulsing wall of sound. Inescapable.

Momo bites her lip and removes the tin of Altoids from her bag, setting it on the counter. Metal hits granite with a quiet clink.

The kettle is still whistling.

“He didn’t tell you,” Momo says quietly. It’s not a question—merely an observation, a statement of fact. She’s never been one to beat around the bush.

Shouto swallows, flexing his damaged fingers inside the brace strapped to his chest. There’s a slight tugging sensation as his tendons creak to life, pulling on unused muscles and stiff joints, but he only feels shivering static below his knuckles—an infinite void of nothingness in a sea of sensory stimulation.

“No,” he replies after a moment, looking away from Momo’s pitying gaze. “No, he didn’t.”

“Oh, Shouto,” she says sorrowfully. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t—”

“It’s fine.”

“But I didn’t—“

“I said it’s fine, Yaoyorozu.”

He turns away, reaching for the burner knob on the stove until the blue flames extinguish themselves, plunging the room back into relative silence. The kettle ceases its screaming and shaking, the boiling bubbles tapering off into little more than a simmer, and he pours the water into the waiting mug, being careful not to drip any on the countertop. The teabag bloats up, then sinks to the bottom like a stone. The sharp scent of ginger floods his senses.

Meanwhile, Momo watches him carefully as the tea steeps in his cup, her fingers tracing the embossed top of the Altoid tin on the counter. She looks uncomfortable.

“I’m sure Midoriya had his reasons for not telling you,” she tries to reason. “Maybe he didn’t want to upset you.”

“I’m not upset,” he says softly, staring down at the glassy amber surface of his tea.

And it’s true—Shouto’s not upset. Surprised, maybe. A little stunned. Caught off-guard. But he’s
definitely not upset. Midoriya deserves to have his license back. He’s fought, bled, and broken a thousand different times for the IHA. He’s lost things no person should ever lose, then picked himself up again and kept on fighting. All for the sake of the greater fucking good.

He’s the best hero Shouto’s ever met. The greatest, most valiant, compassionate hero that ever lived. The world deserves to see him at the top of the hero roster once again.

Shouto removes his teabag from the cup and sets it on a nearby saucer. He picks up his mug, taking a small sip—the scalding liquid feels lukewarm against his tongue. Almost cold.

(It’s also bitter against the back of his throat; he let it steep for too long.)

Shouto sets his mug down and tucks a few red strands of hair behind his ear, looking out the window at the sun rising over the skyscrapers in the distance, each one hazy and indistinct like a half-forgotten memory above the pink cherry blossoms in the park below their apartment window. He gives Momo a reassuring half-smile, ignoring the way his hand tingles, almost like a warning—or perhaps a dream.

“I’ll make sure he calls you tonight,” Shouto tells Momo quietly, tracing the tip of his index finger around the rim of his mug. “Thanks for letting me know about this, Momo.”

“Of course.” Momo inclines her head gratefully, then raises an eyebrow. “Should I expect good news or bad news?”

“Honestly?” he murmurs. “I have no idea.”

As soon as Momo leaves, Shouto resolves to wait for Izuku’s return. There’s a current sparking beneath his skin, a sort of energy that he can’t quite shake no matter how hard he tries. Izuku’s runs are typically rather long affairs since his stamina is basically an endless well of perpetual energy, so Shouto takes the chance to reinstall the battery in the fire detector, throw his half-charred sweater in the trash can, and take a brief shower to rinse the smell of smoke from his skin. The shower, annoyingly enough, is the hardest part.

Showering is a slightly more difficult affair than it’s ever been before in Shouto’s life, but that’s not to say it’s impossible. He takes his time changing out of his clothes and removing his brace, being careful not to jostle his right arm too much in the process, and painstakingly removes the bandages wrapped around his fingers like the doctors instructed him in the hospital. Every time he removes the white bandages and layers of protective gauze like Christmas wrapping, he knows what he’s going to find—purpled skin, senseless fingers, and ruined veins snaking up the inside of his forearm, each one reaching up, up, up like ravenous, clawed fingers.

He wiggles his right fingers just to remind himself that he can. They flex and curl, blood-blistered nails digging into the palm of his ruined hand until he forms ragged crescents amongst the blue-black deadness that engulfs him up to the wrist. Scars crisscross his knuckles like shattered shards of glass, each one silver and pale, stretching and pulling with force that he knows should be painful.

It’s not. It’s not painful, and it will never be painful—not in the physical sense, at least.

Tearing his gaze from his ruined reflection in the mirror, Shouto steps into the shower and blasts
himself with scalding water until his skin tingles and flushes bright red. He tries not to think about it—his hand, his missing Quirk, Izuku’s impending hero reinstatement, the fact that Keiji hasn’t called in a week, four months left until I’m free again. He tries not to think about any of it. He only half-succeeds.

Shouto finishes his shower, ignoring the angry red patches of overheated skin on his body, and changes into a fresh pair of leggings and an oversized yellow sweater with sleeves long enough to cover his fingers. He manages to find one slipper sock embroidered with little yellow parakeets in the depths of his sock drawer, but when he can’t find its mate, he settles for a dark blue ankle sock for his other foot.

Before heading back to the living room, he casts a look at his brace where it sits on his bed, empty and waiting to be worn again.

Fuck it. One afternoon without it won’t kill him. He leaves it on the bed and heads back out into the living room, enjoying the way his right arm feels hanging at his side where it belongs.

It isn’t long before Izuku returns to the apartment, thankfully. By that point, Shouto’s done three Sudoku puzzles, made two pots of tea (mint and jasmine, respectively), and vacuumed the living room carpet simply because he had nothing better to do. Hell, he even considered checking social media for a brief moment after lunchtime. (The only thing that stopped him was the fact that Momo is the one who keeps his login information and manages the accounts. Probably for the best, honestly. Shouto’s never been good at that sort of thing.)

Shouto is in the middle of chapter seventeen of *Twilight* when he finally hears the sound of a key jingling in the lock. Bella is leaving her father’s house to attend a baseball game with Edward—not one of the more thrilling chapters, Shouto will admit. He looks over the top of the novel just in time to see Izuku stumble inside the apartment, sweating and breathing hard with his shirt clinging to his chest, red-faced as if he just did a lap around the city limits—which, in all honesty, he probably did. The music from his earbuds is loud, even from across the room.

“I’m home!” he calls out loudly, too distracted with taking his shoes off to notice Shouto sitting on the sofa fifteen feet away. Izuku kicks off his sneakers at the door and stumbles into the kitchen, ripping open the fridge to grab a water bottle from the shelf. He twists the cap off and downs half the bottle in one go, still wheezing and cheeks tinged red with exertion.

That’s when his gaze finally falls on Shouto. Izuku jumps, startled, and quickly fumbles to remove his earbuds. The music is upbeat and poppy—some song Shouto doesn’t recognize.

“Oh, hey,” Izuku greets, smiling. He leans a hip against the counter and takes another sip of his water. “Didn’t see you there.”

“I noticed,” Shouto says flatly.

He winces. “Ah. Yeah, sorry. Figured you were in your room or something.”

“Mm.” He sinks back into the couch, snuggling a little deeper into the blankets as he half-reads his chapter. “Did you have a nice run?” he asks without looking up.

Izuku shrugs and untangles his earbuds from around his neck, dropping them on the island in a knot of wires. “It was fine. Can’t complain.”

In the book, Edward is buckling Bella into a Jeep. His hand brushes her collarbone, and she starts hyperventilating and having an internal crisis. *Weird.* “How many kilometers did you manage?
You were gone for a while.”

“Thirty-six today. Two more than yesterday, so that’s good, I guess.” Izuku crosses the kitchen and steps into the living room, dropping to sit on the floor with a heavy thud that Shouto can feel through the cushions on the sofa.

Izuku sets his water bottle on the coffee table—without a damned coaster, the animal—and then reaches for his toes in a deep leg stretch. His hands grip the arches of his feet and he bends himself practically in half in an impressive show of flexibility that ripples his back and shoulder muscles in the most fascinating way—not that Shouto’s really looking, per se. Izuku just happens to be in his line of sight.

Shouto turns back to his book, focusing intently on the way Edwards does… things with Bella. Boyfriend things and vampire things, he thinks. He’s not sure. As it turns out, it’s remarkably difficult to focus on a shitty teenage romance novel when Izuku’s doing his post-cardio stretches in the middle of the living room wearing nothing other than a thin sweat-soaked t-shirt and black athletic shorts. The book rambles on about rain, there’s a little part about running through trees, and—oh, they’re already at the baseball field. Shouto might have skipped a page in between Izuku’s heel and butterfly stretch. He flips back to double-check, just in case. (He skipped a page. Fuck.)

Sighing irritably, Shouto marks his spot with a spare hairpin and closes the book with finality, tossing it onto the coffee table. He’ll try again later when Izuku’s not so keenly intent on using up every spare molecule of oxygen in their apartment.

Izuku turns his head in the middle of a heel stretch and looks up at Shouto from the floor. “So, how was your day?”

“It was fine.”

“Just fine?”

Shouto bites his lip, thinking. Kettle, flashfire, Momo, hero license, Twilight.

“Boring,” he amends after a moment. “Mostly, anyway.”

“Mostly is better than completely,” Izuku reasons, leaning up and sucking in a deep breath. He climbs to his feet and shakes out his joints, bouncing lightly on his toes to finish loosening up. When he’s finished, his eyes fall on the novel sitting on the coffee table.

A small smile curves one side of his mouth. Oh, no.

“Shouto,” he says carefully, taking a step toward the table. He reaches down and picks up the book, double-checking the cover. “Are you… reading this?”

“It’s a decorative piece, actually. I really think it ties the whole room together, don’t you?” A pause, then Shouto rolls his eyes up toward the ceiling, dropping the sardonic tone all at once. “Of course I’m reading it.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

He shrugs. “Guess it just doesn’t seem like your kind of thing.”
Izuku thumbs through it, dropping onto the far end of the sofa near Shouto’s feet where they’re covered with the blanket. Shouto bends his knees to move out of the way to make room.

Izuku hums lowly as he flips through the book and Shouto feels the vibrations all the way up his spine. Gooseflesh ripples across the planes of his back and down between his shoulder blades, sending a chill through his blood that he hasn’t felt in over a month. He chases the feeling, following the frigidity it all the way to his core where it disappears like a wisp of vapor, slipping between his fingers before he can truly contain it.

Izuku flips to the page where Shouto clipped his hairpin, eyes scanning the text with no small amount of amusement. He bites his bottom lip to contain a laugh.

“'Instead of keeping safely motionless,'” Izuku reads aloud, “'my arms reached up to twine tightly around his neck, and I was suddenly welded to his stone figure. I sighed, and my lips parted.'” His face twists in comic disgust, looking up at Shouto. “All right, first of all, gross.”

“It’s not that bad,” Shouto mutters, making sure to keep his damaged arm underneath the blanket and out of sight. “You’re just critical.”

Izuku looks up from reading, shoulders shaking in silent amusement as he gives Shouto an incredulous look that forces his dimples to make an appearance on both sides of his mouth.

“Dude,” he starts slowly, biting his lip to hold in his laughter. He shakes his head. “I’m only critical when I know I’m right about something. ‘Welded to his stone figure’? That–”

Shouto cuts him off. “Don’t say it.”

“—doesn’t even make sense,” he explains between his smiles. In the sunlight, the residual sweat glitters on his cheeks and highlights the smatterings of freckles across the bridge of his straight nose. “You weld metal, not stone. And this part,” he says, pointing to another paragraph on a previous page. “The guy actually says to her, ‘Would I ever let a tree hurt you?’ Like, that’s a sentence that was actually written. By a human. And then it was published by other humans.”

Shouto holds his good hand out, gritting his teeth. “Yeah, all right, very funny.” He’s deadpan, gaze withering. “Now give it back. Please. You’re going to lose my spot.”

He pretends to think about it for a moment. Then: “Mm, no. Think I’m gonna keep reading.”


He pretends to think about it for a moment. Then: “Mm, no. Think I’m gonna keep reading.”


“But now I’m all invested in Mr. Stone Figure over here,” he says with false innocence. His eyes glitter with amusement, reflecting emerald in the light. “I can’t just leave this story unfinished now that I’m interested. That’d be cruel.”

“I swear to god–” Shouto lunges forward with his good hand and tries to take the book, but Izuku twists his body and blocks his way, holding the novel well out of reach. Laughing, Izuku flips to page one, still holding the book high in the air. He skims the dedication and subsequent introduction and clears his throat dramatically.

“'I’d never given much thought to how I would die,'” he reads, blocking the kick Shouto aims at his midsection. He’s grinning, holding the book with one hand and gripping Shouto’s rogue ankle with the other, twisting to keep him from landing a decent hit. “‘Though I’d had reason enough in the last few months—but even if I had, I would not have imagined it like this.'” He huffs a lighthearted laugh. “Oh my god, what is this girl, a prophetic witch? Who talks like that?”
“Asshole,” Shouto hisses, fingers scrabbling uselessly at the arm Izuku has raised over his head. Shouto plants one socked foot against the side of Izuku’s face, pushing him even farther away than before while he reaches for the book at the same time. “I’ll set your bedsheets on fire if you don’t cut it out. Izuku— ow, fuck— come on—”

Izuku is laughing with his whole body now, broad shoulders shaking and head thrown back to expose the column of his tanned, freckled throat. He’s holding Shouto off with an annoying amount of effortlessness and stunning strength—the kind of strength that’s held up falling buildings and caught jet airliners from the sky on numerous occasions.

And through it all, he continues to read.

“‘Surely it was a good way to die,’” he recites dramatically, smacking Shouto’s hand away when he reaches for the book. Izuku even catches Shouto’s foot in the midst of a kick, fingers digging into the hills and valleys of Shouto’s left ankle. “‘In the place of someone else, someone I loved. Noble, even. That ought to—’ ow, Shouto, quit it already, you’re ruining the story– ‘ought to count for something.’”

“I will burn your comic books,” Shouto vows, putting his full body weight into pushing Izuku off the end of the couch and sending him straight to hell. “I’ll sell all of your Game of Thrones Blu-rays. Stop reading, oh my god.”

But Izuku pays Shouto no mind, head turned the other way as he continues to read line after terrible line. He’s too strong. With only one hand at his disposal, Shouto doesn’t stand a chance.

Oh, what the hell, Shouto thinks. He curls fingers that he can’t feel anymore, kicks the blanket off his lap, prays for a miracle, and lunges.

Shouto feels the air flow around the curve of his forearm as his right hand shoots out and slips past Izuku’s face, and he sees his damaged fingers curl around the top of the book right in front of Izuku’s eyes. He can’t feel the texture of the pages between his fingers or the softness of the flexible binding giving way beneath the pressure of his hold, but his eyes see the truth—he’s holding the book, and his grip is strong and steady. Muscles flex and respond, tendons grow taut beneath blackened skin, and his shoulder creaks as he rips the book right out of Izuku’s hand with no small amount of clumsiness.

Shouto crushes the book to his chest and shoves himself backwards across the couch as far as he can go until his back runs into the armrest, pulling his knees up to his chest to keep the book hidden away and safe from sticky, curious fingers. Shouto allows himself a moment of victorious pride, just for the hell of it.

But Izuku’s face is much paler than it was a moment ago. He’s not laughing, not smiling, and his dimples have long since disappeared. Izuku looks every year of twenty-seven and then some, each year stacked on his shoulders like two-ton weights. It only takes Shouto a moment to figure out why.

Shouto’s hand sits in open air, fully visible with the yellow sleeve of his soft sweater bunched around his forearm in a loose drape. Fractals of blue-black veins crisscross his skin like sickening vines and greedy fingers, and the scars on his knuckles gleam silver in the sunlight where his skin shattered like glass.

And Izuku is staring right at it.

“You—” Izuku stammers, cheeks suspiciously pale. His expression holds no amusement, no smile
—not a single trace remains of the good humor he was in mere moments ago. “Shouto, y-you’re not…”

“Not what?” he asks abruptly. He holds up his hand and clenches it into a loose fist, watching the way his scars stretch and split one by one.

His gaze shifts to Izuku. He asks a question—one he doesn’t have to voice.

_Not what you expected?

Izuku flinches, hearing it loud and clear. He shakes his head. “No! No, that’s—that’s not what I meant.”

Shouto sets the novel quietly on the coffee table, watching his fingers carefully to make sure they don’t fumble or bump anything they’re not supposed to. “What did you mean, then?”

“You’re supposed to have your brace on,” Izuku tells him. His brows furrow. “And bandages. That’s what they told you at the hospital.”

“I’m allowed to go without it for a few hours,” he says.

Izuku’s face hardens a fraction. “No, you’re really not. Doctor Hiyori said—”

“I know what Doctor Hiyori said.”

“Then you know why you need to wear it,” he shoots back, face hardening.

Silence falls, heavy and cloying. Absentmindedly, Shouto presses the pads of his fingers together, watching closely as deep violet flesh pales to unnatural ivory beneath the pressure. It’s like watching a stain lift from fabric, or a bruise flower into existence in slow-motion. He observes, fixated as the blood returns to his numb flesh millimeter by precious, painless millimeter, and focuses on counting his heartbeats.

At the other end of the sofa, Izuku exhales slowly. He stands up, grabbing his water bottle from the coffee table. A small ring of condensation remains; it’s glossy and broken against the polished wood.

“Do you want me to go get your brace?” Izuku asks, rubbing the back of his neck as he eyes Shouto’s bedroom door at the end of the hall. “I can—”

“No,” Shouto says, curling his fingers in one by one. His skin feels strangely cold. “Thank you. I can get it.”

Izuku bites his lip. “I…” he starts, but thinks better of it. “Right. Okay.”

A careful quietness overtakes them once again, pulling them beneath churning waves they can’t see. Shouto doesn’t—_can’t_—breathe. His wrist aches and his fingers tingle in sudden paralysis.

TV static trapped beneath broken skin, a thousand pins and needles pressed against the ridges of his fingerprints from the inside out.

_(He wishes he could turn back time.)_

On the other side of the coffee table, Izuku winces at the silence and jerks a thumb over his shoulder in the vague direction of the hallway. “I’m, uh… gonna go shower,” he says quietly. “Dinner tonight?”
“I don’t feel like cooking.” Shouto’s voice is quiet, even to his own ears.

“We’ll order in, then.”

He digs a nail into the pads of one of his fingers until he feels skin give way in a burst of blistered pressure. “Fine.”

Somewhere in the apartment, a clock ticks in time with his heartbeat. Izuku hesitates, opening his mouth as if to say something else—*acknowledge it, talk to me, say anything, god dammit*—

But he ultimately decides against it, turning away in a whisper of fabric. Footsteps, slow and slightly uneven, trudge down the hallway, the sound cutting off with the gentle *click* of the bathroom door latching into place. A moment later, the showerhead begins to hiss.

Shouto stares at the droplet of blue-black blood that’s welled up on the tip of his index finger, unmoving; it glitters like polished onyx in the waning light of day. Frowning faintly, he smears it with his thumb, pressing the soured iron back into the folds of his fingerprint where it belongs.

It doesn’t feel like anything at all.
There’s a shallow sort of sickness trapped inside of Izuku, waiting to bloom. He’s almost sure of it. He can’t quite put his reasoning into words—the feeling is too loose, slipping between his fingers like sand every time he dares to wonder—but he knows there’s something lingering in the pit of his stomach, weighted and bitter like mercury. It’s been there as long as he can remember. Maybe even longer.

Sometimes the feeling twists his stomach in the middle of the night, unexpected as the nightmares that accompany those nausea-inducing bouts of horror between ragged breaths and tangled sheets. Sometimes his lungs constrict and his throat closes up as that sickness inside of him spreads a little further with every smile he shares with Shouto across the kitchen island. Sometimes he flips himself inside out in the middle of doing the laundry, checking pockets and sorting whites from colors because their fabric softener smells like her sometimes, if only barely. Other times it doesn’t smell like her at all.

Izuku’s reflection in the mirror above the vanity is clouded with the steam from the sputtering showerhead as he stares at himself, fingers curled around white porcelain edges to support his weight. He can still feel the vibrations of laughter between his teeth from earlier, but it’s chased by the bitter aftertaste of remembrance and regret as he thinks about Shouto’s ruined arm, purpled skin contrasting neatly with the pale yellow of his sweater.

Elbows, shaking. Heart, flayed. Damaged.

He stares at himself in the mirror, looking but not really seeing. He knows he’s stained at the edges, torn and dog-eared like a book that had its binding broken long ago. Sometimes he wonders if he has any pages left worth reading, or if he’s better off left on a shelf to gather dust between other obscure titles not entirely unlike his own. His nightmares fill in the chapter breaks between pages with bold illustrations of his failures, each one rendered in full color and sharp strokes of black ink.

—New York, ferries full of people I can’t save, Lucy, Queens, my blood, smeared lipstick, her blood, so much fucking blood—

(He doesn’t read that chapter as often as he used to.)

—Japan, my apartment building, smoke and salt, flames I can’t feel, Shouto, Shouto, Shouto—

(He reads that chapter every night.)
Izuku’s self-aware enough to know he’s existing on borrowed time, piecemeal seconds he pinches when he can. The memories are slowly starting to claw his body to pieces between faded paragraphs, scarring him in the shadows beneath his eyes and the fine lines around his mouth. Shouto’s going to notice soon, if he hasn’t already. He’s nothing if not observant. It’s only a matter of time.

Izuku drops his gaze from his reflection, eyes falling on his phone as it buzzes, drawing his attention. *Three missed calls*, the display reads, all from Yaoyorozu. Two text messages from Amelia. One voicemail from his mother.

The date reads April 4\(^{\text{th}}\) at the top of the screen, white text crisp and bright amongst the spider-shatter damage that always seems to be there these days. *April 4\(^{\text{th}}\), April 4\(^{\text{th}}\), April—*

The sickness in his body spreads a little further, unbidden.

Clenching his teeth, Izuku silences his phone and sheds his shirt, turning toward the steaming shower as he weeds the thoughts from his mind, root and stem. He’ll worry about it later.

Izuku orders dinner at five-thirty—or, at least, he tries to.

He frowns down at the notepad on the kitchen island, half-listening to the young worker on the other end of the phone line as she rattles off the Greek restaurant’s delivery specials for the evening. Fear mounts in the pit of his twisting stomach as he stares down at Shouto’s chicken-scratch handwriting on the small blue notepad in the kitchen, which is *supposed* to detail the specifics of his order. In reality, it looks sort of like hieroglyphics in some places and math equations in others. Izuku can barely make out the words “extra tzatziki sauce” in one corner next to another scribble that could be *lion ritz* or *limp pith*—neither of which are served at this establishment. Or any establishment. Ever.

“What would you like to order, sir?” the girl finally asks, her chipper voice piercing the panicked tirade going through Izuku’s mind at light-speed.

He spasms violently, whirling around toward the living room where Shouto is quietly watering the plants in the window one by one. The waning sunlight of evening catches the too-long strands of hair hanging in his eyes, turning the pale locks ivory-gold and highlighting the soft curve of his cheekbone. He’s wearing his arm brace again, thankfully, but this time without the bandages protecting his skin the way they’re supposed to. Purpled blood vessels peek out from behind black straps, contrasting sharply with healthy pallor of his undamaged skin.

“Um,” he stammers into the receiver, marching across the room hurriedly. “Sorry, can you hold on a second? Just one quick second, I promise. Just— yeah. Sorry.” He presses the phone against his chest before he can listen to the girl’s response and holds up the notepad in Shouto’s face. “Hey, what the *hell* does this say?”

Shouto blinks carefully and glances at the notepad. He raises one eyebrow.

“Lamb pita,” he says flatly. “Obviously.”

Izuku turns the notepad around to look at the characters that seem to have turned upside down and
backwards at this point. “In what universe does that say lamb pita?”

“Every universe.” Shouto turns back to the plants in the windowsill, lifting his tiny elephant-shaped watering can.

Izuku sighs, rolling his eyes, and drops the notepad on the nearby coffee table. He presses the phone against his ear again. “Hi, sorry. Yeah, I’d like to order two gyro platters with a triple order of steamed vegetables on the side—” Izuku distractedly waves off a ‘seriously?’ look that Shouto aims in his direction “—and a lamb pita meal. Delivery, please.”

“No onions,” Shouto mutters, peering down at the basil plant in the corner.

“No onions on the pita,” Izuku amends.

“And make sure they only give me two tomatoes.” Shouto wrinkles his nose. “Last time they gave me three. It was weird.”

Izuku blinks. Slowly, he covers the speaker with his hand. “I’m— are you being serious right now?”

Shouto gives him a funny look. “Why wouldn’t I be serious? It threw off the entire flavor.”

He stares for several precious seconds while Shouto continues to water his plants, untangling leaves and plucking dead ones off with precise, measured movements while the clock ticks on the wall. On the phone, Izuku can hear the young woman at the restaurant asking if he’s still there.

Izuku shakes his head, uncovers the phone, and preemptively cringes. “Sorry, yeah. Two tomatoes on that pita, please. Not three.”


“Oh for the love of—” Izuku pinches the bridge of his nose and counts to ten. “Fine. Can you add extra tzatziki to that order? Please and thank you.”

The girl thanks him politely, her tone a little more strained than before, and tells them their food will be there in about fifteen minutes before hanging up. At the sound of the dial tone, Izuku locks his phone and tosses it into the nearby armchair before falling face-first onto the sofa.

“You’re calling next time,” he grumbles through the cushion. He can’t breathe very well with his face mashed against the upholstery, but maybe that’s a good thing right now. “Why do you have to be so picky?”

On the other side of the room, Shouto sighs and begins spritzing the succulents with a tiny spray bottle. “I’m not picky. I’m particular about certain foods. There’s a big difference.”

Izuku turns his face to look at Shouto from the sofa. “There’s really not, dude.”

Shouto sets the spray bottle down in an empty space on the windowsill and tucks a few sleek strands of hair back behind his ear—soon it will be long enough to tie back, Izuku thinks. His left eye is more cornflower than turquoise today, reflecting the infinite color of the sky outside their window like a mirror, and after a moment his gaze falls on the notepad that rests on the coffee table, the page covered in scribbles and pen scratches that still don’t look like anything at all.

Slowly, Shouto reaches out with his good hand and runs the tips of his fingers over his own words, tracing the awkward edges and disjointed characters. There’s the scrape of callused skin against
paper, the sound soft and pastel against the bolder brushstrokes of a background Izuku can’t quite see yet.

Then Shouto’s expression dims to something somber. It’s slight—almost imperceptible. The only reason Izuku notices it is because he’s seen it so often lately.

“Sorry about my penmanship,” Shouto tells him quietly, glancing briefly around the living room. He flexes his left hand where it dangles at his side; it’s a habit he’s developed since getting out of the hospital. “I’ll make sure to write more clearly next time.”

His fingers twitch inside his brace a half-heartbeat later. Like thunder following a strike of lightning, each digit curls ever so slightly into the soft yellow fabric near his collarbone.

And Izuku can’t help it—he winces.

It’s knee-jerk, pure instinct on every level. Seeing those cracked, winestain mulberry nail beds and scarred skin stretched thinly across bone-white knuckles sends shivers down his spine. It’s not that he’s disgusted by the sight of Shouto’s arm—Izuku has far too many of his own stomach-turning scars to throw any stones in a glass house as delicate as this one. No, it’s the mere memory of half-frozen blood and shattered skin, of towering ice structures and acrid black smoke painting the night sky in hazy greys and violent reds.

It’s the taste of failure and bitter blood on the back of his tongue and the endless echo of Shouto’s chattering teeth. The ice crystals in his eyelashes, each one as pale and deathly white as his skin. The sickness in his stomach twists, digging a little deeper than before.

Swallowing his nausea, Izuku sits up, bones creaking and shoulder aching. He doesn’t look at Shouto’s arm, choosing instead to focus on his own socked feet where they rest against the carpet.

“For what it’s worth,” Izuku says quietly, rolling his shoulder and wincing at the dull ache between his bones, “your left handwriting’s better than mine.”

Shouto’s gaze flicks upward. He bites the inside of his cheek, lips twisting slightly into some kind of suppressed smile, and he glances out the window. “Right,” he drawls. “Well, that’s not exactly a high bar, so…”

“Hey. My printing is clean.”

“When you want it to be, sure.” He shrugs. “But your shorthand? Shit’s illegible.”

“Well. Rude much?”

“But still true,” Shouto points out. He fiddles with one of the straps on his brace and drops lazily into the nearby armchair, pulling his legs up underneath him. “Do you remember that one time I asked for your chemistry notes in high school? Took me hours to get through them.”

“Ectoplasm always talked too fast!” Izuku gestures exasperatedly. “Come on, you can’t hold chem against me like that. Even Iida couldn’t keep up with him sometimes.”

“Iida still managed to write legibly, though,” Shouto reminds him unhelpfully. “You just threw a bunch of scribbles down and somehow passed the class with flying colors. Absolutely mind-blowing, honestly. Never figured out how you did it.”

Izuku rolls his eyes and pushes up from the sofa, raising his arms above his head in a long stretch. “Well,” he replies flatly, dropping his arms back to his sides and tugging the hem of his
shirt down. “We can’t all have handwriting like Yaoyorozu. Or you.”

“Or normal humans,” he adds.

Izuku grumbles incoherently and grabs a pillow off the end of the couch, hurling it at Shouto. Shouto, however, catches the pillow clumsily with his left hand and slowly raises an eyebrow over the top seam.

Izuku shoves his hands in the pocket of his joggers and turns toward the kitchen. “Ass,” he calls out over his shoulder as he trudges to the door, toeing his sneakers on without bothering to lace them.

“An ass who’s always right,” Shouto corrects lightly. “Where are you going?”

“Main door. Food should be here soon.”

“Ah.” He nods. “Well, good luck signing the receipt, then. You’ll need it.”

Izuku’s hand hovers over the doorknob. His lips twitch and laughter traps itself behind his sternum, hovering next to his heart like warm bubbles he refuses to release. He can hear the smile in Shouto’s voice, soft and slight the way it always is. He can practically see the crooked curve of his closed lips if he focuses hard enough, barely visualizing the shadow of a small dimple in his right cheek that Izuku always thought was a myth right up until he saw it during a game of capture the flag during their third year.

(He used to see that smile all the time. Not so much, anymore.)

In the end, Izuku waves over his shoulder in acknowledgement and chooses not to turn around. Shouto’s smiles often disappear the second witnesses are involved, and Izuku’s not willing to risk its loss for the sake of his own selfishness.

Hearing it is more than enough.

They eat dinner in the quiet comfort of their apartment on opposite ends of the sofa, content to float just barely out of each other’s orbit. Alex Trebek keeps them company on the TV screen across the room—he’s wearing a striped tie tonight, Shouto notices, and not one of his nicer ones.

“What are the Finger Lakes,” Izuku intones flatly in English as soon as the question pops up on screen between bites of steamed vegetables. He pokes at the strips of gyro meat on his plate and crosses his ankles while the contestants deliberate, and the signature Jeopardy jingle plays in the background.

Sure enough, one contestant buzzes in and echoes Izuku’s answer a moment later. The audience bursts into applause.

Shouto glances at Izuku, impressed. “Nice.”

He shrugs, stabbing into his dinner. “Well, the lakes are in New York. So.”

“Really?”
“Yeah, out near Rochester and Syracuse.”

“Mm.” Shouto takes a bite of his pita. “Ever been?”

He nods, not looking up. “Luce and I vacationed there a few years back, actually. She was thinking about doing her doctorate at Cornell, so we spent a few days in a cabin in Ithaca to check it all out.” He pauses, staring off into space wistfully. “It was… nice. Really nice. She loved it there.”

Shouto’s lungs constrict in his chest and his muscles go rigid, pita stopping halfway between his plate and his mouth. The mere mention of her name is enough to stop his heart dead in his chest, even if he’s not altogether sure why. Maybe it’s the fact that Izuku rarely talks about her so candidly, or maybe it’s the fact that it feels completely and utterly normal to discuss such a thing over dinner in their shared apartment.

It’s a lot of maybes. Too many, perhaps. Shouto doesn’t know what to do with all of them.

With slow, stilted movements, he sets the pita back down and wipes his mouth on his napkin, buying himself a few more seconds. Onscreen, the contestant selects another question for three hundred points, this one from the ‘Wild About the Wilds!’ category.

“Did—” Shouto starts, searching for the right words. Cringing, he swallows and tries again. “I mean— well, what about you?”

Izuku glances over, eyebrows furrowed. “What about me?”

“Did you like it there?”

“Ir.” He stammers awkwardly. He sets his fork down. “Uh. Y-Yeah? I mean, I guess so. The region’s pretty and Luce really liked the campus, so that was cool. Good shopping.” He frowns. “Why do you ask?”

Shouto shrugs, returning to his pita. “No reason,” he lies. “Just making conversation.”

For several horrifying seconds, Shouto wonders if Izuku will press him for more information, ask the questions Shouto doesn’t have answers to. But after a moment, he thankfully turns back to the screen and continues eating. His expression is conflicted, brows furrowed and mouth faintly pinched, but he doesn’t say anything. Small mercies.

The show continues onscreen, uninterrupted, and Shouto resolves to keep his gaze on Trebek’s hideous tie while he counts his heartbeats and marks the flip-flops of his stomach in groups of two. It’s something to focus on, at least.

“What is the Galapagos tortoise,” Shouto says a few minutes later, just as a contestant buzzes in and repeats the same exact words. Two hundred points.

Izuku huffs from his end of the couch, hair bobbing slightly as he shakes his head. “Ugh. Should’ve known that one.”

“Better luck next time.”

Izuku chucks a crumpled-up napkin his way. “God, shut up. I’m still winning.”

“Only by a hundred points,” Shouto reminds him, hurling the napkin right back at him. It hits him directly in the center of his chest. “I’ll catch up. I always do.”
“First time for everything.”

“Oh?” He arches an eyebrow. “Well, there’s also a first time for you to go fu—”

A faint buzzing stops Shouto short. His eyes immediately zero in on Izuku’s cell phone where it sits on the living room coffee table. The device spins itself in a half circle as it continues to buzz like a thrumming heartbeat, display lighting up with Momo’s picture in place of the caller ID.

Shouto stops breathing, Izuku tenses.

(Hero license… missed calls… worried about him.)

Izuku’s gaze is trained on the cell phone, expression somber. The muscle in his jaw flutters with each pulsing vibration of the device, and his fingers spasm around his fork, knuckles blanching white beneath scarred skin as Shouto measures time and space between his fingertips. He categorizes every second, squeezes each one dry until he’s wrung as much as he can out of them.

On the television in the background, Trebek asks another question—daily double.

Swallowing, Shouto sets his pita down on his plate and softly clears his throat. “Are you going to answer that?”

Izuku doesn’t give any indication that he hears him, gaze fixed solely on the vibrating device. His cheeks are pale beneath his freckles and the scar bisecting his eyebrow gleams sharply in the waning sunlight that slashes through the nearby window in thick columns.

Shouto shifts his weight, heart stuttering. He opens his mouth to ask again—

The buzzing stops. I missed call, the cracked display reads before going dark. The sound of soft applause filters back through Shouto’s senses as a contestant on the show gets a question correct.

Izuku lets out a long breath through his teeth. He throws a tight smile Shouto’s way and reaches over to grab his phone, waving it in the air between his fingers before slipping it into his pocket.

“Sorry,” he tells Shouto quietly, voice stiff with forced lightness. His teeth flash falsely behind thin, insincere lips. “My mom always taught me that it’s rude to answer the phone during dinner.”

Shouto nods, frowning faintly down at his dinner. “Right,” he murmurs thoughtfully. “So, you’ll call her back later, then?”

“Mm?” He looks up, eyebrows raised. “What?”

“Momo. You’ll call her back later, yes?”


“When?”

“Wh—?” he starts to repeat confusedly, but he cuts himself off, brows furrowing. “Um, after dinner, I guess? I don’t know. Depends on when we get done.”

Shouto stares thoughtfully down at the vegetables on his plate, pursing his lips. Do it, take the plunge, get it over with—

“Maybe you should just call her back now,” he suggests, not looking up. His fingers tingle in their
brace and his heart thrums in his chest, but Izuku doesn’t seem to hear the insistence in his voice, shrugging him off.

“Dude, we’re eating. Maybe afterwards,” he says dismissively, smiling crookedly. “Besides, I’m sure that whatever she wants can wait until—"

“Izuku,” Shouto says quietly and looks up, meeting Izuku’s line of sight with solemnity sculpted in the set of his mouth. He puts every feeling he has into his words, packing each one full to bursting. “I really think you should call her back.”

Izuku’s eyes are wide behind thick lashes, green gleaming vividly in the low light of evening as he stares at Shouto in stunned surprise. His fingers tighten around the edges of his plate as his surprise melts into a confused frown, then suspicion. Shouto can almost see the echo of his own words working their way through the dams and levees of his mind—processing, sinking lower and lower until it finally registers. Shouto holds his breath, skin sizzling involuntarily beneath the fabric of his yellow sweater.

He expects anger. He expects incredulity. Maybe even a bit of hurt and betrayal thrown in there just for shits and giggles. He expects lots of things, honestly—all of them loud and easy to deal with in the short-term.

He doesn’t expect this.

Izuku’s face goes slack, eyes drooping despairingly as his shoulders slump. Loosening his hold on his plate, he slowly sets his dinner down on the coffee table and clicks the mute button on the remote while he’s leaned forward, plunging them both into tense silence. Sinking back into the cushions, he rubs a scarred hand over his face and sighs through his fingers—a long-suffering sort of sound that reminds Shouto of unbearable loss and other bitter things best left forgotten.

“And I thought I was being subtle about the whole thing,” he says quietly after a moment, not looking at Shouto. His eyes are shadowed with exhaustion, each contour of his face stained violet in the evening light.

“You were.”

“How’d you figure it out?”

Shouto doesn’t tell him anything except the truth. “Momo came by this morning to talk to you when you were out on your run. She found me instead.”

He lets out a humorless laugh. “Of course she did,” he mutters to himself, tipping his head back against the couch cushions. He sighs, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment. “Look, man, I don’t know what she told you this morning, but I really don’t want to talk about it, all right? I appreciate the concern and all. Seriously. But I’d kinda rather just watch Jeopardy and finish dinner, if it’s all the same to you.”

“She said she’s been trying to give your license back for weeks,” Shouto says anyway, biting into his cheek. Izuku stiffens next to him, muscles going rigid beneath the thin material of his shirt. “You’ve been ignoring her calls, apparently. I want to know why.”

“Does it matter?” He shakes his head, huffing. “I mean, no offense, but it’s not like you’re going to change my mind about this.”

“I think I deserve the chance to try.” He hesitates for a moment, then adds, “You owe me that much, at least.”
Shouto flexes his fingers poignantly inside their brace until the pins and needles beneath his skin begin to ache. Izuku’s eyes dart over to his ruined hand. Shouto doesn’t miss the way his skin pales and his face twists with horror, stricken as the implication sets in. He’s gutted, hollowed out. 

**Shelled.**

“That’s…” Izuku trails, stunned and faintly horrified. He swallows thickly. “Jesus. Cheap shot, Todoroki.”

“One conversation,” he implores, tucking his knees beneath him on the sofa. “One reason. A chance to change your mind. Then I’ll never bring it up again, I promise.”

Izuku rakes his hands through his hair and sinks lower into the cushions, sucking in a deep breath through his nose as he thinks. Shouto counts the seconds, parsing them out with teaspoons, and tries not to let his stomach crawl out through his throat.

After a moment, Izuku drops his hands unceremoniously into his lap.

“My reasons are my own,” he says quietly, turning to stare out the window with an unreadable expression. He rubs at his jaw, massaging tense muscles. “Just… leave it, Shouto. Honestly. It’s not worth this.”

“So explain it to me,” Shouto implores sharply. His skin sizzles, the air in his lungs expands until he can hardly breathe. “Explain anything, I don’t care what. Just give me some indication you’ve thought this through.”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you,” he mutters.

“Maybe not,” he concedes, considering his words carefully. “But we started this partnership for a reason. You wanted my endorsement to get your hero license back, right? That’s why we did this?”

Izuku sighs. “That’s not—"

“As the person who gave you that endorsement, explain to me why the former Number One hero doesn’t want his job back after all these months of work.” His left fist is clenched painfully, the skin over his knuckles flushed red with barely-contained heat. “Explain to me how All Might’s protégé can stomach sitting on the sidelines for the rest of his career. Does All Might even know you’re considering giving up your license?”

“Don’t bring him into this,” Izuku warns, tone darkening.

“So then explain to me how you can justify putting the lives of millions of people at risk just so you can remain a sidekick,” he continues, each word stiff and steely as they pass between his teeth. They taste bitter on the tip of his tongue. “Tell me why it’s apparently not your responsibility to save the world anymore.”

“Drop it, Shouto.” His eyes are narrowed, jaw clenched.

“I won’t,” he says. “Not until you can give me one good goddamn reason why you think sidekick work will actually benefit you or anybody else in the long run. Because I’ve been thinking about it all day, Izuku, and I haven’t been able to—"

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe it’s none of your fucking business?”

His tone is barbed, words sharp enough to pierce Shouto and rend him cleanly. His stomach twists and his heart thrums anxiously in his chest, tapping the inside of his ribcage in a fluttering tattoo.
He’s never been good at these sorts of conversations; maybe he pushed too far this time.

A moment later, Izuku lets out a slow exhale between his teeth.

“I… shit, sorry,” he murmurs, hands twisting in his lap. He tips his head forward and rubs at his eyes distractedly, curling in on himself ever so slightly. “That wasn’t— I didn’t mean it like that.”

“How did you mean it, then?” he asks hollowly.

Izuku drops his hands and turns to look at Shouto, face drawn and lined with sharp shadows around his mouth and eyes. His gaze flickers down to Shouto’s hand, then back up to his face. He opens his mouth as if to say something—his eyes swirl with indecision, fear, and something else Shouto can’t identify—but in the end he thinks better of it, pulling himself to his feet with nothing more than a soft exhale passed between lips.

“I didn’t,” he says softly after a moment. Clenching his jaw, he picks his plate up from the coffee table and inclines his head toward Shouto’s dish, pointedly avoiding his gaze. “You finished?” he asks, and at Shouto’s stiff nod, he bends down to grab it before turning toward the kitchen.

The silence between them is heavy and brightly-colored with light from the flickering television, casting the apartment in shades of blue and violet that make the spaces between Izuku’s footsteps seem even longer as he crosses the room. Shouto picks at the Velcro straps of his brace and presses his tongue against the roof of his mouth as he watches Izuku set the dishes down on the island with a quiet *clink*. His brows are furrowed, set low above conflicted eyes as he goes about putting their dinner away with stilted, shaky movements.

“I know it doesn’t make sense to you,” Izuku says quietly, intently focused on matching lids to Tupperware in the darkened kitchen. The blue light of the television catches his cheekbone just right, shearing his face into cut-glass planes of pale, freckled skin. He rubs the back of his neck, muscles shifting. “A-And I know it’s not what anybody hoped for with this partnership. It’s not even what *I* hoped for, honestly. It—” he chokes, face twisting. “It wasn’t part of the plan. Originally.”

Shouto rises from the sofa and crosses to the kitchen, socked feet whisper-soft against the hardwood. He comes to a stop on the other side of the island across from Izuku and splays his left palm against the cool granite, leaning into the sensation against his heated skin. Across the room, commercials play back to back, each one dancing across the screen in bold colors as time shifts around them.

“But that doesn’t make sense.” He trims his vowels and consonants to keep his tone from clashing too suddenly against the silence, terrified of losing his tenuous hold on the situation. “Why continue as my sidekick at all if you weren’t going to get your license back? Why go through all that trouble just to turn it down?”

Abruptly, Izuku looks up at him across the island, agony etched into every inch of his expression, raw and bleeding. Shouto sees the shadows carved deeply behind his lashes, traces every jagged contour of the shattered pieces inside of him. He’s barely holding together, all patchwork and piecemeal. Ready to break.

“Please don’t make me answer that,” Izuku whispers, voice stretched thin. He moves his mouth soundlessly for several seconds as he plies words apart and presses them back together in his head, clenching a fist. He grinds his knuckles into the countertop as frustration boils to the surface, barely cresting. “I’m—” he stammers, scowling. “I *can’t*—"
“Why, Izuku?” he asks again.

“It doesn’t matter why,” he bites, slamming a utensil down on the countertop with a clang. “It matters that I did—that I am. It’s my choice, Shouto. I don’t have to justify myself to you or anybody else.”

“But what about Japan?” he interjects, skin heating. “Don’t the people who live here matter?”

Izuku’s face screws up in bewilderment. “You think I don’t care about them?”

“How can you when you’re making the conscious decision not to protect them?”

“I’m not abandoning my country,” he argues hotly, gritting his teeth. “Sidekicks still help people. It’s not a death sentence to work without a full license.”

“No, but it’s limiting.” Shouto snaps back. “Limitations can cost lives in the field and you know —”

“Everything costs lives!” he explodes.

Time stops. Stills.

With a frustrated sound from the back of his throat, Izuku lashes out, bringing a hand down against the counter hard enough that Shouto can feel the impact through the soles of his feet. Oxygen catches in his throat, sharp and acrid. His arm aches. His mouth goes dry as sandpaper. Across the island, Izuku grits his teeth, breathing hard as colored lights cast shadows across his face in garish, watery stains, each one shifting into something more horrifying than the last.

“God,” Izuku exhales brokenly, voice strained as he rakes his hands through his hair in frustration. He shakes his head. “Don’t you get it, Shouto? That’s all we do. We’re dealt shitty hands and forced to bet with chips that don’t belong to us, and when things go south, it’s our fault. We’re given this absolute power when we get our licenses and they leave us with no way to manage any of it.”

He reaches up and twists his fingers into the fabric stretched over his left shoulder, digging deeply into muscle. Torment flickers across his face.

“Judge, jury, and executioner,” Izuku murmurs, almost as if speaking to himself. “Hero licenses grant us the freedom to be all three, if we want. And I don’t.” He swallows thickly, loosening his hold on the front of his shirt, his hands trembling ever so slightly as they fall back to his sides. “I don’t want any of that.”

Sparks spurt from Shouto’s fingertips, casting a faint orange glow across Izuku’s weathered, weary face for several precious heartbeats. His skin pulses with electricity, his stomach churns with nausea.

Turn back, his instincts tell him over and over again. Turn back, regroup, find another way.

He pretends he can’t hear them.

“You’re making generalizations,” he tells Izuku numbly, biting his lip until the taste of copper spears through his senses. “You’re not that kind of hero, Izuku. You never were. You’ve always been responsible.”

Izuku’s expression shuts. He glares down at nothing and snatches up a spare lid from the
countertop, snapping it onto the plastic container full of food before turning and putting in the fridge.

“Responsible,” he mutters under his breath, slamming the door closed with a little more force than necessary. He turns back, narrowed-eyed. “It’s always responsibility with you, isn’t it? My obligation to the people.”

Shouto meets his gaze unflinchingly. “We’re sworn to service.”

“No, you’re sworn to service. I’m just a sidekick.”

“But you’re still a hero,” Shouto insists, coming around the island at the same time Izuku makes a move to leave. He ends up on Izuku’s left in the narrow space between the fridge and the island, blocking his exit. “Like it or not, you save people, Izuku. It’s what you’re hardwired to do. It’s what you’re good at.”

Izuku grits his teeth. “Shouto, get out of my way.”

“No,” he says resolutely. “You’re running scared and I won’t let you.”

“I’m not scared—”

“The world deserves you at your best. As a professional hero, not just a sidekick,” he blurts out in a rush. “With the bombings and the civilian protests and— and everything else going on, we need a strong Number One hero to lead things again. To maintain order. And no disrespect to Bakugou, but if I can’t be there to hold my position, then I think you should be the one to fill my shoes the way I filled yours.”

Izuku looks stricken. His mouth opens, then closes, soundless as he fights for words. “I stepped down for a reason, Shouto. I can’t— You can’t honestly say you expected me to—”

“I knew you’d come back,” he explains, smiling sadly. “I didn’t know how long it’d take, or what the world would be like when you returned, but I knew it was going to happen one way or another. It was just a matter of time.”

Izuku’s eyes narrow dangerously. He takes a half-step closer, edging critically into Shouto’s personal space and bracing his larger, scarred hands on the countertops bracketing them on both sides of the aisle. This close, Shouto can just barely make out the familiar smattering of freckles below his left eye that’s always reminded him of the Lyra—the harp constellation.

“I gave this job everything I had for ten years of my life,” Izuku says lowly, each syllable rife with muted pain. He lets out a weary sigh. “I… I can’t take it back. I can’t. What you think the world ‘deserves’ isn’t my problem anymore, as much as you think otherwise.”

“It should be.”

“No.” He shakes his head, stalwart. “I’ll help where I can as a sidekick, but that’s it. I don’t want the rest of it anymore.”

Shouto lifts his chin a little higher, refusing to budge. “This job has never been something you can quit. You might be out of uniform, but you’re still a hero whether you choose to believe it or not.”

“I’m not the person you think I am, Shouto,” he murmurs.

“Maybe you’re exactly the person I think you are.”
“And who would that be? Hmm?” Izuku tilts his head to one side, bitterness set in the tight line of his mouth and the creases around his exhausted eyes. “The person you knew from U.A.? Because I haven’t been that kid for a long time, if that’s what you’re talking about.”

“Good,” Shouto says. “Neither have I.”

“I’m not a famous hero anymore, either.”

“Fame is relative. And pointless.”

Izuku’s eyes glimmer with traces of moisture and he blinks hard, eyelashes fluttering dangerously. He winces as his mouth presses into a thin, wobbly line. “I… couldn’t save the person I loved. Not when it counted.”

“Maybe not,” Shouto says softly, flexing his fingers. “But you saved me.”

“Did I?” Izuku lets out a half-sobbing laugh and directs his gaze toward the ceiling, blinking hard to fend off sudden tears. He sucks in a sharp breath as a singular tear traces down the curve of his cheek, and he swallows painfully, shaking his head. “Because sometimes it doesn’t feel like I did.”

“You did,” Shouto insists, reaching up to undo the straps of his brace. It comes loose easily, his arm slipping free with a few strategic pulls here and there, and he sets it on the counter gently before holding up his ruined hand for Izuku to look at.

Izuku stares at the appendage for several seconds, horrified, before he blinks and snaps back to awareness. He swipes at the tears on his cheeks and shakes his head. “Hey, you really shouldn’t be —”

“I’m bitter,” Shouto interrupts, spreading his ruined, purpled fingers are far as they’ll go. His ragged, shattered nails gleam dully in the darkness. “I’m bitter and sore and I can’t feel anything below my knuckles, and it gets a little annoying sometimes when I try to do shit around the apartment. I’m also going a bit insane, being trapped in here all day. I’ll admit to that much, at least.”

“Shouto—”

“But I’m breathing,” he rushes to finish. He chokes out a tight laugh that rattles his teeth. “And— and god, it might sound really fucking stupid, but there are a lot more people out there in the world who need you the exact same way I needed you that night. People you could save if you had your hero license back, fully reinstated.”

Heart in his throat, lungs pressed into the tips of his toes, flipped inside out and backwards. He feels sparks pop between his fingertips at his side, but he ignores them in favor of holding Izuku’s gaze unfailingly. The tension is wrought between them, drawn taut like the weft of a tapestry—

But it doesn’t fray. Not this time.

Izuku’s gaze darts back and forth between Shouto’s face and his outstretched hand, throat bobbing as he swallows his indecision by the mouthful. His eyes are still watery, reflective in the bright colors that play between the shadows on the walls of the apartment.

“Can I have some time to think about it?” he asks hoarsely, inhaling sharply with a slight shudder. He shakes his head and squeezes his eyes shut, pressing the heels of his hands against his eye sockets. “I can’t really, um. Process this right now. It’s just… a lot. In general, I mean.”
Nodding stiffly, Shouto lowers his arm to his side, relishing the way his blood flow shifts into something more comfortable beneath the skin of his ruined arm, and he wiggles his fingers just to remind himself that he can.

“I— yeah, of course,” he says quietly. “Take all the time you need.”

Smiling tightly, Izuku swipes at the moisture in his eyes and sniffs, letting out a shaky exhale as his shoulders slump. He murmurs a small *excuse me*, slipping past Shouto with little more than the brush of an elbow on the way past, skin to skin, electric and infinite. Shouto doesn’t dare to turn around until he hears the soft latch of Izuku’s bedroom door closing behind him, accompanied by the familiar squeak of bedsprings as he flops onto his mattress.

*It’s not a no,* he reminds himself as he sags against the edge of the kitchen island, knees shaking. *It’s not a yes, either.*

(But it’s a start.)

Chapter End Notes

[Tumblr] | [Twitter] | [CuriousCat] | [Roots Fan-Picked Playlist]
**Eyes I Dare Not Meet in Dreams**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The city is burning tonight.

Flames lick the jagged edge of the distant skyline in plumes a thousand feet high as sparks float on the wind like flocks of migrating birds, each speck glowing white-hot against the starless violet backdrop of the sky. Nighttime, evening, midmorning, noon—time bends backwards and turns inside out, slipping between Shouto’s senses faster than he can process it. Color has no constant. His mouth tastes of ash.

Somebody sits on the edge of the building rooftop, lean legs swinging freely over empty air. Kick, swing, heel touch, kick. (Red shoes.) Over and over and over and over—

“Judge, jury, executioner,” Izuku says quietly, watching the horizon. His eyes glimmer with gold threads in the lambent light that blankets the city. “Judge, jury, executioner,” he continues, words stumbling together. “Judge, jury, executioner, judge, jury, executioner, judge, jury, executioner, judge, jury, executioner, judge, jury—”

(This isn’t right.)

“Control your breathing,” somebody snaps over his shoulder. Shouto finds himself sitting on tatami mats, ankles crossed carefully, one right over the other, and knuckles pressed together, scraping. His right side feels uncomfortably warm, and even though he can’t see the rest of the world from here, he knows it’s still on fire.

“Focus, Shouto,” his father snaps, sharper this time, and Shouto feels himself flinch. His scar itches and his hair is shorter than it was a moment ago, strands tickling his nose as he fights to support his breath.

(This isn’t right this isn’t right this isn’t—)

But it is right because he recognizes these walls and that doorframe and the scorch marks on the ceiling and on his body and the sour stench of sweat that clings to his skin like the half-dried blood at the base of his blackened nails—

Inhale. Deeper this time.

He holds it, then lets it out through his nose, feeling the telltale flare of warmth flood his veins like molten metal, spreading down the length of his whole left side. He doesn’t open his eyes to see if his father is pleased with his control, or even to see if his father has noticed.

(Judge. Jury.)

(This doesn’t feel right at all.)
Shouto snaps awake in an instant, lurching into a seated position amongst his tangled sheets with lungs heaving and heart racing. His awareness is scattered, shifting and slipping like loose sand between the fingers of his focus as he claws himself from the deep abyss of sleep.

*Flames, red shoes, my father, tatami mats, breathe, just breathe.* It all bleeds together into one tumultuous, torrential image he can’t quite forget no matter how hard he tries.

The crackle of flame catches his attention half a moment later and the acrid scent of charred fabric follows shortly thereafter. He looks down to find his sheets and pillow smoldering, singed in the rough shape of his left shoulder. With a sharp breath sucked between teeth, Shouto snatches the undamaged pillow off the other side of the bed and tries to smother the tiny flames as quickly as he can, ignoring the way his hands shake and his stomach twists. The smell of smoke is strong, and he knows it’s only a matter of time before the smell leeches down the hallway toward Izuku’s room, or worse—

Shouto looks up at the ceiling in horror at the smoke alarm. The tiny light in the center of the plastic disc blinks red, keeping the time in intervals of three.

Worse. Worse, worse, worse.

Clambering to his feet and wheeling his arms wildly to keep his balance on top of his bed, Shouto strains his arm toward the smoke alarm. His shaking fingers close around the rounded edges of the plastic cover, nails catching on hard edges and clasps that don’t come loose quite as easily as they should. His still-hot fingers bend the hard plastic like warm, pliant taffy.

Gritting his teeth, Shouto pulls harder. *Harder.*

The alarm pops off the ceiling with a sharp *snap* and drops to his bed in a heap of half-melted plastic and loose batteries, red light going dead just as the first wisps of smoke reach the ceiling like paper-thin specters.

Shouto exhales in relief and lets out a wheezing half-laugh that doesn’t feel like a laugh at all. He drops to his knees amongst his charred, rumpled bedsheets, and tries to slow his racing heart. At this point, it might be prudent to remove all the smoke alarms in the apartment. First the kitchen yesterday morning, now his bedroom—once is happenstance, but twice? That’s the start of a pattern, and not one he’s proud of.

His nightmares are getting worse. It’s an irrefutable, unpleasant fact, but one he has no use denying at this point. He never dreams the same thing twice, thankfully, but each time has him sweating and snapping awake at ungodly hours of the morning almost as if commanded; it’s always heat and flames and Izuku and sometimes Endeavor, but other times it’s his mother and other times it’s Mizuki or Momo or someone entirely different. There’s no rhyme or reason to it—only fear and the familiar ache of loss emanating from the right side of his ruined body.

His prescription Quirk suppressants sit on his bedside table right next to his painkillers and blood thinners, sterile white labels gleaming in the pale light of early morning. He knows he should take one, at least for today. Just long enough to get himself under control. Even a half dose would do.

*No,* he thinks determinedly after a moment. Blowing vapor out between his lips in a long stream, Shouto flops back onto his bed and counts backwards from one hundred, focusing on his breathing techniques his father taught him once upon a time: the lessons he despised, the advice he ignored,
every single instruction that always seemed to come at a cost too dear to pay.

He breathes, he balances. He tries to find his center just like he used to do when he was little.

Unsurprisingly, the heat consuming his skin does not lessen. It wavers for a few precious seconds, barely giving him hope of a regular body temperature before dying out. Biting the inside of his cheek, Shouto deliberates.

There is another option, technically.

Hesitantly, he reaches for his ice, channeling the dead side of his Quirk with as much focus as he can muster this early in the morning. The fingers in his damaged hand tingle in silent warning and the scarred skin over his knuckles stretches past its limit, but he ignores it in favor of focusing on the beads of sweat that dot his brow like sizzling oil in a pan. He’s asking for a few degrees, not absolute zero. It’s reasonable—right?

Squeezing his eyes shut, Shouto focuses all his energy to the very center of his being. He thinks about his mother, the cold embrace of wintertime, the way Mizuki used to smile whenever he made it snow. Breathe, he tells himself, digging half-moon crescents into the palms of his hands. Breathe, focus, breathe, come on.

Nothing. He reaches deeper within himself, pushing past the numbness at the tips of his fingers in hopes of finding something a little bit colder.

And for half a second, he swears he feels something.

There’s an ancient echo of energy coiling behind his heart, the frigid pain of his teeth freezing in his mouth, the bitter-bite of something clawing its way to the surface. Heart thrumming, he chases the feeling like a madman. He reaches, stumbles, trips over himself and god, it’s right there, if only he could—

The familiar feeling of frost slips through his grasp, dissipating into dust before he can even trace its source.

Shouto gasps for breath, eyes snapping open as his skin crackles with residual heat. The noise that escapes the confines of his throat is a broken one, shattered and splintered. His eyes blur with tears against his will as reality comes crashing back. He lashes out with his fists, hitting the bed beneath him, and presses his palms against his eye sockets until all he sees is the smattering of sickly stars etched into the backs of his eyelids like permanent stains.

Chest rattling, heaving with every ragged exhale. His breath burns his skin where it blossoms over the insides of his wrists.

“Dammit,” he whispers, voice breaking between syllables. He bares his teeth and shakes his head. “God fucking dammit.”

It’s maddening, this sense of futility in the face of stripped-bare loss—agonizing, torturous on a scale Shouto never thought possible, but he tries not to let it bother him. He compartmentalizes and tells himself it’s only temporary because there’s no way he rewrote his own goddamn DNA that night in March just because he tried to hold up a skyscraper without his bracers on. It’s not possible to lose a Quirk that way. It never will be. He’s going to be fine in a few months and–

And he’s lying to himself. He’s lying to himself almost as much as he’s lying to Izuku.

A faint noise manages to pull Shouto from his misery as his phone vibrates noisily against the top
of his nightstand, buzzing twice in quick succession. Sniffing and wiping his nose on his forearm dismissively, Shouto rolls over and reaches for it with his ruined hand, gritting his teeth as his fingers grope uselessly for the sleek edges of the device. When he finally manages to grab it, Shouto squints at the display.

It’s a message from Keiji. *I don’t know if this is allowed, but do you mind if I swing by your place before classes this morning? I won’t be long.*

He sits up in bed slowly, staring down at the message as he reads it over a second time. For a moment, he even wonders if it’s even real. Maybe he’s still dreaming, plunged into another nightmare even more visceral and merciless than the first. He wouldn’t be surprised, honestly. But the grammar and punctuation are far too perfect for this to be a dream; Keiji *hates* shorthand speech almost as much as he hates acoustic covers of classic rock songs.

Hesitance sinks its teeth deep. Keiji hasn’t called in over a week. He hasn’t visited the apartment since Shouto moved in or asked him out to lunch. Hell, he hasn’t even bothered to send more than a few “I hope your day is going well!” texts that Shouto’s been too busy to reply to in the last few days. The last thing he heard from Keiji was a short albeit sweet voicemail about him taking an impromptu trip to Cambridge for some sort of university fellowship opportunity conference-type thing—or something like that. Shouto doesn’t quite remember all the details.

Fumbling slightly with his bad thumb, Shouto types out a response. *yeah thats fine ig. when will you be here?*

The response is immediate. *Whenever you want me there. Classes start at 10 AM sharp.*

Shouto glances at the half-charred bedsheets and his own reflection in the mirror on the other side of the room, noting his tangled hair and sweaty, flushed face. There are ashes on his cheeks and sparks sputtering from his nose with every exhale. He honestly doesn’t think he’s ever looked so awful before in his life.

*Two hours?* he sends back, grimacing.

Keiji wastes no time. *Fine by me. See you then.*

It shouldn’t feel half as ominous as it sounds.

Domesticity has a pattern to it, Shouto thinks, despite all who may say otherwise. It’s a certain, special kind of tattoo that pulses predictably beneath his life now, underscoring every single thing that happens within the walls of this shared, strange space of their shared apartment There are rituals to be had and steps to be taken in order to ensure proper peace, and Shouto knows every single one of them backwards by now. Even on mornings when nothing feels quite certain, he can rest easy knowing that the crossword in the paper will be half-finished by ten-thirty and the kettle on the stove will be warm by the time he wakes up. Tiny puzzle pieces of a much larger picture.

Today, however, is different.

It’s odd, Shouto thinks as he sets the kettle on the stovetop himself, glancing at the clock worriedly. Izuku is due to report to the agency in a little over an hour, yet there hasn’t been a single sound from the direction of his bedroom—no footsteps, no sleepy grumbles, not even the hiss of
the shower starting up. Outside the window, the sun has risen over the city skyline and the streets are teeming with people commuting to work and school. By all accounts, Izuku should be completely and utterly awake, especially considering his idea of “on time” has always been “half an hour early, or maybe the day before.”

Tucking a few strands of freshly-washed hair behind his ear, Shouto bites the inside of his cheek. He could go knock on his door and see if Izuku’s awake yet, he supposes. Maybe he simply forgot to set his alarm. (Ridiculous. He has seven of them set in his phone, only one of which he actually uses. Shouto doesn’t think he’s ever heard Izuku’s alarm ring twice, even back during summer training camp at school.)

In the end, Shouto resolves to wait and see what happens, taking a seat at the kitchen island and flipping through the paper until he reaches the comics and puzzles on the seventh page. He pulls a pen out of a nearby drawer and positions it between the fingers of his left hand with only a mild amount of fumbling. He’ll check on Izuku in fifteen minutes if he needs to. In the meantime, maybe he can keep his numbers legible and in their respective boxes this time around—a lofty goal for a Thursday.

Shouto keeps track of the seconds as time passes, marking each one off with a sloppily-filled in row or quadrant of numbers. After a few minutes, the kettle begins to whistle, and Shouto sets his pen down to get up and make himself a cup of much-needed tea.

He’s pouring hot water over dried jasmine pearls when he hears it: the creak of Izuku’s bedroom door.

Shouto sets the kettle down on the stove as heavy footsteps lumber down the length of the hallway, and he can’t help the small sigh of relief that passes his lips. Izuku’s room is a place he’s never entered for obvious reasons, so he wasn’t looking forward to doing it for the first time today of all days—not with their argument from last night still hanging in the air.

A moment later, Izuku rounds the corner into the kitchen. He’s wearing his costume already—a newer, lighter version of it to better accommodate the seasonal temperatures typical of summertime in central Japan, but still in keeping with those world-renowned viridian staples that haven’t changed much since graduation. His carbon fiber leg guards clank quietly against one another with every step he takes, black gloves cinched tightly just above his elbows, mask hanging loosely around his neck as usual. The collar of his costume is unzipped just enough to show a hint of the black compression suit he always wears underneath; Shouto watches the thin fabric stretch tightly over the muscles of his chest as he enters the kitchen and reaches into one of the cabinets to grab an empty mug.

Suddenly, the sunlight streaming through the window catches the sharp angles of Izuku’s face, illuminating the sickly pallor of his cheeks and the circles underneath his eyes—circles that hadn’t been there the night before.

He’s exhausted.

Shouto crosses his arms over his chest and frowns, bracing a hip against the countertop as he scrutinizes Izuku’s tired face, noting every shadow and every weary crease. “Wow,” he marvels, dragging the word out slightly. “You look like absolute shit.”

Izuku sets his cup down on the counter with a clink and drops his head, pressing against his eyelids with a gloved thumb and forefinger. “Good morning to you too,” he says flatly.

Shouto ignores the half-hearted barb. “Did you sleep at all last night?”
He shrugs. “A bit, yeah.”

“How much is ‘a bit?’”

Shouto picks up his mug and shifts out of the way as Izuku reaches past him for the kettle on the stove. Izuku hums noncommittally, pouring his own hot water, but doesn’t bother looking up. “I dunno. An hour or two, maybe. Don’t remember.”

Shouto takes a seat at the island again, bracing his elbows against the countertop with his mug held between both hands. “You have patrol today, Izuku.”

“I’m aware.”

“Then you should also be aware,” he says pointedly, “that being tired on patrol is a stupid risk you’re not supposed to take.”

“Maybe not,” he admits. “But I’m going to do it anyway.”

“You really shouldn’t—"

Izuku holds up a hand. “Stop,” he says, voice stern and unyielding. He looks up and meets Shouto’s gaze across the island. “Look, Shouto, I appreciate the concern and all, but I’m pretty sure you met your lecture quota for the entire month last night and I’m too tired to listen to another. Can’t we—?”

But he falters, searching for words, and rubs the back of his neck with a grimace. Shouto tastes something bitter beneath his tongue.

In the end, Izuku lets out a long, low sigh. He gestures vaguely between them both. “I just don’t want to fight this morning—again. Is that fair?”

For a moment, Shouto considers pursuing things, damn the consequences. Surely it wouldn’t hurt to press just a little harder even though the wound hasn’t fully healed. Izuku shouldn’t be on patrol if he’s sleep-deprived. That’s Hero Work 101 right there.

But sometimes the price of peace is worth the cost. Shouto knows the pattern. He knows how all this works.

Exhaling softly and nodding in silent assent, Shouto drops his gaze back to the newspaper spread out in front of him. Izuku smiles tightly, gratefully.

“Thank you,” he tells Shouto, and quietly turns back to finish making his tea on the opposite side of the counter with clumsy, lethargic movements.

“The silence that follows isn’t uncomfortable, but it’s not exactly warm, either. Shouto tries not to overthink it as the numbers on the clock change one by one between the perpetual thudding of his heartbeat.

Izuku stirs honey into his tea and he glances over briefly, eyes skittering over Shouto where he sits at the counter. Shouto feels his gaze and looks up, arching an eyebrow in silent question, but Izuku looks away almost immediately.

“You, um.” Izuku clears his throat, frowning down at his tea. “You look… nice today.”

Shouto nearly carves the number four into the countertop.
Ink bleeds out in a small dark blue circle where his pen remains pressed against the newspaper, stock-still and unmovimg as every joint in his body welds solid all at once. He glances down at his plain white shirt and the loose sage-green cardigan he’d pulled from his closet earlier, not noting anything particularly stunning about his choice of outfit. His black joggers haven’t even been washed. There’s no justifiable reason for Izuku to say such a thing, especially now.

Still, the compliment is… nice. Shouto bites his lip.

“Thank you,” he replies carefully, lifting his pen from the page with extraordinary effort and setting it aside. He laces his fingers together, blue-black ruin overlapping with pale, unmarred white. “I figured I’d make an effort this morning.”

Izuku scoffs, setting his spoon in the sink. “You say that like you don’t always make an effort.”

Shouto shoots him a look. “Well, not all of us can wear athletic clothes every single day and get away with it. Some of us have standards.”

His mouth quirks up on one side. “All right, rude.”

“I’m not wrong though.”

“Never said you were.” Izuku smiles, eyes crinkling at the corners. He takes a long, slow sip of tea, watching Shouto over the top rim of his mug with mild curiosity. “So, what’s the occasion then? Physical therapy?”

Shouto thinks back to his message from Keiji. He tastes bitterness on the back of his tongue, and hesitation roots itself in the pit of his stomach like a weed.

“No,” he hedges carefully, mentally tracing the tangled, purple spider-web veins that trail up the inside of his damaged arm. “I was planning on staying in this morning, actually. Might get around to finishing my book.” Or meeting up with my boyfriend, whichever is less dreadful.

Izuku nods, humming. “Oh. Sounds nice.”

It’s not. “Yep.”

Silence descends, weighted like a woolen blanket. Izuku leans back against the edge of the counter, sipping carefully as he stares at an invisible spot in the middle of the island, and Shouto runs his eyes over an advice column next to the crossword puzzle just to have something to look at. He reads the damned thing word for word without gleaning a single ounce of information from it.

Izuku coughs slightly. “You, um…” he trails, hesitating. “You could go visit my mom, you know.”

Shouto’s head snaps up, brows furrowing. Izuku’s cheeks are pink and he’s grimacing as if he just bit into a lemon.

“Your mother?” Shouto repeats incredulously.

Izuku shrugs. “Sure, why not? She asks about you a lot these days, so she’d probably appreciate the company if you could spare it.” He pauses, frowning. “Most likely. I think. I don’t know how often she gets out of the apartment.”

Shouto’s mind is still struggling to keep up. “I’m sorry,” he says slowly, bewildered. “Did you just say that your mother has been asking about me? Why?”
Izuku gives him an exasperated look. “Dude, not sure if you’re aware, but I’m pretty sure my mom loves you more than me at this point. Of course she’s been asking about you.”

“I somehow doubt that’s true.”

“It’s totally true. You helped her with the dishes once in high school and she hasn’t stopped talking about it since.”

Shouto recoils. “That was one time.”

Izuku waves him off. “Totally not the point. The point is my mom’d die if you showed up at her door.” He talks with his hands, tea sloshing slightly in his cup. “Like, die and then come back to life just so she could feed you lunch and make you watch soap operas with her and shit. I don’t know exactly. But she’d be happy.”

It’s a surprisingly tempting offer, when Shouto really thinks about it. He’s always liked Inko’s warm smiles and slightly-too-tight hugs that always lasted just long enough to be pleasantly suffocating. He remembers spending evenings eating dinner with her and Izuku back when they were both in high school and had partner projects to do together—hell, she probably still remembers his favorite food. She’s just that kind of person. Shouto finds himself nodding as he warms to the idea.

“I think… I’d like that, actually,” he says carefully.

Izuku’s eyebrows shoot up into his hairline. “Oh, shit, really?”

“You sound surprised.”

“Well, yeah.” Izuku pushes off the counter, eyebrows furrowed incredulously as he rounds the corner of the island and takes the seat next to Shouto. “I figured you’d think it was a weird idea and say no.”

“Then why’d you even suggest it?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “It sounded pretty good in my head. Not so much when I was saying it out loud though.”

“Well, I’m not. Saying no, that is.” Shouto unlaces his fingers and massages the palm of his ruined hand. “Your mom’s always been nice to me. I wouldn’t mind visiting her every once in a while. Besides, it’s not like I have much else to do around here anyway.”

“Oh, thank god,” Izuku exhales in a rush, slumping against the countertop dramatically. He presses his forehead against the granite. “Because I swear, if she texts me one more time about your health or when you’re planning to visit, I’m gonna go ballistic. Like, I love her, don’t get me wrong. My mom’s awesome. But she can be persistent sometimes.”

Shouto nods sympathetically. “Totally understandable,” he assures, picking up his pen and clicking the end of it to resume his puzzle where he left off. “But if you really think about it, she probably does love me more than she loves you, so it’s not surprising that she’d be so—"

Izuku elbows him sharply in the side. “Asshole. She does not.”

“You’re the one who said it first, not me.”

“Yeah, and then you refuted it.”
“Facts are facts, Izuku.”

“Yeah, well…” he trails, searching for words and failing. “Just— whatever. Shut up.”

Shouto tsks. “Terrible comeback. You used to be much better at those.”

“You’re a terrible comeback.”

“Oh, that one’s even worse. Keep it up.”

Izuku groans and presses his face into his hands, but Shouto can just barely see a dimple peeking out from the edge of his scarred hands. “You know,” he says through his fingers, voice muffled, “I don’t think the agency thought this whole ‘roommate’ thing through when they set it up.”

“Oh, that one’s even worse. Keep it up.”

Izuku peers through his fingers, glaring half-heartedly. “Because I’m going to kill you before the villains even get the chance to find this place,” he mutters. “God, you’re so annoying.”

“I think you’re just jealous,” he tells Izuku lightly, filling in sloppy numbers and marking off filled columns and quadrants with little stars as he bites back a faint smile.

Izuku drops his hands to the counter and spears Shouto with a flat, unimpressed look. Shouto simply arches an eyebrow in return.

Abruptly, Izuku lets out a breathy, unexpected laugh and shakes his head, teeth flashing in a small smile. “Fuck it, fine,” he says, holding his hands up in surrender. “You win. My mom loves you more than me. Are you happy?”

Shouto nods, returning to his puzzle with his chin lifted. “Very happy, thank you.”

“Oh, don’t sound so smug.” Izuku rolls his eyes and picks up his tea, taking a long sip before he slips his phone out of his pocket and unlocks it with a swipe. “I’ll tell her you’ll be over soon then. She’s going to flip when she hears, I swear.”

“Sure,” he tells him distractedly—but then a thought occurs to him. He frowns. “Wait, no. I actually can’t today.”

Izuku pauses in the middle of his text, one eyebrow raised. “Uh, why not? I thought you didn’t have anything to do.” Frowning, he slips his phone into his pocket and peers over at the Sudoku puzzle. He points at the upper left corner. “You have a three in here twice, by the way.”

Shouto squints where Izuku’s finger is pressed against the page. “That’s an eight.”

“Looks like a three to me,” he mutters, leaning closer to get a better look. “Are you sure?”

“…No,” he mutters. He scratches it out and changes it to an eight, just to be sure. “Better?”

“Much.” Izuku leans back in his chair, gloved fingers curling around the handle of his mug as he regards Shouto curiously. “So, you are doing something today, then.”

Shouto doesn’t look up from the puzzle. “What?”

“Earlier you said you were staying here because you didn’t have plans.”

“I said I was staying in, not that I didn’t have plans,” he mumbles distractedly. Four? No, it needs
“Well then, what are you doing today? Aside from finishing your book, I mean.”

“Hmm? Oh, Keiji’s stopping by in a bit, that’s all. After that I’m free.”

Izuku’s mug handle shatters.

It’s a sharp, sudden sound, and Shouto’s attention snaps to the side the moment it happens. Pieces of pale white porcelain fall to the floor like sharpened snowflakes, glittering viciously in the soft sunlight of morning that streams in through the nearby window. Thankfully, the cup itself is still held securely in Izuku’s other hand, and he’s wearing his gloves—no injuries, no sticky mess to clean up. Only a shattered handle and a frozen hero who hasn’t said a word yet, or even reacted to the fact that his hands are covered in broken shards of glass.

Shouto blinks in surprise, setting his pen down slowly. Izuku is staring off at nothing in particular across the kitchen, his eyebrows furrowed, and mouth pressed into a razor-thin line that’s a far cry from his loose, tired smile from a moment ago.

Shouto shifts in his seat, glancing toward the hall closet where they keep the broom and dustpan. “Um,” he trails uneasily, “are you—?”

“When is he coming?”

Izuku’s tone is oddly clipped, subdued, and colorless. Alarm bells ring in Shouto’s head, one right after the other, and red flags pop up by the dozens, stretching as far as the eye can see. Turning slowly to check the clock on the stove, Shouto answers him carefully. “Ten minutes, maybe? I don’t know, it’s hard to say with traffic—"

“Great.” Izuku pushes his chair out suddenly, standing up with stiff movements. His shoes crunch noisily against the pieces of broken glass on the floor as he rounds the corner of the island, dumping out the remainder of his tea into the sink and dropping the mug into the trash can without a second glance. Expression shuttered and unfamiliar, Izuku reaches up and zips the front of his costume up to his Adam’s apple; he’s six feet of solid professionalism carved from stone, completely unfamiliar and unreachable.

Shouto sits on his stool—stock-still, shelled, unbalanced. Tossed into a freezing pond without warning. *This isn’t right.*

“Well, I’d better get to work,” Izuku tells him, rubbing the back of his neck as he looks everywhere in the apartment except Shouto. “I think I’ll be home around six? Maybe. I don’t know, it depends on villain activity and stuff, so I wouldn’t wait up if I’m not home by then. If I’m not here, go ahead and eat dinner without me and don’t worry—"

“You’re upset about this,” Shouto concludes, frowning faintly.

Izuku cuts off his rambling, eyes going as wide as saucers. “What? No. No, no, no way. Why would I be upset?”

“Honestly, you really are the worst liar I’ve ever met in my life. It’s unbelievable sometimes.” Shouto stands from his own stool, crossing his arms over his chest. “Come on, spit it out.”

Izuku rubs a hand over his face and sighs, muttering something under his breath. “Shouto, seriously, I’m not—"
“Tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” he shoots back, vaguely irritated. “I’m not upset, all right? But I am going to be late for work, so if you’ll excuse me, I need to get going.”

Izuku attempts to slip past him, but Shouto shifts to the left, blocking his path.

“Is this about what happened at the hospital?” he asks point-blank.

All at once, Izuku pales and goes rigid beneath the lines of his costume. His mouth forms soundless shapes; it doesn’t look like he’s breathing at all.

“You— what?” Izuku stammers, shaking his head rapidly. “Who told you about that?”

Shouto rolls his eyes, huffing. “I was in the room when you two started arguing. I imagine that helps with the whole knowledge thing a bit.”

Like flipping a switch, Izuku deflates and his cheeks flood with color as relief sweeps his body in a wave. He sags against the edge of the kitchen counter heavily with a groan and covers his face with his hands.

“Oh my god,” he mumbles, rubbing at his eyes. His voice is muffled against his gloved hands. “Oh my god. Okay. All right. That— yeah, you’re right. You were there. This is… yes.”

“What?”

“Nothing!” He waves his hands. “Nothing, I just thought— well, it sounded like— um. Nothing. We’re talking about the same thing here. S’nothing. Promise.”

Shouto’s expression is carved out of pure incredulity and confusion. Blinking, he shakes his head. “This…” he trails, words failing him. “I’m sorry, what is wrong with you right now? You’re acting like a lunatic.”

“I’m sorry.” Izuku rakes his fingers through his hair, tugging at the shorter strands of his undercut near the nape of his neck. “I’m sorry, it’s fine. I’m fine. I just wasn’t expecting you to say that when I asked, so it surprised me. That’s all.”

“What were you expecting me to say?”

Izuku throws his hands up in the air. “I don’t know! Something other than that, I guess? How was I supposed to know?”

“You said you were expecting something,” Shouto argues. “It’s your mind, Izuku. I don’t control your thoughts.”

“Yeah, and I don’t control what comes out of your mouth, so why are we even arguing about this?”

Because you’re acting weird.”

Izuku jabs a finger at him. “I’m not acting weird, you’re acting weird.”

“No,” Shouto grits out, swatting Izuku’s hand away, “you’re acting—”

The sharp sound of a knock seals off the rest of Shouto’s sentence behind his teeth as both their heads swivel toward the door in unison. Shouto’s heart stumbles in his chest automatically, but Izuku pales even worse than before, looking almost on the brink of utter mortification or possibly
death, Shouto isn’t sure. His freckles stand out starkly against his skin like sickly dust motes.

Shouto narrows his eyes accusingly up at Izuku. “Oh, for the love of— see what I mean?” he asks, gesturing at Izuku’s… everything. “Weird. This is fucking weird.”

Izuku runs a hand over his face and eyes the nearby open window with no small amount of longing; Shouto can practically feel his pulse rabbiting beneath his skin right alongside his indecision. Every inch of him is coiled tightly, ready to spring or snap or break apart into a thousand different pieces.

A moment, an hour. Izuku lets out a frustrated sound. “Come on, we don’t have time for this. He’s here already and—”

“Tell me.” Shouto steps closer to look up into Izuku’s face, eyes narrowed. “I deserve to know whatever the hell this is all about.”

“Maybe you do.” Izuku sighs softly through his nose, gaze flicking back and forth between Shouto’s eyes as if searching for something. He bites his lip and shakes his head slowly. “But it’s not my place to say anything, so I won’t.”

Shouto opens his mouth to demand an answer, but he stops short. There’s something behind Izuku’s tone that gives him pause—a solemn kind of desperation, or perhaps thinly-veiled fear. He’s not quite sure what it is, but the bitterness twisted between Izuku’s words sends slivers of hesitation slipping beneath Shouto’s skin regardless.

Then realization washes over him slowly.

“You think I’m not going to like the answer,” Shouto exhales, eyes widening. “That’s why you’re not telling me.”

Izuku smiles sadly. “I don’t think it’s important enough to matter whether you like the answer or not.”

The knocking at the door comes again, more sharply this time. The sound rattles around in Shouto’s skull, clinking against the hourglass he knows is steadily draining second by second. He doesn’t move however, studying Izuku’s tired, drawn face for any hint of what he’s not saying, but he comes up empty-handed. Shouto used to be good at this sort of thing with Izuku, dammit.

Izuku glances over toward the door as the knocking resumes again. He rubs his jaw. “You should probably answer that before he leaves, you know.”

Shouto doesn’t react. He’s numb all over—a broken record, spinning endlessly in a loop he’s apparently never been a part of, but he’s only just now realizing it. He swallows and touches his thumb to each of his deadened fingertips just to give him something else to focus on.

“Index, middle, ring, pinkie, index, middle, ring, pinkie—”

“If there’s an issue between the two of you,” he says carefully after a moment, “then I want to know about it. I deserve that much, at least.”

Izuku searches his face, expression twisting in sudden, bitter agony. The shadows beneath his eyes are deep and dreadful for a thousand different reasons, but watching him struggle with silence as words fight to free themselves is a special sort of anguish that Shouto’s never, ever wanted to see. It reminds him of washed-out hospital rooms, live news reports on large television screens, and a stupid night in New York City that he’s tried his hardest to forget about. It’s pure pain, conflict,
torture—emotions upon more emotions for which Shouto has no name.

“I can’t,” Izuku forces out, pinching the bridge of his nose. The knocking at the door is furious now, louder and louder and **louder**, but Izuku either can’t hear it or chooses not to. “It’s not my place, all right? I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry.”

“But—”

“Listen,” Izuku interjects, jabbing a finger at the main entryway. His mouth is set tightly, gaze burning a hole in the dead-center of their front door as tiny bolts of green lighting skitter up and down the length of his arm, unbidden. “If you want answers, ask your boyfriend. Maybe he’ll tell you, maybe he won’t. I don’t know. Don’t care, either. But *this*?” Izuku gestures between the two of them, expression torn to pieces. “This isn’t happening right now. I have work soon and you have Keiji to deal with, and—”

His voice breaks, shoulders dipping a few inches as tension bleeds out of him by the bucketful. Standing in the middle of their kitchen, Izuku hardly looks heroic—he’s drained, empty. *Tired.* There’s hardly anything left of him except a hollow shell of exhaustion and a soured sense of purpose that used to stand for something great. Shouto wants to reach out and touch him just to see if his hand will pass through Izuku’s chest and mingle somewhere in the space where his heart used to beat.

He wonders if Izuku’s heart’s even still there. He wonders if it’s turned into a ruin of broken bones and blue-black viscera, devoid of that irresistible spark that used to keep it pulsing so strongly.

He wonders about lots of things.

“If…” Izuku stammers, biting the inside of his cheek as he deliberates. His face is haggard, lined with sharp shadows and creases like bold pencil strokes. “I really don’t think I can deal with two fights in two days with you like this. Not now. Not…” He clenches his teeth, expression fracturing a little further. “Not this month.”

Shouto’s exhalations emerge in puffs of steam, heart racing even though he can’t figure out why. There are too many words and noises to sort through, too much sensory input that he doesn’t know what to do with. He’s strung tight and ready to snap.

*Not this month,* he repeats in his head, turning each word over carefully. It’s early April, Shouto thinks, glancing at the calendar on the fridge over Izuku’s shoulder to make sure. The fifth, specifically. *Cherry blossom season, Easter, Showa Day, April, April, April.* Why is *April* important? Why does—

The realization hits him. It’s a punch to the gut, a train at full speed, a thousand bricks slamming into him all at once with the intent to kill. It rips the air from his lungs and flips him inside out, emptying the contents of his chest as easily as half-empty coin purse except he’s too horrified to bother bleeding yet because it’s *April, oh my god. How could I have forgotten?*

Izuku must see it on his face because he smiles tightly and drops his gaze to the slate floor between his feet, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Only now does Shouto notice the way Izuku’s thumb continually dips toward the center of his palm, rubbing over a familiar bump at the inner juncture of his leftmost ring finger.

“I—” Shouto tries, fumbling for words. Guilt gnaws at him from the inside out, shredding him to pieces like shards of metal and broken bits of glass. On the countertop, Shouto’s phone lights up and begins to buzz as Keiji no doubt calls him, but he doesn’t care enough to notice it. “I had no
idea, Izuku. None. I didn’t—god, I’m so sorry. I completely forgot that… um. That she—”

“Just ask him, Shouto,” Izuku interrupts quietly, reaching up for the titanium mask hanging around his neck. He situates it over his mouth and nose, eyes filled to the brim with hollow-hearted apathy, and sucks in a deep breath. “Or don’t, I don’t care. I’ve got enough to worry about on my own.”

Shouto opens his mouth to apologize, to say anything, god, anything at all—but Izuku turns toward the open kitchen window before he gets the chance to speak. Shouto stares as he braces his strong hands against the windowsill; he bounces lightly on his toes and hauls himself up and out of the apartment in one fluid motion, and with a flash of green energy and a gust of wind, Izuku leaps from the window and disappears, taking most of the air in the apartment with him in his wake.

Newspapers and half-finished puzzles flutter to the floor at his feet, whisper-soft and weightless as Izuku vanishes into the skyline. Shouto remains stock-still in the center of the kitchen with ice in his veins and bitter bile painting the back of his throat in bright colors, horrified. No words come to him. He doesn’t expect them. Doesn’t want them. Can’t.

Shouto goes to answer the door.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr | Twitter | CuriousCat | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist
Why Should I Mourn

Chapter Notes

Many of you have been looking forward to this chapter for a long time. Please remember that just because things may not have happened exactly how you wanted them to, that's still no excuse to flame my inboxes. If you don't like how I handled the situation, I'm sorry, but I don't care. Keep in mind that none of you know the planned ending of Roots, so you have no idea how the repercussions of this chapter will play out into the rest of the story. This is what I felt was best for the characters and the upcoming events of the story, and you all will have to accept that because I will not go back and change things to suit your preferences.

tl;dr, please don't send me mean comments simply because you were expecting something entirely different from this chapter and this didn't feel "satisfying" enough for you. I have feelings. They are capable of being hurt. Don't fuck with me.

I hope you all enjoy the third-longest chapter in this entire fic. It took a long fucking time to write. Gonna go sleep for a million years now. ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dust in the apartment settles slowly. The kitchen window gapes like a fresh wound.

The breeze whistles softly between the blinds as they dance lazily in the midmorning sunlight, and Shouto can see the broken mug handle on the floor near the island, half-covered by fallen newspapers. His cell phone continues to buzz on the countertop uninterrupted, and Keiji’s name is stamped across the display in crisp, white letters.

*Ask him.*

Shouto’s fingertips crackle like embers as he curls them around the doorknob. Using strength he doesn’t have, he wrenches the door wide and braces himself for the worst—whatever that may be.

Keiji stands in the threshold with his phone pressed against his ear, eyebrows lifted high as he looks Shouto up and down in thinly-veiled surprise like he hadn’t expected him to answer the door at all. He’s wearing a simple button-up today with the sleeves folded neatly above his elbows, glasses perched on his nose and hair pushed away from his face—the picture of university professionalism. A leather-banded watch on his left wrist ticks quietly, endlessly.

They regard each other in careful, cloying silence for several sluggish heartbeats. Shouto tries not to fidget under Keiji’s scrutiny, but he fails and finds purchase at the hem of his cardigan instead; numb fingers rasp along stitched edges and cable-knit designs, bumping buttons unknowingly as he bites into his cheek. He welcomes the sharp taste of blood.

Keiji swallows, dropping his phone with stilted lethargy, and he slips it back into his pocket. “Hello,” he says quietly.
Shouto inclines his head. “Hi.”

He clears his throat, shifting his weight as his hands tighten around the strap of his messenger bag. “May I…?” he trails, nodding toward the interior of the apartment.

It’s tempting to say no. It’s tempting to keep him here in this doorway, trapped in the liminal space between welcome and not-quite-welcome that Shouto’s been toeing like a tightrope between cut-glass skyscrapers. He can feel the pull of gravity tugging at him insistently, urging him one way or the other—he’s just not yet sure which way he’s willing to fall.

Inhaling through his nose, Shouto nods faintly and steps back, holding the door a little wider with his foot. It’s not much of an invitation, but Shouto doesn’t feel much like giving one in the first place, so it’s the best he can do, under the circumstances. Keiji smiles and slips past Shouto with a quiet word of thanks, silently stepping into the cramped confines of a space that doesn’t really belong to either one of them.

Ask him. It echoes in his head like a distant gunshot as Shouto latches the door, hand heating the brass knob to uncomfortable levels. Or don’t, I don’t care.

Shouto turns and follows him into the kitchen. He shrugs vaguely when Keiji comes across the newspapers on the floor and the small pile of broken ceramics near the island, arching an inquiring eyebrow.

“Clipped my cup against the countertop,” Shouto lies, pulling the sleeves of his cardigan down over his fingers. “Still getting used to things with my hand.”

Keiji slips his messenger bag over his shoulder and hangs it from the back of one of the chairs at the island, then looks around the apartment with a frown. “Broom and dustpan?” he asks.

Shouto points. “Closest. But you don’t have to—”

“It’s fine, I can get it.” He waves Shouto off, walking to the closet and pulling out the small hand broom and dustpan before he kneels down and begins sweeping up the tiny shards of broken ceramic. He glances sidelong at Shouto’s bare feet. “Besides, you’re not wearing shoes.”

Shouto looks down at his feet. “I wouldn’t step on anything.”

“Mm, you said that last time.” He glances up through his lashes. “Remember?”

(Empty flower vases too close to the edge of the kitchen countertop, needy sex and half-hitched breaths pressed against sweat-slick skin, a sudden noise, sharp pain in his foot, lots of swearing—)

Shouto’s cheeks sizzle, and he crosses his arms over his chest with a scowl. “That was one time,” he mutters.

“One time is all it takes.” Keiji straightens up, slipping past him to dump the contents of the dustpan into the trash can. Setting them both aside, he brushes his hands off on his trousers and smiles tightly, glancing around the rest of the apartment around them. “So, this is your place, huh?”

Shouto nods, rocking back and forth on his heels. “Yep. This is it.”

Keiji stuffs his hands in his pockets, crossing the kitchen and into the living room where he turns in a slow circle and gets the measure of the entire place. He studies the titles on the bookshelf, the simple wall decorations, the folded-up blanket that’s slung over the armrest of the sofa. When he cranes his neck to peer down the hallway, Shouto has to make an effort to avoid staring at the
smooth column of his neck above the crisp white collar of his shirt.

“It’s smaller than your loft,” Keiji determines after a minute, running his index finger over the spines of the books on the shelf near the television. “A lot smaller.”

“I didn’t have much of a say in the square footage.”

“Shame. There’s a new development of townhouses uptown that are a lot more spacious.” His brows twitch, threatening to draw together. “I actually thought about moving out there, believe it or not. My lease is up in July.”

“What stopped you?” Shouto steps into the living room hesitantly, sinking his toes into the lush carpeting.

Keiji pauses, chewing on his words. Shouto tries not to suffocate.

“Too much room for just one person,” Keiji says after a moment. The corners of his mouth tighten imperceptibly. “Among other things.”

Keiji’s index finger stills suddenly over a leather-bound title on the top shelf of the bookcase. He frowns, pulling it out halfway to peer at the cover—*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce. Sliding it free, Keiji holds it up. “Is this the one I let you borrow?”

“It’s my copy,” Shouto corrects. “I left yours in your campus mailbox a few months ago.”

“Right, right.” He flips through a few pages, eyes skimming the page where Shouto accidentally left an old grocery list as a bookmark, then snaps it shut and looks over at him. “You told me you hated this book.”

Shouto shrugs. “It grew on me.”

“I see.” Keiji studies the cover for a moment, brows furrowing in thought. “I didn’t realize you’d purchased your own copy.”

“Is it really that surprising?”

Keiji bites his lip, face contorting with pain for a brief moment. After a moment, he shakes his head.

“No,” he says quietly. “No, I suppose it isn’t.”

Keiji slides the novel back on the shelf and turns around, letting out a long, slow breath and aiming a tight smile in Shouto’s direction. His fingers tap nervously against his thigh, long and slender and slightly more tanned than the last time Shouto saw them.

“Your hair’s getting longer,” Keiji says softly to fill the silence, approaching Shouto with careful steps. Reaching up, he brushes a stray lock of scarlet hair out of his eyes, fingertips lingering near his scarred cheekbone. “Have we finally found your rebellious stage?”

Shouto’s lips twitch. “You assume I ever left it in the first place.”

“Oh?”

“Mhm.” Shouto can’t help the wry smile that curls one corner of his mouth. “Who knows, one of these days I might go get some piercings, start pinning band posters up in my room or something. Maybe get a tattoo. Really go all-out with the whole look.”
Keiji gives him a flat look. “Piercings.”

“Yeah,” Shouto replies, nodding. He reaches up to touch the shell of his own ear. “I’m thinking five or six right here. Maybe seven, if I do one of my eyebrows. What do you think?”

“I think that I don’t like piercings,” Keiji tells him, raising an eyebrow. “And I think you’re well aware of that fact.”

Ice water, cold and biting. Keiji says it all admonishingly—a tone Shouto hasn’t heard for a long while. He pulls up short and bites back his next sardonic quip, stung and reeling.

“Christ, Keiji,” Shouto exhales, stepping away from his soft touch. Irritation crawls beneath his nails like sewing needles. “You know I’m not actually planning on getting my ears pierced, right? Metal doesn’t do well in my extreme temperatures.”

“Just making sure.” Keiji’s lips twist, and he nods thoughtfully. “What about the tattoos and band posters?”

“Depends. Are you going to think I’m serious about those, too?”

Keiji drops his hand back to his side with a sigh, shoulders drooping. He grimaces and tugs at the collar of his shirt absentmindedly. “Sorry,” he says, rubbing his eyes. “I didn’t—I mean, I got the joke. I promise. I’m just really tired this morning, so I suppose my sense of humor is a little extra thin.”

Shouto scoffs. “No shit.”

“Please don’t swear at me.”

Shouto throws his hands up in the air with a frustrated noise, doing his best to tamp down the heat that bubbles beneath his skin, unbidden. He’s walking through a minefield inch by inch, but he’s almost too afraid to touch his toes to the dirt in front of him just to see whether it will explode or not. Biting back his temper after a moment, Shouto pinches the bridge of his nose and lets out a long, slow breath between his teeth.

“Fine,” he says softly, holding up a placating hand. “Just… fine. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to swear, okay?”

Keiji’s mouth tightens but he nods, accepting the apology. Swallowing, he glances sidelong at the sofa a moment later. “Can we sit?”

Shouto flexes his fingers and bites his lip, nodding. They each take a seat on the couch—close enough to touch if they reached for one another, but just far enough to matter. It’s clear Keiji isn’t going to speak first.

“To answer your original question,” Shouto says, reaching up to touch the ends of his hair absently, “I haven’t bothered to get it cut in a while. I’ve been, uh. Sticking around here a lot lately. Agency thinks it’s best I keep my head down, just in case I’m being targeted.”

Keiji’s expression is grave. “Are you?”

He leans back against the sofa with a shrug. “Hard to say. It’s still early in the investigation and the agency’s attention has been split between all those anti-hero protests downtown.”

“My train’s been stopped six times because of those stupid protestors. It’s ridiculous,” he gripes,
shaking his head. His mouth twists into something sour. “Still, I find it hard to believe that you aren’t your agency’s first priority. You almost died, Shouto.”

“They aren’t ignoring me,” he counters, running a hand over his weary face. He gestures to the space around them. “I mean, they put me in a safehouse with the deadliest, most capable hero on the planet. Aside from giving me the detonator to a nuclear bomb, there’s not a whole lot else they could have done to keep me safer.” Shouto shifts his weight, clearing his throat as phantom pains tingle the tips of his fingers one by one. Quietly, he adds, “And the thing that matters is that I didn’t die.”

He wants to argue more—Shouto can see it in the set of his mouth, that spark of stubbornness. The words are perched on the tip of his tongue, ready to loosen themselves into open air.

Don’t, Shouto wants to beg, sensing the fight brewing on the horizon. Please, don’t do this. Not right now.

But Keiji’s gaze slips down to Shouto’s right arm where it’s mostly covered by the sleeve of his cardigan, and the fight bleeds from his body in a single rush. Discomfort burrows in the cavern of Shouto’s chest under the sudden scrutiny, and his fingers twitch idly where they poke past the end of the sleeve, skin stained deep purple and slashed with silver scars from nail bed to knuckle.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Shouto tells him, holding up his ruined hand. The sleeve of his cardigan slips down his wrist a few inches, revealing the cobweb capillaries that lace the length of his forearm like tangled violet threads. He clenches a fist until his scarred knuckles blanch an unnatural, deathly white. “I don’t have much feeling in my fingers, but I can still move them and hold stuff. Guessing about appropriate pressure is the only thing I’m having trouble with right now.”

“You don’t have any feeling at all?”

Shouto presses his lips together, shaking his head slightly. “Phantom pains, mostly. I might gain a little sensation back in a year or two, but the doctors aren’t sure yet.”

Keiji recoils. “How can they not be sure? It’s simple frostbite.”

He says the word in a single pained exhalation like a curse, rail-thin and full of unwanted sympathy. Shouto hates that tone; he’s always hated that tone.

Clenching his teeth, Shouto swallows and drops his hand back into his lap. “Frostbite is common, but this is… different,” he explains. “The right side of my body was made for cold temperatures, so that’s probably the only reason I still have fingers left at all. The rest is unknown.”

Keiji fists his hands, glaring down at the carpeted floor between his feet. “And—” he hesitates, biting back the words like broken bits of glass. “And your Quirk? Any news on that?”

Shouto thinks of shattered smoke alarms and charred bedsheets, white flames and seared skin. The type of fear that tastes like iron.

“My ice is still dormant,” he lies smoothly, lacing his fingers together. “Everything else is fine so far. The doctors are hopeful.”

Keiji glances away, face twisting with an emotion Shouto can’t quite place. “I see,” he says. Shouto tries to convince himself that it’s not disappointment he hears laced throughout his tone.

Keiji hedges past words that refuse to fall past his lips, no matter how much Shouto wants them to.
There’s an unspoken argument bubbling beneath the surface of the silence between them, ready to burst. It’d take no effort at all to light the fuse and ask the wrong (right) question, but finding the catalyst is the simple part—it’s easy to burn and even easier to set the world on fire; to shift the air around them into something altogether new and dangerous.

It’s the fallout that’s difficult to deal with.

Keiji shifts on the couch, folding his hands in his lap. “Will you be returning to work any time soon?” he asks carefully, biting into his cheek.

“Four months.” Shouto digs the ragged edge of a nail into the pad of his thumb until his bones ache with barely-there twinges of discomfort. “It depends on how well physical therapy goes and whether or not my Quirk decides to come back.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

The question catches him like the serrated side of a blade, pinching uncomfortably. There’s an implication behind those words.

Slowly, Shouto relaxes his fingers, taking the time to memorize the precise shape of the crescent-moon indent that now mars the pad of his thumb. “Then I suppose I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it,” he says, and the idea sits bitterly on his tongue. “There’s no point in dealing with hypotheticals until I’ve had more time to heal.”

“Humor me,” Keiji says, looking up suddenly to meet his gaze. There’s eagerness in his expression and the set of his shoulders beneath the crisp lines of his button-up; he’s vibrating with tamped-down energy Shouto can feel through the couch. “Give me an estimation. Please, if you can.”

Apprehension skitters up the length of Shouto’s spine like an electric shock, delving deeply somewhere in between his shoulder blades. He shakes his head. “I don’t understand what you’re asking me.”

“I’m asking about us,” he clarifies, voice taut. “About our future, Shouto.”

“What does our future have to do with my Quirk?”

“Everything,” he answers, turning on the couch to face Shouto more fully. He’s tugging at the fabric of his trousers, pulling at them until the seams start to complain. “You can’t tell me it hasn’t crossed your mind yet. Surely you’ve thought about the possibility.”

“Thought about what?”

“What if you’re going to do if your Quirk doesn’t come back.”

Shouto’s been hit with hard things before. He’s been shot with non-lethal rubber bullets during late-night training exercises with local SWAT teams and taken punches from the strongest man in the known world—punches that have toppled entire city blocks and shifted the tides with their power. He’s been mauled by villains, beaten by street thugs, tossed between skyscrapers like a ragdoll, and blown up for good measure.

Keiji’s words hit him so much harder.

What if, his mind repeats. What if, what if, what if. A question he’s asked himself for weeks. A question he’s never been bold enough to answer or even think about because the possibility of failure is too frightening to consider.
He hasn’t allowed himself to think about if. He’s been holding onto when.

Keiji smiles in plastic sympathy and reaches out to take Shouto’s left hand in his own. His fingers trace idle patterns on the inside of Shouto’s wrist—triangles, letters, numbers, short sayings, and symbols. Shouto doesn’t feel a single one of them.

“Please be reasonable,” Keiji murmurs, expression pained. “Without your ice, can you honestly say you’re capable of being the hero you were before? Can you protect people with just your left side?”

Shouto fights to regulate his breathing, but his lungs aren’t working. He shakes his head. “I said I’d cross that bridge when I come to it,” he repeats stiffly.

“You can’t leave things like that up to chance.” His voice is soft, crooning. Shouto detests it. “You have to have a backup plan of some kind. Something for the worst-case scenario so you can land on your feet either way.”

Anger wells up in the back of Shouto’s throat, pressing fear up against the roof of his mouth. “And I suppose you have something in mind?” he asks, fighting to keep his skin at a normal temperature. “Something for this ‘worst-case scenario?’”

Keiji nods. “That’s why I came over this morning.”

“Is it, now.”

“Please don’t use that tone with me,” he implores, sighing. “I’m trying to help you.”

Keiji drops his gaze to Shouto’s hand, tracing the hills and valleys of his knuckles with whisper-soft touches. He follows the ridges of Shouto’s veins down to his wrist and circles back around to follow the contour of his palm, memorizing each dip between his bones, every burn scar, every crease.

“I… I told you I went to stay in England for a bit, yes?” he asks hesitantly, not looking up at Shouto. His focus is singular. “I left you a voicemail, but I wasn’t sure if you—”

“I got it,” Shouto says flatly.

Keiji glances up through his lashes, expression tight. “Right, of course.” He clears his throat, grimacing. “Well, I went for a fellowship opportunity at Cambridge. The head of the linguistics department read my book on syntactic structures apparently, so he invited me to the campus for some conferences. The university covered my travel expenses. It was hard to say no.”

Shouto arches an eyebrow. “Congratulations?”

Keiji lifts his shoulders, huffing out a faint laugh. “I suppose so, yes. There aren’t a lot of linguistics conferences these days. I was lucky.”

It’s leading somewhere. Every word has weight, tied to something heavier that Shouto can’t see yet. His brow knits. “Keiji, are you—?”

“They offered me a position at the university,” he interjects softly.

The deafening plunge of silence that follows is thick enough to choke him. He hears the words once, twice, three times in his head, each iteration echoing with the exact same inflection and looping like a sour-noted song etched into the metal sounding cylinder of a music box.
“A job,” he repeats, slowly pulling his hand from Keiji’s. He leans back against the couch and absorbs the information, turning each syllable over on his tongue one by one. “Really.”

Keiji nods, smiling shakily. “The head of the linguistics department is stepping down at the end of this academic year. They want me to take the job of his successor now that the position’s opened up.” He grips his knees until his knuckles blanch white beneath pale skin, and he bites his lip. “It’s a great opportunity for me, Shouto. The administration is willing to pay for my moving expenses from Japan, my visa—everything.”

“Sounds nice,” he mutters.

“It’s a once-in-a-lifetime offer.”

Apprehension twists his stomach into knots. There’s something concealed behind those words; Shouto can feel its aftershocks through the soles of his feet like distant subterranean tremors. Little deaths trapped between letters—tiny and insignificant on their own, but just powerful enough to have substance when they come in groups of two and four.

The realization comes to him all at once.

“You’ve already accepted,” he articulates carefully, meeting Keiji’s gaze as the pieces fall into place one by one. “Haven’t you?”

Little deaths, little deaths.

Keiji flinches automatically as if struck, mouth parting and words tilting on the edges of his teeth, caught in time. For a few precious seconds, Shouto almost allows himself to hope. Maybe he’s wrong. Maybe Keiji will refute the claim. Maybe they’ll revert back to conversations about old books and apartment sizes, broken mug handles and half-healed injuries—those safer, shatter-proof topics meant for people with hard edges exactly like theirs.

Tell me I’m wrong, he wants to beg, though he has no idea why.

Keiji dashes those hopes to pieces half a heartbeat later, clenching his jaw and giving Shouto a barely-there nod of affirmation.

“I did,” he answers quietly. His spine straightens and he lifts his chin. “And… I want you to come with me when I leave.”


“I want you to move with me to England. Officially.”

The idea doesn’t process. Rather, it sits in his mind like a lead weight, refusing to move or shift or do anything of major consequence. “That’s…” he trails, slowly shaking his head. “Keiji, I can’t move to—"

“Just think about it,” Keiji implores shifting on the couch until his legs are tucked under him. Reaching out, he takes hold of Shouto’s good hand once again, pressing the flat of his thumbs into the center of his too-warm palm. “Think about it for five seconds, okay? That’s all I’m asking.”

He doesn’t want to think about it. It’s a future he’s never bothered to entertain because the idea has always been a certain sort of laughable. He’ll never have a good enough reason to leave his family, Mizu, Momo, Izuku, or all of his friends at the agency because no such reason exists. He’s sure of it.
Shouto tries to pull his hand back, but Keiji tightens his grip, anchoring him to the spot.

“Listen to me,” Keiji says, barreling onward. His voice is tinged with forced lightness. “Listen—I’ve thought it all through, okay? All you’d have to do is retire from hero work and announce it. The rest is easy.”

All at once, Shouto’s temper flares. “Retire?” he repeats, recoiling. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’ve never been more serious in my life.”

“I can’t fucking retire.”

“Can’t you though?” His gaze flickers to Shouto’s right hand where it’s curled around the edge of a couch cushion, all purpled skin and pale pressure points hidden behind a webbing of scars that will never fully heal. “You’ve always been a realist, sweetheart,” he says, voice softening. “Can you honestly promise yourself that you’ll be able to go back to work after—”

Shouto rips his hand from Keiji’s, ignoring the way his internal temperature spikes. “Finish that sentence.” Shouto’s eyes are narrowed, wisps of smoke curling out from underneath the collar of his t-shirt. “I dare you.”

“I’m trying to help.” He sighs, frustrated. “It’s like you’re under the impression that you’ll make a full recovery by the end of all this. It’s not true, Shouto. You have to realize that.”

“You don’t know that,” he says stubbornly. “Nobody knows. I’m waiting until the doctors can figure out—”

“When are you going to wake up and realize that waiting is all you ever do?”

It’s funny, the way the remark slips beneath his skin like slow-acting poison. There’s no stunned shock or whip-crack sensation at his fingertips, no anger or irritation worth provoking to the point of total immolation. Rather, he expects nothing and receives exactly that, save the bitter, molten slide of truth that drips down the back of his throat.

It burns with abandon as it spreads through Shouto’s veins and seeps between his cells, and his memories cycle like a rapid-fire picture show—lamplit parks, pulsing strobe lights, news reports, crumbling cinderblocks, a moonlit bedroom, missed calls not meant for him. He bleeds words by the thousands and gushes until his body’s all but drained, then wonders where he’s supposed to go from here.

Just as Shouto opens his mouth, his gaze catches on a watermarked ring near the corner of the coffee table—it’s lighter than the rest of the stained wood surface, perfectly circular, with ragged edges near the bottom where the condensation bled a bit too far. Shouto mentally traces its contour with care. Izuku must have forgotten his coaster again.

Mayonnaise, he remembers Izuku telling him once several years ago. They’d fallen asleep on their notes in the common room of their dorm, and by the time they woke up, their water bottles had left horrible rings on the table.

“It’s a stupid technique,” Izuku had told him that night. Shouto remembers his smile more than anything else, all toothy and bright enough to challenge the stars. “But hey, whatever works, right?”

Shouto bites his cheek to fend off a faint smile. His fingers smelled like mayonnaise for three days
straight after that.

Whatever works.

Exhaling slowly, Shouto stands up from the sofa and tugs the sleeves of his cardigan down over his fingers the way he likes them, fistng the fabric in his hands until the tendons in his wrists protest. His mouth tastes like vinegar, sour-sweet and acidic enough to make his teeth ache, but he doesn‘t particularly mind the flavor this time.

Keiji frowns, straightening slightly. He looks around. “Shouto, where are you—?”

“I think we should break up.”

The silence that follows is ephemeral and echoing, just loud enough to drown out the calm cadence of Shouto‘s heartbeat. His words hang in the air before dissipating like vapor, bleeding into the walls of the apartment where they embed themselves behind wallpaper, framed photos, curtains—useless things that have never served a more important purpose until now.

Keiji stares up at Shouto from the couch, eyes wide and lips parted in stunned shock. It’s one of the few times Shouto’s ever rendered him speechless, he thinks.

“You… what?” Keiji asks.

Shouto lifts his shoulders a few spare inches in the semblance of a shrug. “I said I think we should break up.”

He sputters wordlessly, eyebrows lifting into his hairline as he reels. “Jesus, Shouto, you’re—I mean, isn’t that a bit extreme? We haven’t even talked about options yet, o-or long-distance arrangements, or… I don’t know what else, but something.” He exhales sharply, raking a hand through his well-kempt hair. “Why on earth are you jumping to this solution first?”

“Because I’m not moving to England,” he replies as he steps past Keiji’s legs. Turning toward the kitchen, he rubs the pad of his thumb over his fingertips and tries not to think about the way his skin rasps over itself like crumpled paper. “And I’m not retiring, either, so I don’t see how we have any other choice here.”

“We have choices!” Keiji stands up from the couch suddenly and begins pacing the length of the living room, tugging at his collar as he struggles to think. “Shouto, please, you have to hear how insane you sound right now. You need to retire. You’ll get yourself killed if you don’t.”

“Maybe.” He thinks about it for a moment. “Or maybe I won’t.”

“And you’re willing to take that chance for—for what?” he demands, halting his steps. His shoulders are tight, teeth bared, and brow knitted. “For Japan? For the people here?”

“No,” he answers. “For me.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means…” he trails, searching for the right thing to say. He bites his lip, tossing aside syllables and half-formed words as he sifts through his mind piece by piece.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shouto sees that stupid watermark on the corner of the coffee table again. He thinks of late nights, diligent note-taking, and a bright smile that isn’t nearly as bright anymore—a smile that makes the best of what it has left.
“It means I don’t mind waiting a little longer for something that might not happen,” he finishes, biting into his cheek. He smiles tightly, meeting Keiji’s eyes, and shrugs. “I suppose it’s what I’m good at.”

Keiji stares at him, dumbfounded. He slowly shakes his head back and forth. “But…” he falters.

“Your Quirk—"

“The way I see it, if everyone else can make it in this world with just one power, then so can I.” He clenches his jaw determinedly. “I’ll adjust, Keiji. Whatever happens, I know I’ll figure out a way to make it work.”

He doesn’t wait for a response this time. Slipping past Keiji and walking toward the kitchen, Shouto pulls the fridge open and searches the shelves. He grabs the mayonnaise when he finds it, kicks the door shut behind him, and snatches the paper towel roll off the island, sticking it under his arm before he returns to the living room. Keiji merely watches in stunned, silent shock as Shouto kneels down at the corner of the coffee table and sets the jar of mayonnaise on the carpet without a word of explanation.

Shouto tears off a paper towel and folds it in half three times, being careful to line up its edges neatly. He feels Keiji’s eyes on him the entire time—watching, waiting. Expecting. The silence clings to Shouto’s skin like a salve.

“I know it may not make sense to you,” Shouto says quietly after a moment. Unscrewing the lid on the jar, he scoops out a small amount of mayonnaise with the corner of the paper towel and begins rubbing it in small circles on the damaged tabletop. “And I realize you’re upset with me right now because of what this means for our relationship. For us.”

“No,” he agrees, breaking on the word. His lashes flutter as he fends off tears. “I don’t want that at all.”

Time hangs suspended by invisible wires for several tenuous, tentative heartbeats before it begins to fall like shards of glass, each one shattering upon impact at their feet. It’s the type of moment that’s supposed to feel monumental, or perhaps like the end of the world. There should be tears, arguments, counter-offers, denials, bitter words spit from familiar lips—all the things Shouto’s seen in films and trashy novels.

It should feel like something. Shouldn’t it?

Keiji lets out a shuddering breath, running a hand over his face as every ounce of energy leaves his body in a rush. His shoulders slump, his expression falters, his eyes take on watery shadows like a floodplain, shelled and shattered—a stranger.
“So, this is it, then?” Keiji asks weakly. He gestures at the abyssal space between them. “We’re… breaking up?”

Shouto drops his gaze to the coffee table, its surface now shiny with oil. Something tugs uncomfortably in the center of his chest.

“I think it’s for the best,” he affirms quietly.

Shouto hears Keiji’s breath catch in his chest, all jagged-edged and ruined. *It’s the sound of inevitability*, he thinks to himself.

*Little deaths.*

“Okay,” Keiji whispers after a moment, swallowing. He nods. “If this is what you really want, then… okay.”

“It is,” he replies. There’s a sharp twisting sensation right behind his sternum, sour and stinging. “I’m sorry.”

Keiji sighs softly, defeated. “Yeah,” he says. “Me, too.”

Words float, spent and useless. There’s nothing left to say, and they both know it. Time dissolves into itself, soundless and infinite as Keiji takes the initiative and steps out of the living room, taking care to pick up his messenger bag and straighten the collar of his shirt—small, mechanical movements stacked on top of one another like the bricks of a tipping tower. Shouto’s fingers tighten in the paper towel as he listens to the sound of Keiji’s footsteps nearing the door to the apartment; each one resonates like the toll of a bell.

There’s still time to fix it, he thinks in a gut-wrenching panic. The hourglass is draining quickly, but he’s not yet out of sand. He could take it back, they could solve this, things could go back to—

*Normal.*

Normal isn’t meant for people like him. It never has been.

Shouto flinches as the door slams shut behind Keiji, rattling the windows in their frames and the pictures on the wall. A deep quiet engulfs the room, but he doesn’t look up, doesn’t breathe. Instead, he stares at the ring on the table indomitably, memorizing its exact size and shape, the specific gold color of the water-stained wood, and every untidy edge.

A pinprick of pain makes itself known in the back of his throat, sharp like a bee sting. It pulls and stretches like a silent scream packed into a too-small space, pressing against the backs of his teeth and tugging at the dip between his collarbones as it searches for an outlet it can’t seem to find. He clenches his jaw and fists his fingers until his scars threaten to tear, and he takes a moment to wonder why he never bothered to learn how to cry with style. It always seemed like such a useless skill.

A lone tear sizzles on the crest of his cheekbone, evaporating into steam before it falls any further. He pretends he doesn’t see it.
It’s nearly midnight by the time Izuku returns home, and he feels every single hour in the marrow of his bones. The minute he shoulders the apartment door open, all he can think about is the first aid kit in the bathroom, the fact that some of his joints feel like crushed gravel shifting beneath his skin, and the steadfast, tempting lull of sleep that’s threatened to drown him since lunchtime. A typical day on patrol, all things considered.

Shutting the door behind him with a grunt of pain, Izuku immediately reaches up to pull his mask up and over his head, being careful not to bump the gash above his left eyebrow that he incurred from a broken window earlier in the day. He hangs the heavy piece of titanium on a nearby coat hook, limping toward the living room and biting back every curse he knows along the way. He’s not in great shape, admittedly, but he’s not bad enough to risk a trip to the hospital, so he’ll count that as a win.

First aid kit, then sleep, he tells himself. Two simple steps. He can handle that much. Probably.

The apartment is dark as Izuku stumbles toward the living room, shedding pieces of his costume along the way. He unclasps his leg guards and tosses them aside piece by piece, then kicks off his shoes in the general direction of the foyer, not looking twice at wherever they land. Next, he peels off his dirty gloves and drapes them over the back of one of the chairs at the kitchen island, and lastly he reaches up to grasp the zipper at his throat, unfastening his costume all the way down to his navel. Air floods his compression suit underneath in a rush, and Izuku fights (and fails) to withhold his sigh of relief. Nothing in the world feels better than—

“You’re late.”

Izuku yelps and whirls toward the voice, muscles tensing automatically. The living room is barely illuminated by the ambient lights of the city, neon signs and late-night storefronts casting pale slashes of silver and blue across the contours of the room. It’s just bright enough for him to see Shouto sitting in one of the chairs near the window; the brightness of his phone screen catches the sharp angles of his face from below, carving him completely from the shadows.

Izuku lets out a sharp breath and slumps in relief all at once. “Christ, Shouto,” he mutters, pressing against his eyes until he sees stars. “Don’t do that.”

“What?”


Shouto locks his phone with a soft click and reaches over to turn on the table lamp. The room floods with soft yellow light, showcasing the loose fit of Shouto’s pajamas and the blanket he has draped over his shoulders like a cape, legs tucked underneath him comfortably. His bangs are held back from his face with a small butterfly clip, and Izuku can’t help but find the entire ensemble more than a little amusing.

“Right, well, I’ll try not to make it a habit,” Shouto says flatly, arching an eyebrow as he gives Izuku a brief once-over. “You look terrible. Eventful day?”

“I’m sorry, is that your go-to greeting now or something? You said the same thing this morning,” he grumbles, coming around the edge of the sofa. He slips his arms out of his costume so it can hang loosely around his waist, and then drops onto the couch with a pained groan. “Most people start with ‘hi’ or a ‘how are you doing,’ but I
suppose I’m a bit out of touch with social stuff these days.”

“You’re bleeding.”

Izuku wrinkles his nose, “See, that’s not a good greeting either. Like, just say hello. That’s all it takes. Super easy.”

“No,” Shouto says, frowning sharply. “You’re bleeding.”

The concern laden in Shouto’s voice gives him pause. Hesitantly, Izuku reaches up to touch the cut above his eyebrow, fingertips coming away bright red and glistening—no surprise there. Head wounds bleed a lot, so the amount on his fingers isn’t uncommon per se, but he supposes it might be bleeding a bit more than it should be. He watches the fluid drip down his fingers, seeping between the lines of his palm like warm, sticky ink.

Glancing over at Shouto, he shrugs. “I mean, yeah. So?”

“So,” he repeats, rolling his eyes, “it looks deep. And it’s really close to your temple.”

Izuku wipes his hand on his thigh. “It’s probably fine,” he says dismissively. “Not like I’m going to bleed out in the middle of our living room.”

“It’s going to scar.”

“What’s your point?”

Shouto stares at him for several seconds, clearly unimpressed, and Izuku stares right back in silent challenge. A moment later, Shouto lets out a sharp sigh and rolls his eyes, loosening the blanket from around his shoulders and slipping out of the chair.

“Don’t move,” he mutters. He pads toward the bathroom down the hall. “And don’t get blood on anything, either. I mean it. Move to the island or something so you don’t stain the couch.”

“You know I can’t really control that, right?” Izuku calls out, craning his neck as he disappears into the bathroom; Shouto ignores him.

Light spills out into the hallway, casting dancing shadows on the wall as he no doubt rifles through the cabinet below the sink, muttering under his breath the entire time. Izuku hears several choice curses amongst the noise, a few minor gripes and groans, and one half-assed comment about his recklessness that Shouto’s used before on multiple occasions. None of them are particularly creative, however, so he must not be too irritated—just the normal amount.

A moment later, Shouto emerges from the bathroom with a few washcloths, a bowl of warm water, and the first aid kit tucked under his arm. He carefully sets the bowl down on the kitchen island and lays the washcloths next to it, then pops open the kit and begins sorting through various bandages and trauma equipment.

Izuku sighs heavily. He gets up from the couch, joints complaining noisily, and crosses the room to take one of the empty seats at the island. “Listen,” he tells Shouto, “you don’t have to—”

“Butterfly closures or stitches?” he asks, not looking up from the kit.

Izuku blinks. “Uh,” he stammers, frowning. “Neither? A bandage will be fine.”

“Nope.” He shakes his head. “Gotta pick one.”
“Shouto, the cut’s not that deep.”

“It is, actually,” he counters, glancing up through his lashes. His gaze shifts upward, studying Izuku’s forehead. “And you reopen it every time you move your eyebrows, so you’re going to have to keep it shut somehow. So, I’ll ask again: butterfly closures or stitches?”

Izuku glances around the kitchen like he might be able to find the answer hidden somewhere within the pantry or the valences above the window. He bites his cheek. “Um. Well, butterflies don’t like to stay on my face, so… stitches, I guess?”

“Fair enough.” Shouto nods, plucking out a packet of curved, sterile needles, a small bottle of rubbing alcohol, a spool of black surgical thread, and some cotton bandages. He lines the supplies up on the countertop in a neat row, then reaches for one of the washcloths and drenches it in water.

He wrings it dry and holds the rag out for Izuku to take. “You’re on your own from here,” he says, averting his eyes. His brow twitches. “There’s a hand mirror in the kit, so I can hold it for you while you stitch yourself up, but—”

Izuku blinks. “Wait, you aren’t going to do it for me?”

“Nope.” He waves the rag a bit. “Come on, take it. You’re going to bleed all over my kitchen.”

Izuku tries not to balk openly, but he’s fairly sure he’s unsuccessful. “Dude, you know I’m absolute garbage at stitching my own wounds. We established that, like, forever ago,” he reasons, brows drawing together sharply. “Plus, the hospital always has to rip them out again because I never do it right.”

“I have complete faith in you.”

“Shouto.”

“I have… some faith in you.”

“Shouto,” Izuku grits out, spearing him with a pointed look. It’s the kind of no-nonsense tone he only ever uses in the field, or when he’s talking to politicians and wants nothing more than to end the conversation and escape. “Listen to me: if I do this myself, I will mess up my face—like, completely. And probably die or something. You’re my only option here.”

“And I’m telling you that I can’t,” he counters, teeth gritted. He raises his right hand slowly, wiggling his damaged fingers before closing them into a fist. “Whatever you do to your face can’t possibly be any worse than what I would do if you handed me that needle.”

Izuku shrugs. “I trust you.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Well, I do, so deal with it.” Izuku rolls his eyes and tentatively dabs the washcloth against his forehead, hissing a bit through his teeth. “Ow, fuck. Are you going to help me with this or not? We haven’t got all night.”

Shouto looks at him like he’s lost his mind—which, admittedly, maybe he has. “I thought I made it pretty clear that I’m not touching that needle.”

“Yeah, and I thought I made it clear that I trust you anyway.” Izuku reaches forward and picks up the prepackaged needle, holding it out toward Shouto. He waves it around a little. “Come on, do
me up real quick. Won’t take long.”

Shouto sighs. “Izuku—”

“Please,” he asks, voice softening. He offers Shouto a small smile and holds the needle out a little farther in his direction. “Please. I’m asking this as a favor to me. Just this once?”

Shouto glares at the sterile needle, clenching and unclenching his jaw. For a moment, it seems like he’s going to say no, but Izuku sees the way he flexes his right hand at his side, knuckles paling dangerously below damaged skin. Before Izuku can ask again, Shouto exhales sharply through his teeth and snatches the needle from Izuku’s hand, grumbling under his breath.

“Fine,” he spits. Shouto drags the other island chair over, its feet scraping against the tile. “But I swear to god, if you even think about moving while I’m doing this—”

“I won’t, I won’t.” Shouto gives him an I-don’t-believe-you look, and Izuku lowers the rag from his forehead to hold up his hands in mock surrender. “I’m serious! I promise I won’t move. Honestly, I mean it.”

“You say that every time.” Shouto washes his hands at the sink quickly and hops up on the chair, scooting forward until his knees bracket one of Izuku’s legs, almost close enough to touch. From this distance, Izuku can feel the warmth emanating from his body and smell the faint traces of a campfire—a comforting, familiar scent, and one he’s always liked.

Shouto tears open the prepackaged needle and carefully sets it aside, then dons a pair of latex gloves (he struggles with the right one a little more than usual). He lines up the rest of the supplies near his elbow where they’ll be easy to reach, prepping everything he’ll need with clumsy, stilted movements. After a few short minutes and several failed attempts to thread the needle, Shouto exhaled in quiet victory as the thread slips through the eye.

“Finally,” he mumbles, clipping the thread off at a decent length. His head is dipped low and his hair is starting to fall into his face, but Izuku can read the hesitant relief in the bend of his shoulders.

Curved needle in hand, Shouto lifts his head and eyes the gash on Izuku’s forehead with no small amount of trepidation. He bites his lip.

“Are you sure you want me to do this?” he asks. The needle is held in his right hand, clutched between latex-clad fingers that Izuku knows can’t feel a single thing. “I feel like I should have you sign a liability waiver or something. There’s no way this is going to end well.”

Izuku rolls his eyes. “Oh my god, will you quit being a chicken and just do it already? I’m tired. I want to sleep.”

He clamps his mouth shut. “Fine, whatever. Lean down.”

Izuku offers him a wry half-smile, doing as he is told. Carefully, Shouto reaches up with his left hand and angles Izuku’s chin a little lower, eyes narrowed in concentration as he focuses in on the cut above his eyebrow. Up close, Izuku can barely make out the filaments of silver threaded throughout his eyes, subtly hidden behind the gentle slope of his lashes. A flash of white draws Izuku’s attention to Shouto’s mouth as he sinks his teeth into the flesh of his lower lip, deep in thought.

Then comes the pain.
It’s sharp, searing, and so very sudden. Izuku flinches and hisses through his teeth as the needle plunges through the top layer of his skin and emerges on the other side of his cut.

Shouto’s grip on Izuku’s face tightens to keep him still and his expression flattens. “You said you wouldn’t move,” he reminds Izuku.

“I’m not,” he protests, squirming in his seat as his forehead burns and blisters and ow, god, fuck. It’s been a long time since he’s gotten stitches from somebody other than a doctor. “It just… stings. A lot.”

“Sounds like you’re complaining.”

“I’m not complaining, I’m only—” Another stabbing pain tears through his nerve endings, and Izuku grips the armrest of the chair until the metal begins to buckle between his fingers. “Fuck me,” he curses through clenched teeth. “That— oh my god, ow.”

Shouto rolls his eyes, staying focused on his handiwork. “You used to have a much higher pain tolerance than this, you know,” he mutters, pulling the thread through to complete the first stitch.

Izuku glares at him, fisting his hands in his lap so he doesn’t accidentally break the chair. “Why don’t you focus on keeping your sutures straight instead of making fun of me?”

“One of those options sounds much more enjoyable than the other,” he hums. “Think I’ll stick with what I’ve been doing, thanks.”

“I’m going to hit you.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Izuku lifts his eyebrows. “Oh, yeah? Well, let’s—”

Shouto sinks the needle deep beneath skin once again. Abruptly, Izuku swears loudly and latches onto the edge of the countertop as pain shreds his thoughts to ribbons, knuckles whitening under the strain of his grip. The pain fades as the thread pulls through his skin, ebbing in time with his heartbeat.

Izuku glares vehemently at Shouto, who is watching him with an arched eyebrow and nothing more.

“You did that on purpose,” Izuku mutters.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” He shrugs unconvincingly, returning to his work. “Now quit moving and shut up. This is harder than I thought.”

With great effort, Izuku bites back his remarks and instead resorts to translating his feelings into vitriolic expressions, cycling through them one by one every time Shouto puts a little too much pressure on the needle. (There are other times when he doesn’t push hard enough to break the skin, still unused to exerting proper force with his deadened fingers; Izuku forgives him for those little incidents.)

They devolve into comfortable silence as Shouto secures the second stitch, then the third. Shouto taps Izuku’s cheekbone with his pinkie every time he needs him to tilt his head this way or that for a better angle, and Izuku jabs an index finger against Shouto’s kneecap every time he takes a little too long to get the thread through the wound. It’s a silent system—rusted around the edges with neglect, but still familiar despite the number of years it’s gone unused. Different.
Shouto’s in the middle of the fourth stitch, teeth sunken into his lower lip as he scrutinizes the wound closely. Izuku tries not to watch him outright, instead looking around the apartment for something, anything to keep him distracted from the pain.

It’s when Shouto’s forearm accidentally brushes him that Izuku notices it—the undeniable, unusual heat of his skin.

“You’re warm,” Izuku murmurs, frowning as much as he’s able without stretching his wound. Loosening his hold on the countertop, he reaches up and presses the backs of his fingers against Shouto left cheek, keeping his touch feather-light. He doesn’t miss the way Shouto flinches. “Like, really warm.”

Shouto’s gaze flickers down, then back up. “Occupational hazard. Stop talking.”

Izuku lowers his hand hesitantly, still feeling the heat clinging to his skin. “Shouto, you never run this warm.”

“It’s fine.”

“It doesn’t feel fine.”

“I said it’s fine,” Shouto tells him firmly, narrowing his eyes as he goes in for another suture. The muscle in his jaw flutters. “And I swear, if you open your mouth again, I’m giving you an eyebrow piercing. Don’t think I won’t.”

“What’s your body temperature right now?” Izuku asks anyway.

Shouto groans frustratedly, chin dipping toward his chest. “I really don’t think that’s relevant. Stop. Moving.”

“I think it’s very relevant, actually.” Izuku meets his gaze determinedly.

“Well, I suppose that makes one of us,” he replies irritably. “Now if you’ll shut up for one second, I’ll—”

Shouto reaches toward Izuku’s face again, intent on making the final stitch, but Izuku sees it for the diversion it is. Before he can even think to stop himself, his hand shoots upward, fingers encircling Shouto’s wrist with enough gentle strength to hold his hand a few precious centimeters away from its intended destination.

Shouto’s eyes widen and he looks at Izuku. There’s outrage etched into the fine lines of his expression. “Are you out of your fucking mind—?”

“Are you okay?”

It’s out of his mouth before he even realizes it, words ricocheting off the walls like bullets. Shouto’s shoulders slacken and his mouth parts as he stares at Izuku like he’s insane, and his gaze quickly shifts around the apartment as his cheeks color. His bloodstained fingers tighten around the curved needle clutched between his thumb and forefinger.

The question hangs in the air, suspended above their heads. Izuku collects his heartbeats in his fingertips. Counts them twice.

Shouto’s eyes drift closed and he sucks in a deep breath, and Izuku watches as he exhales through his nose in a long, steady stream of vapor that curls away into nothingness almost as quickly as it
appears. His skin cools off in tandem, leaving Izuku’s hand stinging and throbbing in the absence of impossible warmth.

Shouto opens his eyes. He drops his gaze to meet Izuku’s, mouth tightening in a facsimile of a half-smile, or perhaps a partial grimace, and Izuku does his best to keep his doubt hidden someplace deep.

“I’m okay,” Shouto tells him gently. The lines around his eyes tighten imperceptibly. “Really, Izuku. It’s nothing to worry about. I promise.”

There’s something about the set of Shouto’s jaw and the way his mouth thins into a stiff, unyielding line that both seem to beg a thousand different questions—but Izuku knows how to pick his battles. He knows Shouto’s lying through his teeth. He isn’t sure how, but he knows, dammit.

In the end, Izuku nods faintly and releases Shouto’s wrist, dropping his hand back into his own lap where he flexes his fingers over and over again as if doing so will rid his body of Shouto’s warmth any faster.

Another day, he promises himself, and resolves to keep an eye on things a little more closely than before. Not today, not today.

Shouto straightens his shoulders and nods tightly, offering Izuku a faint smile in thanks. He leans back in to work on the final few stitches—needle through skin, the sharp slide of thread, pull tight. Pain.

A simple process, but one that never gets any easier.

Shouto’s working on the positioning for the last suture when Izuku breaks the silence. “How did your morning with Keiji go?” he asks softly, eyeing the glowing clock on the stove across the kitchen. 1:32 AM.

Shouto pauses for a brief second, joints seizing up in surprise. Izuku wonders if he’s said something wrong, but Shouto seems to snap out of his surprise just as quickly.

“It was…” Shouto trails, frowning. “Not great.”

Izu looks up. “Not great?”

“Not great,” he confirms. Shouto pointedly avoids his gaze, giving every ounce of his attention to the wound on Izuku’s forehead.

Izu hums lowly, trying not to let the abject curiosity and concern show on his face. Shouto continues to work in silence, accompanied only by the sound of the thread noisily zipping through his wound stitch by stitch. It sounds so much louder against the backdrop of morbid implication Izuku refuses to fracture.

Which makes it all the more surprising when Shouto eventually murmurs, “We broke up, if you really want to know.”

Izu’s eyes widen and he spasms in his seat. “You what?”

Shouto hisses and flicks Izuku’s cheek, glaring fiercely down at him. “For fuck’s sake, Izuku, stop moving so much. I’m tempted to stitch your mouth shut.”

Izu ignores him. “You broke up?” he sputters, horrified. “Wh—why? And all this time, you’ve
just been—I mean, you seem—"

“Fine?” Shouto arches an eyebrow.

Izuku swallows his words with great difficulty. “Yeah,” he says, averting his eyes. “You seem… fine.”

Shouto hums, slipping the needle through Izuku’s skin one last time. There’s a cadence to the action—a sort of gentle swing and lift, like a weighted pendulum at the bottom of its own beat. Izuku leans into it, relying on the constancy of pain to see him through to his next thought.

“Fine is relative, Izuku,” Shouto murmurs a moment later, pulling the thread taut. He glances sidelong. “You of all people should know that.”

It stings, but it stings less than his stitches. Izuku drops his head in shame as far as Shouto will allow.

“I’m sorry,” Izuku tells him. The inside of his mouth tastes like blood, but he fights around it to focus his words a little better. “I know… I know that you really liked him. You always talked about him when we were on patrol, and every time you did, you—"

“Stop. Please.”

Izuku’s mouth snaps shut. With fluid, practiced movements, Shouto ties the suture off and snips the thread with a small pair of surgical scissors, setting them both aside without a word. He drops the needle in a small bowl of rubbing alcohol and Izuku watches the blood dissipate in a small cloud, turning the liquid a light rosy pink against pale porcelain.

The rest is all perfunctory—antiseptic, gauze, a bandage to cover the stitches, tape to keep everything in place. Shouto doesn’t look at Izuku once throughout the entire process, his focus singular and unyielding, and if his hands tremble a little more than usual, Izuku doesn’t allow himself to notice. Shouto peels off his latex gloves to reveal that damaged, frostbitten skin that haunts them both these days, and Izuku fights the urge to apologize—though for what, he isn’t sure.

When he’s done, Shouto sits back in his seat and looks over Izuku’s face, expression thoughtful. Izuku turns his face into the light. “Well, how do I look?”

“Like you have a bandage on your forehead.”

“I’m talking about the stitches, dumbass.”

“Oh. They’re not terrible, I guess.” Shouto tilts his head to one side. “It’s not my best work, but it looks better than I expected. Pretty straight.”

“Pretty straight?”

Shouto’s eyes narrow. “I offered you a liability waiver and you didn’t take it. Fuck off.”

“All right, all right, fair point.” Izuku huffs a laugh and reaches up to gingerly touch the gauze taped to his forehead. It stings a little, but the pressure has definitely lessened. “I suppose as long as you didn’t sew a lightning bolt into my face, we’re probably fine.”

Shouto sucks air through his teeth, wincing. “Ooh,” he exhales. “Yeah, now that you mention it, I may have done a little—"
“Oh my god, please tell me you didn’t sew a lightning bolt onto my face.”

Shouto bites his bottom lip, the corners of his mouth quirking infinitesimally. “No,” he replies, shaking his head. “But I sort of wish I had.”

“Asshole.” Izuku huffs in amusement and purposely bumps Shouto’s knee as he stands up from his chair, stretching out his stiff, sore muscles with a languid yawn. Sleep is finally starting to claim Izuku in pieces, and the clock reads nearly two in the morning.

“Coming to bed soon?” Izuku asks, rolling his bad shoulder with a faint wince. “It’s late and, like. I don’t know. Sleep cycles are a thing, I guess.”

“It’s early, actually,” Shouto corrects, standing up from his own chair. He pushes both of them underneath the island and begins repacking supplies into the first aid kit where he found them with careful, precise movements. “I’ll finish cleaning up here and head to bed. Might be able to sleep now.”

“You weren’t able to sleep earlier?”

He shakes his head. “Figured I’d wait up for you instead. Better use of my time.”

Izuku rubs at his jaw. “Right,” he says, glancing around the kitchen at the disastrous trail of carbon-fiber plate armor and assorted costume scraps he left all over the apartment. He leans down to pick up one of his leg guards, tucking it under his arm. “Well, can I help with—?”

Shouto waves him off, picking up the bowl of soiled water and dumping it in the sink. “Go to bed, Izuku. I’ll handle this.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. Besides, you’re running on less sleep than I am, so…” he trails, shrugging. “It’s fine. Go get some rest, I’m right behind you.”

Izuku nods, ducking down to grab his other leg guard and one of his black gloves from the floor. “Thanks, Shouto,” he says warmly, turning toward the hallway. “Don’t stay up too late, okay?”

At the sink, Shouto flips on the faucet and runs his good fingers beneath the spray until it begins to steam, then waves his free hand over his shoulder. “Don’t mention it,” he replies without turning around.

Shouto cuts a lissome figure in the soft light that illuminates the kitchen in warm, golden hues, and Izuku takes a moment to appreciate the simplicity of it all—the hiss of the hot water, the pale blue valences above the windows, the small hanging basket of fruit beneath the cabinets above the countertop. Shouto’s hair has started to fall from its clip, and his shirt has started to slide inexplicably to the left, exposing the sloping juncture of his neck and shoulder. There’s one sock on his right foot—yellow this time, and fuzzy. It’s perfectly domestic in every way, and just as equally impossible for all the exact same reasons.

(Izuku also sees the sagging line of Shouto’s shoulders and the way his hand trembles as he reaches for the faucet to adjust the water temperature, crescent moons pressed into his palms like tiny, imperceptible tattoos. His socked foot taps nervously against the tiles with no particular rhythm. There’s something strangely brittle about him in this moment—caught in this trapped-time instant, mingling with the witching hour, somewhere in between real and not-quite-real that’s never been defined by either one of them.)
Izuku finds himself lingering at the mouth of the darkened hallway, arms full of stiff carbon-fiber plating that clanks quietly with every breath he takes. He memorizes the outline of Shouto’s body in front of the kitchen sink—the length of his hair, the angle of his jaw, the way the light catches on the curve of his cheekbone—and thinks long and hard before he finally opens his mouth.

“Shouto?” he asks softly.

Shouto reaches for the faucet handle and cuts the water stream down to a quiet trickle, bracing his hands against the edge of the sink. He angles his face slightly to the left. The light catches his profile at just the right angle, and Izuku knows he’s listening.

“Earlier this morning,” Izuku starts, tracing his tongue over a metallic-tasting split in the center of his bottom lip. Nerves eat at him from the inside. “After I left, did you ever…” he trails, shifting his weight. “Um, did you— ?”

“Did I ask Keiji about what happened at the hospital?” Shouto finishes, raising one eyebrow.


Shouto inhales slowly, shoulders rising and falling as he contemplates an answer. The sink drips steadily in front of him, the city breathes outside the nearby window, and Izuku tries not to crawl out of his own skin with every passing second as he waits.

After a moment, Shouto turns back to the sink and reaches for the faucet. His hands no longer shake.

“No,” he says, adjusting the waterflow to a medium speed as he washes off the curved black suture needle and surgical scissors with a clean washcloth.

Izuku’s brows knit. “Why not?”

Shouto rinses the needle off, setting it on the counter to his left to dry. The muscles in his back shift beneath the thin material of his t-shirt in symphony, each one catching the light and molding the shadows to their liking as he washes each tool with precision.

“The opportunity to bring it up never presented itself in our… discussion,” he says carefully, setting the scissors out to dry next to the needle. His damaged index finger runs over the sharp side of the blades, dragging slightly against the polished steel without hesitation. He shrugs. “Plus, past a certain point, I didn’t think it mattered.”

Izuku nods, turning Shouto’s answer over in his mind until he’s examined every angle, every crevice, and slowly but surely his lungs begin to fill with helium as the implication bleeds and sets like a stain. Shouto notices his silence, glancing back over his shoulder with his eyebrows raised in silent question.

“I’m sorry if that wasn’t the answer you were looking for,” he says, but Izuku shakes his head quickly.

“No, no, no, that’s not it at all.” A sudden, breathy laugh escapes him, unbidden, and he doesn’t care enough to contain it as relief sweeps him in a wave. “I’m not— I mean, that’s not what I expected, admittedly, but… I think I’m okay with that.” More than okay.

Shouto blinks thoughtfully for a moment as he considers Izuku’s words, then nods. He turns back to the sink.
“I’m glad,” he says softly. It’s hard to hear his voice over the rush of water from the faucet, but Izuku swears he hears strains of relief packed tightly between his words, tying each one with curled ribbons of promise. “You should get some rest while you still can. You have patrol again tomorrow.”

“Right,” he breathes, glancing down the hallway toward their rooms. He rocks back and forth on his heels. “Well, good night, Shouto. Try not to stay up forever, I guess?”

“I won’t. And again, it’s good morning,” he corrects, glancing over his shoulder. One side of his mouth quirks up. “If you’re going to say it, you might as well say it right.”

Izuku smiles, rolling his eyes. “Oh, whatever. Good morning, Shouto,” he emphasizes, then lifts his eyebrows expectantly. “Better?”

Shouto hums. “Much better.”

Chapter End Notes

It's all uphill from here, guys. Hooray.

Again, please don't send me hate for this chapter, either on this platform or any other. I started planting the seeds for Keiji's move to England in, like, chapter 29 or something like that, so this was not a spontaneous decision on my part. Y'all just didn't notice my little hints. If Shouto had brought up Izuku's question during his discussion with Keiji, their breakup would've felt like it happened over Izuku and not their differences, which wasn't what I wanted from this. In order to progress healthily, Shouto and Keiji needed to break up on their own terms. Izuku couldn't have entered into it.

Tumblr | Twitter | CuriousCat | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist
Chapter Notes

It's the anniversary of Lucy's death. Prepare yourselves accordingly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time, Shouto knows, isn’t a constant thing for anybody, no matter how steadily those seconds pass behind paper-thin glass watch faces and half-shattered phone screens. Time is cruel in its own insidious, irreversible way, and there’s never been anything in the world strong enough to slow it down.

Shouto and Izuku exist in the empty spaces between blaring alarm clocks, late-night reruns of Jeopardy, and farmer’s market visits that almost feel familiar if they squint. It’s a balanced sort of being that Shouto can only attribute to the static equilibrium that’s enveloped their apartment since that day Keiji came over two weeks ago. They orbit each other in sync for the first time in—well, years—and Shouto willingly allows himself to be pressed into place like a puzzle piece, fitted against the contour of Izuku’s edge as neatly and unobtrusively as possible.

With as much free time as Shouto’s been given by way of medical leave, he takes it upon himself to maintain their shared living space to the best of his ability. He’s always been a neater-than-average person, and although he’s well-known for neglecting his laundry hamper for distressing amounts of time, he prides himself on his organization and attention to detail when it comes to other aspects of their cohabitation. It’s the little things that seem to make the most difference throughout the day, he determines. Whether it be making sure the kettle is ready by the time Izuku emerges from his room every morning, keeping the fridge fully stocked (because nobody in the entire fucking world has a caloric intake requirement quite like Izuku’s), or setting the first aid kit out for those nights when he inevitably comes home from patrol a little more bruised and battered than usual, Shouto does his part to make sure everything goes as smoothly as possible.

Playing the part of the domestically-inclined roommate gives him something to focus on in the wake of his breakup with Keiji; he mourns the loss of his relationship privately, drowning his sorrows in Swiffer dusters, trashy novels not meant for intelligent human consumption, and grocery lists that often cover two entire pages because Izuku simply eats that much. If Shouto stagnates, he thinks, and if he thinks, he wallows. It’s far preferable to drown himself in menial tasks until his melancholy can run its course.

However, with little left to keep him entertained outside visits to Inko’s uptown apartment and his excruciating physical therapy appointments at the hospital, Shouto finds himself staring at the date near the top of his phone screen more often than not. Dread and apprehension hold him hostage as that number climbs ever higher with each new sunrise. There’s nothing he can do about the inexorable slipstream of time that drags him forward hour by hour, but that doesn’t mean he can’t fight it in every way he knows how—it just takes a little more effort than it usually does.

Despite all of this, the shift settles. It’s subtle, sitting there just below the surface where Shouto can’t quite make out all of its distinct, jagged edges, but he feels it in the air of the apartment—an impossible weight that reminds him of gravity, keeping his feet anchored against something solid every time he feels most unsteady.
If not for the date on the calendar, Shouto would almost dare to call it comfortable.

April 20th, 2026

Azami bursts into the living room with a broken sob, skirts fluttering as she drops her purse to the floor of her apartment. Her hair is tousled, there’s pink lipstick smeared near the corner of her mouth, and she’s breathing hard. All at once, the music meets its crescendo and focus suddenly sharpens—there’s a heavy diamond ring on her fourth finger, glittering in the harsh light.

Shouto sucks in a sharp breath. Next to him on the couch, Inko shakes her head with a disappointed sigh and returns to crocheting.

“Eiko!” Azami cries out, tearing through her apartment as she searches high and low for any trace of her best friend, but the drawers in her bedroom have already been ransacked and the cabinets in the kitchen sit ajar, pilfered thoroughly. Eiko must’ve packed in a hurry.

“No, no, no, please, don’t let him be gone,” Azami chants under her breath, tears already collecting in her eyes. She raises her trembling fists to the sky and the camera zooms in on her face; one of her false eyelashes is in the process of detaching. “Please, he’s all I have left!”

Shouto’s heart pounds, threatening to burst out of his chest. He curls his fingers into the skein of yarn in his lap and fights to regulate his pulse, but he’s only partially successful.

The scene fades slowly, bleeding into the split screen that always comes at the end of each episode; the credits roll rapidly on one side, and a commercial for the newest weight loss supplement plays on the other. He has to wait until Monday for the next one, but it might as well be seven fucking years.

He feels the denial cresting in the pit of his stomach, and he scowls at nothing in particular. Eiko wouldn’t just leave. He loves Azami, dammit, just like he loved Mirai before she got the heart transplant surgery and forgot how she felt about him. Eiko hasn’t had a single romantic break in two seasons, and he deserves better than this.

“A little more slack, dear,” Inko tells him, tugging on the length of yarn between them.

Shouto loosens his fingers from the skein of thick, blue angora yarn. “Right. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. I’m upset, too.” She loops the yarn over her crochet hook in a slip stitch, fingers flying. She purses her lips. “I suppose I had more faith in Azami. I didn’t think there was any way she’d settle for Tenchi after that evil twin nonsense from last week.”

“Eiko is clearly the better choice,” he grumbles, slumping back against the couch. “And yeah, how can she overlook the twin thing? She’s going to be so paranoid if she goes through with the wedding.”

“Oh, I agree, but did you see the size of that diamond?” She sighs dreamily, pausing between a series of chain stitches. “True love or not, even I’d have trouble turning down that many carats.”

He turns to look at her, betrayed. “Inko.”
“What?” She laughs, shrugging and returning to her crochet. “If an attractive, successful man asked you to marry him with a ring like that, can you honestly tell me you’d say no?”

“Well, I like to think I have principles, so, yeah. I’d probably turn him down.”

She tsks, shaking her head. “Oh, sweetie, nobody has principles on daytime television.”

Shouto scoffs and turns the skein over a few times, letting out a little more yarn. On the television, a rerun of General Consensus starts up, and Shouto tries his hardest to pretend he’s only half interested in what’s going on between the characters. (Apparently, the homeless girl Maggie accidentally tries to murder at the soup kitchen is actually her long-lost daughter, but she’s mute and terminally ill. There’s also something about a German doctor showing up after he was presumed dead, and… brain fever is involved? Somehow. He starts to lose track after the first commercial break.)

As time drifts between campy episodes, Shouto takes solace in the repetitive motion of unspooling yarn while Inko crochets row after row of her blanket; the show rolls quietly in the background, filling their silence with drama ridiculous enough to be utterly captivating.

During the commercial breaks, he allows his eyes to wander the apartment. Fuzzy images of Izuku line the walls by the dozen, and Shouto always seems to find new ones every time he visits. He spies snapshots of Izuku at birthday parties and playgrounds when he was small, wearing All Might costumes that hang off his frame like billowy parachutes; he’s all baby teeth and bright smiles, skinny arms and scraped knees, and Shouto finds himself smiling at the sight of it.

There’s another picture over by the mantle that’s a bit more recent: it’s Izuku the day he received his first medal for one of his rescues in Tokyo back when he was barely nineteen. His costume is an older, clunkier style, his smile is sunnier, and he’s missing a few scars—the ones in his eyebrow and the corner of his mouth, specifically—but everything else looks almost exactly the same.

Letting out a slow exhale, Shouto turns back to the television, but his eye catches on another photo that’s propped up on a small side table near the mouth of the hallway. One corner of the wooden frame is splintered and the glass fits oddly over the photo as if pulled from a different frame. Even from here, he can see it’s one of Izuku’s wedding pictures—a beautiful, sepia close-up shot of him holding Lucy’s face, smiling down at her with nothing but warm, unconditional adoration in the soft curve of his lips. Her hair is braided with full-bloom flowers, pinned perfectly in place, and Shouto can see the flushed roses in her cheeks despite the waxen quality of the image.

His stomach twists. Something about the photo doesn’t feel real, though he can’t figure out what. It’s a piece of trapped time locked away behind ill-fitting glass, the moment offset inexplicably from the rest of reality like a canary trapped in a cage of its own design. It tenuously toes the line between two distinct realities, refusing to intersect the way it’s meant to.

Death is funny that way, he supposes. It’s never quite real, even when it’s staring you in the face as plainly as an old photo in a broken frame—it’s only real whenever it’s least convenient.

“I found it on the floor a few weeks after he moved home.”

Inko’s voice rips him from his reveries, and mild mortification floods his cheeks with startling heat. She’s looking at the wedding photo with a thoughtful expression on her face, but she doesn’t skip a single stitch, fingers moving as if on autopilot.

“I salvaged the frame,” she continues blithely, shrugging, “but the glass had to be replaced. Never could find a piece that fit it quite right.”
Shouto’s cheeks sizzle, and he drops his gaze. “I’m sorry,” he blurs, though he has no idea why he’s apologizing. “I didn’t mean to stare.”

“It’s all right, dear.” Inko casts off another row and the fine lines around her mouth tighten imperceptibly. “Izuku doesn’t like it when I keep it out, so I’m glad it’s getting some exposure, at least. Photos are meant to be seen.”

Shouto fiddles with the yarn, eyeing the colorless flowers woven throughout Lucy’s hair. Her blissful smile is a far cry from the horror-stricken expression he remembers seeing splashed across news channels and headlines for weeks after her death—the expression that never fully left his mind, even after the dust had settled and society resumed its clip. He remembers city-wide memorials for the Symbol of Peace’s wife with thousands upon thousands of civilians in attendance, handfuls of two-hour documentaries about the disastrous event, magazine retrospectives written by faceless strangers, and morning talk show hosts who all seemed to think that a thirty-second moment of silence actually did a damned thing for anybody.

There’s nothing worse than losing ownership of your own grief when the rest of the world involves itself out of a sense of twisted moral obligation. Shouto knows that better than anybody.

“Why do you keep it out?” he asks, staring down at the ball of yarn between his hands. The fibers catch on his calluses and tangle with the tips of his fingers. He clears his throat awkwardly. “I’m sorry if that’s rude, but… I don’t know. It seems like a lot of extra effort to hide it every time he visits.”

Inko smiles over at him, but her eyes glimmer with bitter melancholy. “Children are effort, Shouto. That’s the burden of parenthood, no matter how old they get. And since it’s my son we’re talking about, I think that should count for double.”

Shouto bites his lip. “He can be a handful sometimes.”

“Sometimes?”

“Most of the time,” he amends.

Inko snorts softly, smiling down at her lap as she nods in agreement. Her fingers gradually start to slow, and she turns to study the photograph across the room, gaze softening as her fingers finally stop between half-loops and single stitches.

“Everyone copes with loss a little differently.” she tells him softly, shrugging. “For me, I like to see her face, but every time I mention her name around Izuku, he either changes the subject or tries to jump out a window.” Her brow knits in a sharp frown. “I don’t think I’ll ever understand that boy’s problem with doors.”

“Harder to follow someone when they leave through a window,” he replies. “Standard disengagement tactic for heroes in tight spots. He used to do it at school sometimes.”

“Are you telling me my son skipped class?”

“Whenever we had a test he forgot to study for, yeah. Less risky than running into a teacher in the hallway.” Inko still looks remarkably unamused, however, so he hurries to add, “But he only did it two or three times, I swear. And he always came back.”

She purses her lips, eyes narrowing. “Interesting.”

“You did not hear that from me,” he emphasizes. “Please. I have to live with him.”
She waves him off. “Of course not, dear. My lips are sealed.”

He mumbles a half-formed thank you, dear god, thank you under his breath and tries not to think about Inko’s words as they bounce between the corners of his mind. Shouto twists a loose piece of yarn around his damaged index finger until his skin turns bone-white under the pressure, then loosens the string all at once and watches as the deep, deadly violet shade of his skin returns much too slowly for his liking.

“He’s mentioned her once or twice to me, I think,” he informs Inko quietly, and guilt instantly spears him through the chest like a javelin. She looks over in surprise, and he rushes to add, “Just passing comments though. Nothing substantial.”

“Really?” Her expression is wrought in skepticism.

Shouto nods. “Yeah, a few weeks back he told me how they were looking at a school in America for Lucy’s doctorate degree or something.”

She hums, nodding thoughtfully. “Well, I suppose I shouldn’t be too surprised he’s started opening up a bit,” she says after a moment. She aims a small, grateful smile his way. “This is you we’re talking about, after all.”

Shouto blinks. “I… don’t know what you mean by that.”

“Nothing bad, dear.” She smiles wider, and it draws out her dimples—the exact same ones her son inherited. “Only that he trusts you. He always has.”

They’re small words, insignificant enough to fit within scant syllables, but Shouto feels each one in his solar plexus. His grip on the skein tightens, fingers sinking deeply between the tangled strands of yarn until he half-worries he’ll slip into the mass of fibers and lose himself forever.

Trust.

It’s not a word he’s used to hearing.

April 21\textsuperscript{st}, 2026

The early light of dawn dapples a green-gold mosaic across the produce stands that line the riverfront, daylight diffusing through the leaves of trees as they undulate overhead in gentle, rolling waves. It’s the type of tranquility that’s rarely found this far within city limits, and Shouto allows himself to find solace in the familiarity of it all. From the fluttering, striped awnings to the handwritten signs advertising low prices on cabbage and deals on fresh-baked bread, the farmer’s market is like a breath of fresh air in Shouto’s lungs, filling him with something he’s sorely missed for far too long.

Plus, it’s Tuesday. He’s always been fond of Tuesdays.

Tugging the edge of his beanie down a little farther, Shouto eyes a nearby stand that’s full to bursting with fruits and vegetables, and in the process his sunglasses slide down the bridge of his nose just far enough to be annoying. It’s not much of a disguise, admittedly, but Momo had advised looking “as inconspicuous as possible” for his supposed safety, and this was the best he could do.
on short notice. As long as nobody sees his hair or his fucked-up hand, he should be okay. Probably.

An incredulous huff pulls him from his thoughts.

“Oh, what the hell— three daikon?”

Shouto glances over his shoulder. Izuku’s holding the list in one hand, frowning down at the cramped writing that fills the page from edge to edge; a small basket is looped over his other arm, waiting to be filled. He’s disguised even less effectively than Shouto is, clad in nothing more than a thin t-shirt and joggers, zip hoodie thrown over one shoulder. He’s wearing sunglasses as well, but he’d hardly made an effort to hide his hair before they left. That distinct green shade is… well, distinct, and based on a few of the looks he’s receiving from passersby, he’s not fooling anyone.

When he feels Shouto’s gaze, he looks up with annoyance etched into his features.

“This,” he says, pointing to one of the bullet points near the bottom. “Right there. It says we need three.”

Shouto arches an eyebrow. “Yes, it does. Congratulations on your ability to read.”

“But why do we need three of them?” Izuku scowls down at the list. “I hate daikon, you know that.”

“I need it for a recipe.” Shouto shrugs, pushing his sunglasses up his nose again. “And I need three because I’m making a triple batch. Somebody will eat us out of house and home otherwise, and I’d like to avoid that, if I can.”

Izuku recoils, offended. “I don’t eat that much.”

“You do, actually.”

He groans, dropping his head back in exasperation. “Oh my god, whatever. We’re not arguing about this again. I still don’t like daikon.”

“And I still don’t care,” Shouto says, slipping between the crowd to approach a stand selling assorted lentils in large baskets. He points at the leftmost basket full of red lentils. “Quarter kilo, please,” he tells the elderly stall owner, who nods and smiles pleasantly.

Izuku comes up behind Shouto’s left shoulder as the old man fills a small plastic bag with the lentils, weighing it carefully every time he adds another scoop. Izuku lets out a weary sigh that Shouto feels against the back of his neck.

“First daikon, now lentils?” Izuku asks. He shakes his head. “It’s like you want me to die an early death.”

“Well, you destroyed my favorite cashmere cardigan in the wash. Murder is the most merciful option on the table right now.”

Izuku huffs a laugh that Shouto feels all the way down the length of his spine. Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, he accepts the bag of lentils from the merchant and pays for them, mindful to hand the money over with his left hand. Turning around, he sets the lentils in the basket hooked over Izuku’s forearm, then jerks his chin toward the other produce stands.

“Come on, let’s keep moving,” he says, tugging at the edge of his beanie again to make sure it
hasn’t slipped. “And may I remind you that it’s your job to carry the basket, not to criticize. You have no real power here.”

Izuku presses the list against his chest in mock horror. “Oh, I see how it is. You only wanted me along for manual labor.” He tsks softly, shaking his head. “For a minute there I actually thought you valued my company.”

Shouto rolls his eyes. “You know that’s not why I invited you.”

“Oh?” He arches an eyebrow. “Well then, what’s the reason?”

Lie, he hears in the back of his mind. Lie, lie, lie.

Shouto bites his tongue until the familiar taste of copper floods his senses, and his words fight against each other, twisting and shattering between the spaces of his teeth. He knows there are a thousand different truths he could open up within himself, given a sharp edge and a good enough reason.

What’s the reason?

It’s because it’s Izuku’s day off. It’s because the fridge is empty again, and they need something for dinner tonight. It’s because Shouto didn’t want to leave Izuku in the apartment alone on the day directly before the anniversary of his wife’s death. It’s because everything’s been so fucking normal for the past few days that everything else in the world seems distinctly abnormal in comparison. Save for the wedding band on the fourth finger of his left hand, Izuku has been acting like he’s completely, utterly fine.

Something is wrong. Not knowing what it is only serves to scare Shouto more.

Shouto sucks in a deep breath, swallowing back the taste of blood. “Right, well,” he says, shifting his weight from foot to foot and shrugging, “I needed you to keep track of the list. Figured that was obvious.”

Izuku’s eyebrows lift into his hairline as incredulous amusement overtakes his entire face, and Shouto fights to withhold a sigh of relief.

“Wow,” Izuku marvels, laughing in mock, stunned offense. He shakes his head. “See if I ever come to the farmer’s market with you again, asshole.”

“You’re so fucking dramatic,” he mutters, rolling his eyes. He nods toward the rest of the farmer’s market along the riverside, bumping Izuku on the shoulder. “Can we go already? I want to get home before I’m recognized.”

“Fine,” he concedes, following close behind Shouto as they slip through the crowd. “But just know I’m only doing this because you asked so nicely—and by nicely, I mean you were kind of a dick about it.”

“Yeah, totally didn’t need the clarification.”

“Just making sure.”

They fall back into a familiar rhythm with one another, meandering through the crowded farmer’s market like everything is fine. Their basket gradually fills with brightly-colored produce, and if anyone recognizes Shouto along the way, they don’t make a big deal about it. Izuku continually scans the crowd as Shouto shops; he’s tall enough to see over the heads of most of the people here,
thankfully, and while they’re not expecting something bad, it never hurts to be careful. Paranoia rests easily on their shoulders these days.

The sun rises above the trees as Shouto and Izuku peruse fresh leeks and leafy bunches of kale, hand-preserved jams and baked goods that make their mouths water in sheer anticipation. At every turn, Shouto keeps Izuku in his peripherals. Watching—waiting. Izuku’s a ticking timebomb woven together with the threads of his own machinations, stitched and pressed into something lethal.

Shouto wonders how much time they have left.

__________________________

April 23rd, 2026

Shouto stares at the ceiling of his bedroom, fingers laced over his stomach as the rain pours steadily outside his window. Water sluices down the half-opened glass in thick sheets, warping the amber-hued streetlamps into unsteady shapes that tremble in tempo with his pulse. The alarm clock on his nightstand burns bright red in the darkness—1:23 AM.

Sleep is beyond his reach tonight. Down the hall behind a closed door, Izuku sleeps soundly in his bed; Shouto hasn’t heard a single sound from him since they both turned in for the night—no creaking floorboards, no telltale squeak of door hinges, no muffled murmurs of sobs. The only thing he hears is the fall of rain outside his window and the sound of his own breathing, tempered with the quiet sizzle of sweat against his too-hot skin.

He tries to link his ideas together with pushpins and thread, but no matter how he tackles it, nothing about this past week makes any goddamned sense. Izuku should have been a wreck—an emotional, bitter wreck packed full to bursting with regret and a thousand other different flavors of dread. Shouto turns the idea over in his head until he’s thinking in four dimensions, bent over backwards and turned inside out, but no matter how hard he tries, the pieces simply don’t fit together.

Either Izuku has coped with his loss or he’s lying through his teeth. There’s no third option.

A noise in the hallway catches Shouto’s attention somewhere between one thought and another. It’s a small sound, almost inaudible—the soft shuffle of socked feet, the familiar squeak of a door hinge. Izuku’s door, he knows. The hero’s footsteps are hesitant against the hardwood and faintly uneven as he lumbers down the hallway toward the kitchen.

What’s he doing up this early?

Maybe he’s getting tea or a glass of water. Maybe he’s hungry. Maybe he’s planning on coming back to bed in five minutes after a successful raid in the kitchen pantry.

Maybe he’s not fine, he hears in the back of his mind. The voice is thin, traitorous, and truthful. Shouto pushes it to the side.

For several minutes, he doesn’t move from his spot in the center of his bed, limbs splayed wide amongst twisted bedsheets. He waits and listens for Izuku’s inevitable return to his room, counting the seconds on the tip of his tongue where it’s pressed up against the roof of his mouth and the backs of his teeth.

Five minutes pass, then ten. Twenty minutes. Half an hour.
He’s not fine, whispers the voice again.

Gritting his teeth, Shouto throws the covers back and stumbles out of bed, fumbling for the ties on his sweatpants to make sure they stay up around his hips as he staggers toward the door. He pulls his hair into a small, ratty knot at the base of his neck and ignores the short pieces that come loose to frame his face.

The hallway is dark and empty when he steps across the threshold of his bedroom. The space stretches out in front of him, all sharp edges and infinite shadows in every crevice, every corner, every empty, abandoned space, and Izuku’s open doorway carves a void into the pale, unblemished sheetrock to his right. A few wall-mounted photographs gleam in the darkness, their stock images painted in muted shades of quicksilver and ash. The hardwood floor is cold beneath his feet.

At the far end of the hallway, a small flickering light plays over the furniture Shouto can see—the backs of the island stools, a half-filled bookshelf, the coat hooks by the front door. The sound of bit-crushed laughter and tinny conversation floats down the hall on imperceptible swells of silence, but Shouto can’t make any sense of what he hears. There’s only rain, the rush of blood in his ears, the creaking pressure of feet versus floorboards—noise.

Swallowing his reservation, Shouto takes the first step, then another. He’s choking on his heart as he nears the end of the hallway, but he clenches his fists. Now or never, now or never. Fear stuffed into the end of his fingers, nerves tied tightly around his aorta, he turns the corner and braces himself.

The living room is dark, illuminated only by the patchy moonlight rippling through the deluge of rain that coats the windows in thick sheets of silver, but the outline of Izuku’s broad shoulders is clear where he sits in the center of the couch. Shouto can barely make out the back of his head, hair sleep-mussed and tangled, the wide spread of his knees, and a mug of something on the coffee table in front of him. No coaster.

Only when Shouto steps closer does he see the phone in Izuku’s hand, images flicking behind the cracked screen faster than he can track them. The screen casts blue-white light across the sharp planes of his weary face, highlighting the despondent shadows that mar his features like heavy bruises, and there’s exhaustion scrawled between the fine lines of his empty expression. A stiff curl is set in his fingers and saltwater sorrow slips between his long lashes, but Izuku stares at the video with an unflinching attentiveness that snaps Shouto’s heartstrings one by one.

Shouto watches over Izuku’s shoulder as the video pans left, and he tries not to vomit at what he sees: Lucy stands in the living room of that wretched New York apartment, lingering near one of those ridiculously-sized windows. She’s wearing a beautiful dress with strappy shoes that only make her long legs seem miles longer, and she’s covering her face, glaring through her fingers at Izuku as he approaches with the camera. The diamond on her left ring finger glitters in the ambient city lights.

There’s something about hearing the voice of a dead person that chills your blood, even if you’re incapable of feeling cold anymore. Shouto stifles a shiver.

“Stop,” Lucy whines in the video, turning away from the camera despite the way Izuku follows her with a laugh. She momentarily swats at him, groaning. “Oh my god, you know we’re going to be late, right?”

“I somehow doubt they’ll give our table away.” Izuku’s voice is far too close to the device, coming out in a warble of solid sound that grates like rusted metal. His scarred hand reaches out into view as he attempts to pry her hands away from her face. “C’mon, Luce, turn around and let
“Go away.”

“Please? I just want to record how nice you look tonight. I promise it’s for a good cause.”

She drops her hands to her side, arching a skeptical, perfectly-plucked brow. “Oh, really? And what cause might that be?”

“The ‘Husbands with Pretty Wives’ cause, obviously.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Well, you have now.” Izuku huffs a laugh, camera shaking with the sound. “Come on,” he implores. “Look into the camera and say ‘happy anniversary’ or something. Gotta mark the occasion for my mom’s sake.”

She pointedly looks into the camera, green eyes sparkling like broken bottles. Her lipstick is a soft, ashen rose color and the redness of her cheeks reminds Shouto of fresh apples. Something about the smooth skin of her cheekbones and the ephemeral quality of her voice (she’s dead she’s dead you saw her die everyone saw her die) makes her seem inexplicably waxen in the pixelated video. She’s edged in setting sunlight, ethereal, transient, temporal—a porcelain figurine come back to life, hand-painted in flesh tones and sewn with flaxen filaments. Impermanent, but no less living for it.

A shaky inhale draws Shouto’s attention back to Izuku where he sits on the couch. Despite the darkness enveloping the apartment so absolutely, he doesn’t miss the shimmering, singular tear track on Izuku’s left cheek.

“Happy anniversary, dork,” says Lucy, lips curving sweetly as she says it. Her gaze flicks upward a moment later, and her smile morphs into something more exasperated. Teeth flashing, she gestures toward the door. “Now can you turn the stupid camera off? We’re going to be so late—”

Laughing, Izuku fumbles with the camera. Shouto can hear his smile through the noisy microphone scrapes and warbled sound bytes—it’s bright and effortless as the sun in the background of the shot that edges Lucy’s curved figure in liquid gold leaf.

The video ends a moment later. Somehow, that’s the realest thing about it.

Izuku’s thumb shifts slowly, and he locks his phone with shaky, uncoordinated movements. His expression darkens in tandem with his screen, profile outlined in ashen light.

“I’m sorry,” Izuku whispers without turning around. He sniffs, rubbing at his face with a single swipe of his forearm, and clears his throat. “I, uh… didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“You didn’t.”

Stepping around the armrest of the couch, Shouto sinks into the empty space on Izuku’s right and pulls his knees up to his chest. Izuku nods numbly but doesn’t say anything, and silence descends like a gossamer slip-sheet. Somewhere between the scant spaces of their breath, a scale sits in perfect balance.

He offers no words, no conversation in lieu of the comfortable quiet—only the familiar warmth of a shoulder and the lingering scent of a tamped-out wildfire. It’s all he has to give.
Reaching forward, Shouto carefully picks up Izuku’s mug from the coffee table. Tea sloshes inside, half-finished and cold—orange spice, he thinks.

He glances over, holding it up. “Want me to…?” he trails, arching an eyebrow.

Izuku shakes his head, swiping at the moisture on his cheek. “No,” he says quietly, but his voice is like scraped metal, rusted at the edges. He coughs lightly. “No, it’s fine. Not going to finish it.”

Shouto nods and lowers the mug, holding it between both hands as he stares down at the cold, forgotten liquid. Moonlight pools at the edges of the cup, collecting along the delicate curve of the handle in spots of dull shine, and the scent of spiced citrus is razor-sharp against his senses.

_Wasteful_, he muses silently.

Instinctively, Shouto’s left hand begins to warm, and he lets out a long exhale as he focuses his power into a slow, gentle burn directly in the center of his palm—the smolder of a dying ember, not the explosiveness of a flashfire this time. It doesn’t take long for the tea to begin steaming. Lifting the mug to his lips with both hands, he takes a sip.

Izuku doesn’t look over or even flinch, eyes still trained on the shattered device in his hands with a distant, inscrutable expression on his face.

“How do you want me to stay?” Shouto asks quietly. The tea burns his tongue, but he barely feels it.

Izuku’s fingers tighten around his phone. “I— you don’t have to.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

Izuku bites his cheek. Shouto takes another sip, watching carefully over the top rim of the mug for any sign of an answer. He expects a vehement _no_, or maybe a softly-worded dismissal and a promise for a better morning. He expects a fake smile, a half-laugh of incredulity, a sarcastic quip. He expects the banal back-and-forth they’ve perfected over the past few months, complete with a few diversionary remarks about inside jokes that aren’t half as funny as they used to be. A _plea_.

What he doesn’t expect is the sudden displacement of weight as Izuku settles back against the couch cushions and leans over, carefully resting his head on Shouto’s left shoulder like it belongs there.

Izuku doesn’t say anything, and Shouto doesn’t offer.

Silence seems to suit them best.

Chapter End Notes
**Those Passions Read**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

*Height: 174 centimeters*

The bottom of the four protrudes past the baseline of the box on the processing sheet laid out in front of Izuku. Biting the inside of his cheek, he reaches for his white-out where it sits near his pencil holder, twists off the cap, and meticulously begins to correct his mistake. Once it’s dry, he rewrites the digit.

*Better.* He shifts his gaze down to the next line.

*Hair: red*

It’s broad, as far as descriptors go. Izuku frowns, trying to think of a better word for the precise shade of the villain’s hair, but he comes up empty-handed. Shaking his head, he moves onto the next box. The reports ask for clarity, not specificity. He knows the difference.

*Eyes: blue*

…then again, that’s an *awfully* vague term. Blue could mean anything—sky blue, royal blue, navy, turquoise, cerulean, periwinkle—the options are infinite. Izuku places the end of his pen between his teeth and clamps down on the abused plastic, his gaze strafing toward the acoustic ceiling tiles overhead as he thinks. The villain’s eyes had been more of a greyish-blue shade of… something. There’s got to be a word for that. Icy, perhaps?

(The tabloids and Buzzfeed articles always compare Shouto’s left eye to ice, but Izuku’s never fully agreed with them. Shouto’s specific shade of blue is more like a swimming pool during summertime, maybe, or the beaches down by Okinawa. Something warm and inviting to match the rest of his left side.)

Izuku blinks. His gaze falls back to the processing report.

Blue is good enough for this.

He doesn’t know how long he spends on the report, checking and double-checking each fact, detail, and footnote to make sure it’s as thorough as it needs to be for the District Attorney’s office. His printing is crisp and clean within the lines of the *Quirk Description* subcategory, and his recollection of events is comprehensive to a fault. When he’s done, he files the report into the overfilled outbox on the corner of his desk, caps his pen, and leans back in his desk chair, ignoring the way his joints creak and pop with residual stiffness.

He waits for the feeling of victory to sweep through his system.

It never comes.

That was his last report for the evening. It’s *supposed* to feel satisfying, dammit—he’s caught up on his paperwork, he worked ahead to compensate for his day off tomorrow, and there’s nothing left for him to do aside from organizing his post-it notes by size and color. Theoretically, he could go home if he wanted to. It’s not even *eleven*. That’s got to be a new record.
The rest of the agency is quiet, half-staffed for the night shift, and sparsely filled. He sees Momo’s office alight through the glass panels inset in her wooden door, and he spots a collection of analysts crowded around a few screens at the opposite end of the bullpen. There’s a hushed murmur across the floor that suits the space oddly, like a key fitted into a lock that’s three sizes too big. It’s not a sensation he likes.

“Going home early?”

Izuku looks over. A small, petite analyst with frizzy hair is watching him from her desk nearby, eyes wide and sympathetic behind her glasses, and there’s a half-empty cup of cold coffee clutched between her slender hands. Izuku’s talked to her before in passing at briefings and quarterly meetings, but he can’t remember her name for the life of him.

Izuku nods, letting out a slow breath between his teeth. “Think so,” he says, stretching his arms over his head, and glances at her sidelong. “You?”

A stupid question. She smiles politely nonetheless, shaking her head and glancing out across the sparse, dim floor. “Night shift,” she tells him. “I don’t get off until six.”

“Oh, right.” Izuku’s mouth tightens. “Sucks.”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Slow night, too.”

“It certainly doesn’t help matters; I’ll tell you that much.” The analyst laughs lightly and takes a sip of her coffee, shrugging her thin shoulders. She lowers her mug, fingers lacing together around the warm porcelain. “You know what they say about slow nights, don’t you?”

Izuku reaches forward and grabs his discarded gloves off the corner of his desk, slinging them over his shoulder and standing up from his chair. He wonders if Shouto will be asleep by the time he gets home, or if he’ll be awake, cursing the crossword at the kitchen island like usual.

“Nope,” Izuku forces out between breaths, rubbing at his jaw distractedly. He eyes Momo’s office—he should probably tell her he’s leaving early for the night. “What do ‘they’ say?”

“Slow nights,” the analyst repeats quietly, “busy days.”

“I wouldn’t know.” She raises her mug to her lips, looking at him over the top rim. “But it can’t mean anything good.”

There’s something odd about the way she says it—perhaps it’s the way she clings to her syllables like bits of hard candy stuck between her molars, or the faint crease between her brows that makes Izuku wonder if she believes her own words at all. Izuku tongues absently at a small split on the inside of his cheek as he considers it, metallic bitterness bleeding out between his taste buds, but he pushes the thought from his mind after a moment. He has enough to worry about.

“Well, I really hope you’re wrong about that,” he says with forced lightness, pushing his chair in. He nods in the direction of Momo’s office. “I’d better tell the boss lady I’m going home. It was nice talking to you, um…” he trails, trying his hardest to remember her name.

“Kara,” she supplies softly, staring down into her coffee cup. “My name is Kara.”

She waves him off. “It’s fine. There are a lot of us here. Can’t remember everyone’s name.”

“I can make an effort though.”

She looks up at him, lips pursing as she regards him with an inscrutable look. There’s a slight iridescence to her skin beneath the flickering fluorescent lights overhead, and Izuku notices a blue-white shimmery residue on the outside of her mug, smeared slightly by her fingers as they slip idly around the contour of the vessel. *Bioluminescence?*

After a moment, Kara lets out a quiet exhale and glances sidelong at Momo’s office. “I’d hurry if you want to catch her.”

Izuku nods. “Right. Yes. Uh, have a good night.”

“You, too.”

Izuku feels the stares of the night shift analysts boring into his back as he turns away and begins maneuvering his way through cluttered desks and wobbly office chairs, but he does his best to ignore the feeling in favor of focusing on Momo’s office door in the distance. There’s something bitter and sorrowful in their gazes, and it sizzles against the back of his neck as Izuku considers the fact that maybe they’re not staring at him at all—they’re staring at the empty spot next to him.

He feels Shouto’s absence like a man missing a limb or the air from his lungs. Without him, Izuku’s unbalanced—placed on a scale where he doesn’t belong, listing dangerously to one side while the rest of the world struggles to make up the deficit in every way they know how. The agency senses Shouto’s absence, too; everyone feels the hollow vacancy that’s been in the air since that day in March, even if they try not to make it obvious.

Izuku passes the darkened corner office with Shouto’s nameplate on the door, and he averts his eyes with clenched, cracking teeth. He hopes the night crew has been watering Shouto’s plants.

The rest of the world thinks Shouto’s recovering somewhere in Hokkaido, enduring physical therapy for an undisclosed injury—which isn’t entirely untrue, when Izuku really thinks about it. Other news outlets claim he finally gave in and retired from the industry after that building downtown collapsed, citing the stress of the job and the pressures of being Number One. (Again, not altogether false, but the implication grates against Izuku’s patience.) A few tabloids say he’s been dead for weeks in some confidential government coverup scandal, but nobody really believes those, thankfully. Only a few higher-ups at the agency, Shouto’s immediate family, and Izuku know his true location, and even fewer know what he’s recovering from in the first place.

Half-truths. Unfinished fabrications. Omissions of responsibility and guilt that nobody can claim are truly theirs in the first place. It’s a tangled, twisted web of government-issued lies, and Izuku hates every bit of it, even if he sees the practicality. Between a supposed “missing” former Number One hero and the worsening anti-hero protests that color every news station these days, July can’t come soon enough.

When he reaches Momo’s door, Izuku knocks quietly, ignoring the way his bruised knuckles protest. He hears a muffled, “*Come in,*” from the other side of the polished wood, and he opens the door a few scant inches, leaning a shoulder against the frame as he surveys the scene laid out before him.

Momo sits at her desk surrounded by glowing tablets and two full-sized computer monitors, buried
up to her elbows in paperwork of all shapes and sizes. Her burgundy cardigan is draped over the
back of her chair, expensive high heels kicked off in a far corner of the room near the coatrack in a
haphazard pile. Three empty coffee mugs sit perilously close to the edge of her desk, and there’s a
half-eaten packet of crisps near her secondary monitor, foil glittering in the dull lamplight. Based
on the contents of the nearby trash can, it’s her sixth bag today.

“Can I help you?” she asks distractedly, squinting at something on her computer. Her hair is tied
back in a messy bun, and her manicure is chipped.

Izuku crosses his arms over his chest. “I’m heading home for the night. Figured you should know
about it.”

Momo glances up for a half-second before she turns to a tablet at her elbow, fingers flying rapidly
across the screen. She waves dismissively between paragraphs. “Right, yes, okay. That’s fine.
Thank you for telling me.”

Izuku hums, craning his neck slightly. He spots an open package of cookies on her lap, halfway
demolished. “Did you eat dinner?”

“I’m?” she hums distractedly, not looking up.

“Dinner,” he repeats. “Did you eat?”

“Do salt and vinegar chips count as a meal?”

“No.”

“Then no, I didn’t.” She stops typing, frowning down at her screen, and eventually glances up
through her lashes. “Did you process that robbery from Kiyose yesterday? Or did I dream that?”

“You dreamed that.”

Momo’s face twists in annoyance, and she flops back in her chair. “Well, shit,” she huffs. “Who
did, then? I can’t find the paperwork for it, but I’m sure—”

“Yaoyorozu.”

“—someone turned it in, and the press release for the drug ring in Tachikawa district is due
tomorrow morning, but—”

“Yaoyorozu, please.”

“—I have to have thirteen statements drafted for the new PR liaison by tomorrow, so I really can’t
—”

“Momo,” he says sharply.

It’s enough to catch her attention. She stops in the middle of a word, looking up with wide eyes.
“What?”

“Go home,” Izuku tells her, pushing off the threshold and into her office. The door closes behind
him, latching with finality, and Izuku carefully slides the coffee mugs away from the edge of the
desk and closer to safety. “I think you’ve been here a little too long today.”

Momo lets out a sigh and gestures weakly to the mess set out before her. “I can’t leave yet,” she
mutters, tucking a loose lock of hair behind her ear. “Kyouka’s plane doesn’t get in until one. It’s
pointless for me to go home just so I can leave again twenty minutes later. Easier to stay here.”

“Jirou’s coming home?”

Momo nods. “For a little while, yeah. She’s flying in from Cairo.”

“How long is she off this time?”

“No idea. Could be six weeks, could be six hours.” She shrugs, sorting a few papers idly on her desk. “You know how international agencies are.”

He hums lowly, grimacing. International agencies have broader jurisdiction and higher demand, sure, but the constant jet lag more than makes up for the benefits of seeing the world through a thousand different lenses. Working as the Symbol of Peace for a country as large as America had been hard enough—Izuku can’t imagine being responsible for the entire world. He doesn’t envy Jirou one bit.

Exhaling through his nose, he eyes the clock on Momo’s wall. “Well, tell her I said hi when you see her. I’d assume Shouto would say the same if he were here.”

“I’ll make sure to tell her. She’ll be thrilled to hear from you both,” she tells him, smiling gratefully. Leaning back in her chair, she laces her fingers together and cocks her head to one side. “How’s he doing, by the way?”

“Shouto?” Izuku rubs the back of his neck. He shrugs noncommittally. “He’s fine,” he answers after a moment’s thought. “I think.”

Momo lifts an eyebrow. “You think?”

“Pretty sure, yeah.”

“Midoriya, you live with him.”

“Well, he’s not exactly the chatty type,” Izuku counters, but Momo purses her lips, clearly unimpressed. He huffs and shifts his weight. “Come on, this is Shouto we’re talking about. What else do you want me to say?”

“Something a little more helpful would be nice.” Momo mutters, crossing her arms over her chest. “How’s his physical therapy going? Any problems between you two? Is he handling his breakup well?”

Izuku holds up his hand to stop her, counting off his fingers. “First, his physical therapy is good. Hasn’t missed an appointment. Second, things are fine with us, like I said. No incidents yet, unless you count that time I shrunk one of his sweaters in the dryer.” He exhales slowly, dropping his hand with a shrug. “As for the breakup, I have no fucking clue. That’s not exactly dinner conversation for us.”

Momo considers his answers. She taps her index finger idly, swiveling back and forth in her chair as she thinks, and her mouth twists in faint displeasure. “What about his Quirk?”

The question catches Izuku on a jagged edge. There’s something about her tone—something he can’t put his finger on.

“What about it?” he asks warily.
Momo shrugs, dragging a thumb across one of the glowing tablets near her elbow. The screen shifts, pages scrolling one right after the other, and Izuku notices that some are almost entirely redacted. “I’m only wondering how his recovery’s coming along. I have to ask about these things, you know that.”

“He’s recovering just fine.”

“Last time I came over, things didn’t seem so great.”

“Come over again, maybe you’ll change your mind,” he says carefully, studying her face for any hint of what sort of answer she’s hunting for. He feels his defenses rising, but he’s not sure why.

“Midoriya,” Momo chastises lowly, her expression growing serious. “I know you always notice more than you let on. Be honest with me—how’s Shouto doing, really?”

Izuku bites his tongue until the sharp taste of copper blooms between his teeth. He holds Momo’s gaze for several heart-pounding seconds, and the air between them pulls taut as he remembers their days spent in school, bent over notebooks in the library for group study sessions, sharing theories about famous heroes and their Quirks.

“Fine,” he exhales, rubbing a hand over his face. Exhaustion clings to him, weighing him down, and he struggles to put his thoughts in order. “I may have… noticed a few things. Small things.”

Momo arches an eyebrow. “Concerning things?”

“I don’t know yet.” Izuku pinches the bridge of his nose and grimaces, sensing the start of a headache. “I’m pretty sure he keeps bumping the thermostat up to ninety when I’m not home. Oh, and the batteries keep disappearing from our smoke detectors. His body temperature is high, too. Higher than normal.”

Momo frowns. “Doesn’t he always run a fever?”

“Not like this. I can feel the temperature change when he passes me in the hallway. That’s extreme, even for him.”

Her mouth turns down at the corners. “Have you asked him about it?”

Izuku’s hand strays to the mostly-healed cut near his temple, running his fingers over the old, slightly crooked stitches. “Once,” he admits. “He told me he was fine. I didn’t press him.”

Momo frowns. “Doesn’t he always run a fever?”

He huffs lightly, cracking a smile that doesn’t feel real in the slightest. “C’mon, Momo. Truth is a little subjective, don’t you think?”

“Midoriya.” Momo bites her lip, expression tightening. She looks exhausted. “Please, answer the question.”

Izuku’s words tangle, knotting around one another in the back of his throat. The truth tastes bitter on his tongue. There’s something about the way she phrases her question that makes Izuku wonder whether she’s asking as a friend—or if she’s asking as head of the agency.

“Yes,” he lies, exhaling softly, and he drops his gaze to his feet. Every word is nauseating. “I think he was telling the truth.”
Momo regards him carefully for a moment, pursing her lips. Izuku’s heart pounds, and he stares at his shoes just to have something to focus on.

Finally, Momo lets out a sigh. “All right,” she tells him, returning to her work. “I trust your judgment, Midoriya. At this point, I’m fairly sure no one knows him better than you do, after all.”

Izuku swallows back the bile in his throat. He nods. “Right. Totally, yeah.”

“But,” she interjects sharply, glancing up at him shrewdly through her long, dark lashes, “if you do notice anything… concerning, you’ll tell me, right?”

Her words burrow deep, settling somewhere in the pit of his stomach.

“Yes,” he lies. “Absolutely.”

Izuku takes the train home instead of freerunning. An exercise in normality, he tells himself as he scans his city transit pass, the hoodie of his zip jacket pulled low over his eyes; he left his work uniform in his locker back at the agency in favor of day-old sweatpants and a crumpled t-shirt. There aren’t a lot of people on the platform at this time of night—a fact for which Izuku is incredibly grateful. With the protests growing in number and severity, anonymity is every hero’s best friend.

The train rolls in right on time, and Izuku clambers on with a handful of other people he doesn’t know. Nobody looks twice at him. The doors close with a soft hiss, and the train begins to move before he even has time to fall into an empty seat next to a window.

Neon lights blur together as the elevated train bolts down its track into the Koboremi district. Izuku presses his forehead against the smudged window as he fiddles with a frayed seam at the hem of his hoodie, watching the city as it passes by on the other side of the glass. The train is mostly empty, save for a few drunken college students laughing and slurring at the opposite end of the car, and there are two other people slouched in the seats closest to the doors. One man babbles into a Bluetooth earpiece, waving his hands emphatically as he holds a passionate conversation with no one at all. Tugging his hood a little lower, Izuku turns his gaze back toward the window and lets out a soft sigh.

There’s always something inherently disappointing about the eternal glow of a city—especially at what’s supposed to be its darkest hour. No matter how hard Izuku squints through the grimy window, the stars remain invisible above those glittering skyscrapers in the distance, every constellation drowned out by the blinding metropolitan glow that crisscrosses the city limits like vibrant, fluorescent veins. Izuku mistakes departing planes for comets more often than not as they touch the horizon near the outskirts of town, and flashing emergency lights stain other parts of the city red-blue-red in time with his sluggish, sleepy pulse. At one point he spies a faint plume of smoke in the distance near the financial district, glowing orange against the indigo backdrop of the night sky.

Another anti-hero protest, perhaps. The thought sits poorly with him, and he tries to push it from his mind. A problem for tomorrow, he thinks, tugging on a new loose thread near the cuff of his sleeve. His bruised, scraped knuckles flash in the sickly light of the train.

Two stops left.
The drunken college kids get off at the next station, stumbling over each other and laughing loudly at every misstep they make on their way out. The girls have bright blue glitter smeared on their cheekbones with green lipstick staining their vibrant mouths, and the young men have that same lipstick smeared on their faces and necks in between love bites and their stained, crumpled collars. By the time Izuku reaches his stop, the rest of the train has emptied, save for the man with the Bluetooth earpiece, who stands by the door with one hand curled around a vertical steel support bar. He must be finished with his phone call.

Izuku shifts in his seat as the train begins to slow. “Koboremi Central,” says the automated woman on the intercom. Her voice is garbled and nearly indiscernible. “Koboremi Central, exiting on the right. Please keep clear of the doors.”

He tugs his hood a little lower and rises from his seat, staggering toward the door as the train jostles its way around a curve in the track. The stranger looks up at Izuku’s approach, shifting slightly to the left to let him pass.

Izuku dips his head, smiling tightly. “Thank y—”

The man spits at his feet.

Izuku stares at the spot of saliva on the grimy, metal floor of the train car. Outside, brakes screech as the train pulls into the station, and the doors slowly slide open on his left with a hiss.

“Hero,” the man sneers, voice plagued with pure vitriol. His lip curls, and his face carves itself from disgust as he looks Izuku up and down, shaking his head. “You’re all so fucking corrupt.”

The word seeps into Izuku’s consciousness like a vile poison, sour and astringent enough to burn the back of his throat, but he doesn’t look up or retaliate. The apathy pooling in the pit of his stomach isn’t foreign; he knows full well that anger is useless in a situation like this, and frustration will get him nowhere.

Let it go, he tells himself. It’s not worth it.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Izuku shoves his hands in the pockets of his jacket and nods curtly before stepping off the train, barely missing the doors as they slide shut behind him. A few of the people on the platform glance at him in passing, but he hunches his shoulders in defense and heads directly for the stairs that lead down to street level.

He doesn’t know if anybody else recognizes him as he slips through the crowd and darts across the street between honking cars and taxis; he doesn’t care enough to look. Home is three blocks away — straight, left, then a sharp right across the footbridge past the bakery. Shouto will be there. A first aid kit, maybe. The banana Shouto always leaves on the counter for Izuku on those nights when he comes home extra late, and perhaps a half-empty kettle of water will be waiting on the stove.

Izuku smiles faintly beneath the shadow of his hood as he watches the cracked sidewalk pass beneath his feet. He can manage three blocks.

By the time he crosses the footbridge into his apartment district, the man on the train is a distant thought in Izuku’s mind, barely even a memory. The now-familiar townhouses in the neighborhood glow beneath the iron streetlamps that line the quiet road, and brightly-colored flowers in window boxes wave gently in the late spring breeze as Izuku passes, their sweet scent carrying faintly on the wind. Before he jogs up the front steps of his apartment building, he takes a moment to crane his neck and search for Shouto’s bedroom window in the darkness.
Sure enough, a faint orange glow seeps through the blinds. He must still be awake.

Keying open the main door with a small smile curving one side of his mouth, Izuku climbs the stairs up to the third floor quietly so as not to wake the neighbors. The brass numbers on his apartment door are a welcome sight, and he fiddles with his keys as he hums tunelessly under his breath, bouncing on his toes. He has the day off tomorrow, and he can practically feel the soft embrace of his bedsheets.

That’s when he smells it.

Izuku freezes, fingers stiffening around his keys as every sense pitches into high alert collectively. The scent is faint, admittedly, but present nonetheless. Unmistakable. Frighteningly familiar.

Smoke.

Izuku fumbles to find the key to the apartment and unlocks the door with stilted, clumsy movements, shouldering his way inside with little ceremony. He surveys the dim apartment from the doorway, noting the thin haze of smoke that lingers in the air everywhere he looks—the kitchen, the living room, the ceiling where it collects in thick swells. Slithering, ghostly tendrils of grey-black smoke pour from the mouth of the hallway, billowing into transitory shapes that dissipate almost as soon as they’re formed.

His heart drops into his stomach, and panic rises sharply in his throat.

It tastes an awful lot like fear.

In one swift motion, Izuku strips his hoodie and kicks the apartment door shut behind him, pressing the thick fabric of his jacket against his nose and mouth as he scans every corner of the apartment for signs of Shouto.

“Shouto?” he calls out, swiveling his head in every direction. Izuku sees a banana on the kitchen counter and the copper kettle on the stove, just like he expected. A first aid kit sits open on the island, ready for use but untouched. Craning his neck back, he squints upward through the haze—sure enough, the smoke detectors aren’t blinking; Shouto must’ve removed the batteries again.

Bedroom, he thinks, remembering the glow he saw from outside the building. He’s in his bedroom, get to the bedroom, get to him, find him.

Izuku’s eyes water as he runs to the hallway, clipping his shoulder against the corner and caving in the drywall in the process, but he doesn’t stumble or dare to stop. His brain shifts into high gear, his pulse thunders. He doesn’t know if he’s breathing. He doesn’t know if he cares.

The smoke is thicker in the narrow corridor, spilling out from beneath Shouto’s door at the end of the hallway in a smolder of thin, hot ash. Panic claws its way into the empty spaces behind Izuku’s heart, and he squints through the darkness as the emanating warmth dries his eyes out until they sting and burn. Bolting down the hallway toward Shouto’s room, he doesn’t bother with the doorknob; with green energy flickering dangerously over his skin, he kicks the door in and splinters the damned thing from its hinges, grunting with the effort.

A swell of black smoke spills out into the hallway in a thick gust, nearly choking Izuku through the fabric of his jacket, but he darts inside without a second thought. He scans the room, fighting the urge to gag on the smoke that threatens to drown him with every breath, and nearly vomits as he takes in the grisly scene before him.

Shouto lies in bed, tangled amongst his bedsheets with his eyes closed and hair splayed out on his
smoldering, charred pillow as the flames cling to his skin in inexplicable blue-orange tangles of heat. He’s asleep—dreaming, shifting, twitching, nightmare? His hands fist the sheets at his sides, sickening purple and pale ivory standing out starkly against their opposites, and his eyes flicker wildly beneath his eyelids with every spasm. Somehow, he hasn’t woken up yet.

Squinting through the poisonous haze in the air, Izuku spots a melted orange plastic pill container on Shouto’s nightstand—sleeping pills.

“Fuck,” he exhales, staggering forward. The flames are high and searing, but the blaze is thankfully contained to the bed—it’s only spread to the nightstand and the headboard in some places. The paint on the wall peels and bubbles, curling away to reveal the raw sheetrock underneath. “Fuck.”

Izuku thinks fast. Sucking in a deep breath through the fabric of his jacket, he lunges forward, grabs the only undamaged pillow on the other side of the bed, and attempts to smother the worst parts of the fire. Shouto flinches away automatically and curls up on his side, hugging his knees to his chest, but he still doesn’t wake up. Flames cling to every inch of skin on the scarred side of his face, his left shoulder, and parts of his chest, burning away half of his t-shirt to leave it in blackened tatters.

“Shouto,” Izuku gasps, chasing every flame with the pillow, unburned parts of the comforter, and his own jacket. He ignores the heat, the searing sensation in his lungs, the fear coiled in the pit of his stomach that tears him apart from the inside out. “Shouto, wake up, come on, I need you to wake up, please—”

It doesn’t work. Shouto’s face only twists more, trapped in the clutches of his nightmare, his skin coated with sweat and soot. He curls up even tighter than before, and his flames don’t lessen.

Izuku grits his teeth and continues to smother the larger areas of the blaze until they’re little more than smoldering embers and blackened fabric, but there always seems to be more to put out everywhere he turns. His skin blisters, and he’s starting to feel dizzy without adequate oxygen, but he pushes it all to the side. Not the time, never the time, stay focused, stay focused, stay focused.

Shouto mumbles in his sleep on the far side of the bed, catching Izuku’s attention in an instant. He stares in horror as the fire clinging to Shouto’s skin ripples blue for a brief second, restarting the blaze Izuku just managed to put out.

“Shit,” he hisses. Izuku abruptly drops his jacket to the floor, abandoning his efforts of extinguishing the inferno, and curls his fingers beneath the remnants of Shouto’s mattress. He lifts it with barely any effort, ignoring the red-hot springs that poke through the sheets, and dumps Shouto on the floor in a heap of unconscious limbs. He still doesn’t wake up.

“I can’t go out with you,” Izuku wheezes to absolutely nobody, glancing at those melted bottles of medication on the ruined nightstand. Too many, clearly. Not sleeping well?

With Shouto finally off the bed and away from flammable material, Izuku manages to buy himself enough time to put out the worst of the fire before it can spread any further. His respite is short-lived, however—sure enough, the floor beneath Shouto begins to smolder.

(No time.)

Vaulting over the bed, Izuku eyes Shouto with a grimace, noting the flames that refuse to go out. He turns back toward the hallway, mentally gauging the distance.
Water, bathroom, shower? Shower will work. Has to. Can’t pick him up without getting burned. Solution?

He eyes Shouto’s flameless right side—namely, his arm. His damaged, destroyed arm.

(No time, no time, no—)

“Sorry for this,” Izuku mutters, swooping down and grasping Shouto’s wrist. Clenching his jaw, he begins to drag Shouto’s limp body toward the hallway, pointedly ignoring the ashes and floating embers he leaves in his wake. Smoke still hangs heavily throughout the apartment, cloying and choking Izuku with every step, but he fights through it as best he can.

“Oh my god, oh my god,” Izuku wheezes as he drags Shouto toward the bathroom, hissing through his teeth when he accidentally turns the corner too sharply and whacks Shouto’s head against the doorway. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m...sorry—"

The cold bathroom tile clings to the half-melted soles of Izuku’s sneakers, but the temperature begins to rise in the small space at a blistering rate with the heat emanating from Shouto’s left side. With a grunt, Izuku grabs Shouto’s upper arm and hauls him over the edge of the bathtub, not caring when he rips the shower curtain down in the process. Shouto’s head lolls to one side as he mumbles in his sleep, and the plastic curtain begins to melt beneath him.

(No time.)

Izuku lunges for the silver knob, turning the shower on full-blast—cold. As cold as it will go.

He only feels a little bad about it.

The second water makes contact with Shouto’s skin, his eyes snap open and he gasps, sucking in a strangled breath that catches somewhere on the jagged edges of his throat. For once, his expression is peeled back, exposed like a nerve and ripe with shock and bewilderment.

Izuku watches numbly as Shouto lifts his arms to shield his face from the frigid blast bearing down on him, sputtering nonsensically and probably still half-asleep. Letting out a long, slow breath, Izuku presses his back against the far wall of the bathroom and slides down to the cold tile floor, relishing the hiss of steam as Shouto’s flames finally go out.

Shouto shivers and gasps in the bathtub as he’s quickly drenched by the relentless spray, skin sizzling and hair plastering itself to his neck and face in a matted mess of colors. Clumsily, he clambers forward on his hands and knees to grab the shower knob, fumbling for a solid grip with his damaged hand.

On his third attempt, he manages to cut the spray off, plunging the entire apartment into complete, smoldering silence.

Shouto collapses back in the bathtub, chest heaving as he shivers against cold porcelain and half-melted plastic. His clothes (what’s left of them) cling to his skin, and soot rolls down the side of his face in glossy rivulets.

“When were you planning on telling me?”

Izuku feels the words spill from his own mouth, but he’s not the one who put them there.

Shouto swallows thickly between ragged breaths and looks over, expression laid bare beneath his scrutiny. Izuku sees the abject horror and confusion in his eyes the second Shouto realizes he’s not
alone in the bathroom, but there’s something else Izuku can’t quite identify, tied down beneath those shadows in Shouto’s eyes. Fear?

“I… wasn’t,” Shouto tells him quietly, voice cracking between ragged breaths. “Not for a while.”

“Why?”

“Izuku, I can explain this—”

“Why?” he asks again, voice edged with steel.

It’s point-blank and sharp, and Shouto flinches. He swallows, dropping his gaze. “I thought I had it all under control.”

Izuku jabs a finger toward the doorway, gesturing at the smoke in the air and the trail of embers they left on the floor. “That is not control. Trying to burn our apartment down isn’t control.”

Shouto recoils. “I— what?”

“I found you in your room when I got home ‘bout ten minutes ago,” Izuku exhales, rubbing his eyes wearily. He gestures vaguely. “There was smoke everywhere, fire, you were sleeping—all that stuff. I did what I could and dragged you in here to put you out ‘cause you weren’t waking up.” He shrugs, massaging his temples. “It’s all a little fuzzy now, honestly, but your room’s totally trashed. That I know for sure.”

Shouto’s mouth forms soundless shapes for several moments, eyes wide. He looks like he’s about to vomit, or maybe cease to exist on the spot. Inch forward and disappear, like vapor.

After a moment Shouto gives up and slumps back against the shower curtain, his face pale beneath a thin layer of soot and damp ash.

“I didn’t…” he starts, but the words shatter on the edges of his teeth. He bites his lip, glancing down at his tattered shirt, and his expression twists. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“You could’ve burned down the building,” Izuku scolds him. He throws his hands up in the air. “If my train had been even five minutes late, I probably wouldn’t have made it in time. Anything could’ve happened.”

Shouto looks sick. He drops his chin. “I know.”

“You could’ve blown our location,” he adds, raking his fingers through his tangled hair. He laughs hollowly. “Shouto, if the agency ever found out about this, they’d make us move. They might even push your reinstatement back. They’re already suspicious.”

“I know,” he says miserably.

“People could’ve gotten hurt,” he scolds, but he chokes on his next thought. “You could’ve gotten hurt.”

Shouto presses the heels of his hands against his eyes, and he hunches his shoulders. “I know, okay? I know. You don’t have to keep telling me.”

“Then why—”

Shouto drops his hands away from his face, meeting Izuku’s eyes with a rare sort of vulnerability in his expression Izuku’s only ever seen once or twice before.
“Because I’m scared,” Shouto says softly, hands shaking and white-knuckled in his lap. He swallows with great difficulty and glances off to one side, blinking rapidly as he lets out a jagged, ruined breath of defeat. “Because… because I don’t know what’s happening to me, and— god, I have no idea what I’m supposed to do about any of it. And I know that’s probably not a very good answer, or the answer you were looking for, but I don’t have anything else to give you right now.”

Silence falls over them both, thick and heavy like the smoke that threatened to choke them both not ten minutes ago. Shouto doesn’t look at Izuku or wait for any kind of response. He likely doesn’t expect one. Instead, Shouto pulls his knees up to his chest and presses his forehead against them, curling in on himself as if to shut out the world. He’s frighteningly still, silent, and sopping in the soot-smeared bathtub, but for several precious moments, Izuku allows himself to indulge in this stolen moment of transient peace.

*Because I’m scared.*

*(I think I am, too—but of what?)*

Sucking in a rattling breath, Izuku winces at the stinging, smoky aridity of his throat and reaches up to grab the edge of the vanity to pull himself to his feet. Shouto doesn’t look up or acknowledge him in the slightest. He might not be breathing, actually.

“All right,” Izuku exhales, approaching the bathtub with purposeful steps. He holds out a hand in Shouto’s direction. “Come on, up you get. You can sleep on the futon in my room after we open some windows.”

Shouto looks up through his soaked hair, his gaze miserable and drenched in more ways than one. “M’gonna stay here,” he mumbles, dropping his forehead back to his knees. “Safer.”

“I’m not letting you sulk in the shower, dude. I don’t care how flammable you are.” Izuku beckons with his outstretched hand again. “Come on, let’s go.”

Shouto bats his hand away blindly. “No.”

“No?”

“No,” he mutters stubbornly, voice rife with despair. “You’re supposed to be mad at me right now.”

“Oh, I’m plenty pissed, don’t worry about that—but I think I’m more worried about you than anything else. Sorry to disappoint.” Izuku waits for Shouto to respond or move. When he doesn’t, he arches an eyebrow. “You know, I dragged you in here the first time. I can drag you back out just as easily.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Shouto mutters against his knees.

“Oh, I most definitely would.”

Shouto’s fingers flex, knuckles blanching as he grips his legs. With a glare, he looks up sharply. “God, don’t you take anything seriously?” he demands, brows knitting in irritation. Sparks and steam erupt from his nostrils in a puff. “I almost burned down this goddamn building, Izuku. The agency’s going to push back my reinstatement when they find out. For fuck’s sake, just let me wallow in my misery for a little bit.”

Izuku shrugs, crossing his arms over his chest. “Who said the agency’s going to find out?”
“You did. Like, two minutes ago.” His shoulders slump, and it’s almost ridiculous enough for Izuku to laugh. “Momo’s bound to visit eventually, anyway. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Well, it’s not like Momo has a reason to go into your room. As long as you don’t invite her in for tea or some shit, and we air out the apartment, it’ll be fine,” Izuku reasons off-handedly. He frowns, noticing a decently-sized blister on the back of his hand. (He also spots a hangnail, but he’ll worry about that later.) “I mean, I’m not planning on telling the agency, so at least you don’t have to worry about that.”

Shouto looks up at him incredulously, doubt etched into the fine lines around his sleep-shadowed eyes. “I’m sorry, are you telling me you’re going to lie to the IHA?”

Izuku nods. “I’m considering it, yeah.”

“You,” Shouto deadpans. “You’re going to try and lie to the organization we work for.”

“In theory.”

“There’s nothing theoretical about this and you know it. You’re a terrible liar.”

Izuku’s expression sober, and he meets Shouto’s gaze. “Listen, if keeping this whole shitshow quiet means you’ll still get reinstated this summer, then yeah, I’m totally going to keep this quiet.” He shrugs. “I want my partner back. Sue me.”

Shouto studies his face, brows knitted and lips parted as he searches for any hint of a lie on Izuku’s face. When he doesn’t find one, Shouto’s eyes widen imperceptibly, and he slumps back against the side of the tub in numb shock, dropping his arms to his sides.

“You’ll be breaking federal law, you know,” Shouto murmurs. He glances up. “You’re really fine with that?”

“We’ve been breaking the law together since high school.” Izuku thinks back to stargazing and a quarry they were never supposed to visit, missing curfew and working outside their provisional licenses. He shrugs. “What else is new?”

“This is a little more severe than trespassing.”

He smiles softly. “I know.”

“And you still want to do this?”

Izuku bites the inside of his cheek, rocking back and forth on his heels as he considers it. Lying about Quirk fitness to the IHA is a felony, sure, and the consequences if they’re discovered are more than a little daunting. Any sane, normal person would say no.

(He thinks of falling buildings and late nights bent over paperwork, patrols that go until dawn and protein bars tossed through the air on empty, gravel rooftops in the worst parts of the city. He remembers the feeling of searing heat at his back, the sound of sublimating ice, and the way Shouto always covered Izuku’s blind spots without ever being asked.)

When have we ever been normal?

“Yeah,” he tells Shouto firmly a moment later, nodding with a smile. “I want to do this.”

Shouto stares at him for a moment and exhales a soft, disbeliefing laugh, shaking his head. He
rubs his temples, glancing up at Izuku through his lashes. His expression is significantly softer around the edges than it was mere minutes ago.

“I always wondered how heroes went corrupt in the industry. Figured there was a lot more complex shit that went into it,” he murmurs, studying Izuku closely. His mouth quirks in a small, melancholic smile. “Turns out it’s actually pretty easy. Who would’ve guessed?”

Smiling faintly, Izuku holds out a hand for Shouto to take. Reaching up, Shouto clasps Izuku’s wrist and allows himself to be hauled to his feet.

“I’d say we’re overdue,” Izuku tells him, squeezing Shouto’s wrist before letting go. He turns toward the hazy hallway, waving smoke away as he goes. “Come on, let’s get a head start while we still can.”

Chapter End Notes
Shouto awakens with a splitting headache and ashes packed beneath the torn edges of his fingernails. The apartment still smells like smoke.

For a long while after waking, he lies on his futon and stares at the ceiling with his fingers curled into loose fists at his sides, tapping an idle rhythm against tangled sheets as dappled sunlight plays across the ceiling. The pit in his stomach yawns and the minutes pass slowly, threatening to swallow him whole upon the hour.

He doesn’t want to get up. He doesn’t want to leave this room—hell, this apartment—ever again. Maybe if he doesn’t move from this spot on the floor, he can get away with quiet retirement and a proper descent into relative obscurity. Nobody will even notice he’s gone—except Izuku, of course, but that’s only because this is his bedroom. Totally unfair advantage.

Shouto glances over, being careful not to make much noise, and lets out a breath of relief; Izuku’s bed is empty on the other side of the room, neatly made with sheets and pillows tucked into place as always. He must’ve gone to work extra early today, or perhaps he went to run errands somewhere. Shouto supposes he has this to be grateful for, at least—he’s not sure he’d be able to withstand that maddening, pervasive stare over breakfast.

Get up, he tells himself, clenching his teeth and pushing the thoughts from his mind. Get up, dammit.

With a small exhale, Shouto pulls himself to his feet and staggers as the blood rushes to his head all at once, springing stars into his vision by the ink-stained dozen. Raking his fingers through his hair, he makes his way to the door and dreads every single step; the hardwood is frigid beneath his bare feet, and Izuku’s oversized, thin t-shirt does very little to keep out the damp morning chill currently seeping through the window.

Shouto bites into his cheek. Maybe if he elevates his body temperature by a few degrees, he can—

He stiffens, hand poised over the doorknob. His stomach twists.

Maybe not.

There’s a bad taste in his mouth as he softly pushes open the door to Izuku’s room. The air in the hallway is even colder, likely due to the fact that every window in the apartment is still wide open, airing the place out, but the faint smell of smoke still lingers. Shouto doesn’t dare glance down the hallway in the direction of his own room. Instead, he turns toward the kitchen.

Later, he tells himself, biting his tongue until the sharpness of copper floods his senses. His footsteps are soft against the hardwood floors, breaths even softer. Later, later, later—

“Oh, good. You’re awake.”

It takes everything in Shouto’s power not to jump out of his skin, but his fingers sputter rebelliously and pop like lit fuses as his head snaps up to take in the scene laid out before him.

Izuku sits at the kitchen island, thick-framed glasses perched on his nose and a pencil tucked
behind his ear as he smiles tiredly at Shouto like nothing in the world is wrong. He’s wearing black joggers and a t-shirt with writing Shouto can’t make out from here, but he has a feeling it says something stupid like “t-shirt” or “fruit cup” or “capitalism” because that’s just the sort of thing he’s fond of wearing for some reason. Predictably, there’s a cup of coffee at his left elbow and a bowl of yogurt on his right, both already halfway demolished. By all accounts, he’s the perfect snapshot of normality on a warm Tuesday morning—or he would be, if he weren’t surrounded by a forest’s worth of paper.

Stacked on the counter, taped to the fridge, crumpled up on the floor near the trash can in the corner—sheets of lined notebook paper litter the island in reams and piles that make Izuku’s old study sessions at the U.A. library look like mere child’s play. Cramped handwriting drips from every line and margin, interspersed with equations, numbers, and sketched-out diagrams in utterly illegible penmanship. It’s almost impressive how thoroughly trashed the room is; under different circumstances, Shouto might spare a laugh.

Shouto approaches the island hesitantly, picking up one paper by the corner with care. He blinks, shaking his head as the equations and symbols begin to swirl before his eyes.

“Izuku,” he starts lowly, “what is all this?”

Izuku shrugs, plucking the pencil out from behind his ear. “Oh, nothing much. Just a few notes,” he says lightly as he begins to twirl the pencil between his fingers. He practically vibrates with pent-up energy, knee bouncing in double-time. “I figured I’d get an early start this morning.”

“An early start on what?”

He gives Shouto a funny, halfway amused look that puckers a few of the freckles near the corners of his mouth. “Uh. You? Obviously.”

“Did you sleep at all last night?” he asks incredulously.

“A bit, yeah. Wasn’t really tired though.” Faster than thought, Izuku snatches a blue electronic thermometer off the corner of the island and holds it out to Shouto. “Hey, I need your temperature real quick. For science.”

Shouto stares at the thermometer. He didn’t even know they owned one of those—it’s not like either of them ever get sick often enough to warrant such a thing. Did Izuku buy it this morning?

“For science,” he repeats slowly. He arches an eyebrow. “Are you serious?”

Izuku nods. “As a heart attack.”

“I feel like I should say no on principle.”

Izuku slumps his shoulders and huffs. “Oh, come on,” he begs, brows lifting in supplication. He waves the thermometer in the air. “Pretty please? This is, like, the least invasive thing I’m going to ask you for a while. If you won’t do this, we’ve got bigger problems.”

He glares half-heartedly in response, but Izuku flashes a smile in return, unperturbed. It’s the sort of smile Shouto hasn’t seen a lot of lately—bright and a bit weary at the edges, but still true and eager despite it all. Shouto feels his cheeks heat automatically, and he pulls idly at a hangnail until it stings just to take his mind off things.

His resolve crumbles a moment later.
“You’re ridiculous,” Shouto mutters, plucking the thermometer from Izuku’s grasp and plopping down in the other empty seat at the island. He places the metal tip of the thermometer under his tongue, crossing his arms over his chest as he waits for the final verdict. “Is this going to be a daily thing?”

“Maybe.”

“It’d better not be.”

Izuku shrugs. “I guess it depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“On how much you complain about it.” Izuku resumes twirling his pencil between his fingers, leaning back in his chair with a crooked half-smile as he watches Shouto with amusement in his eyes. “You’re not exactly off to a good start, let me tell you.”

Shouto holds up his hands in mock surrender and presses his lips into a thin line. Scooting toward the edge of his seat, Izuku peers down at the thermometer’s display as the numbers begin to climb in large intervals, uninterrupted. The backlight flashes green, yellow, and eventually settles on bright, disturbing red before it beeps with finality.

Izuku’s eyebrows rise steadily. “Well, shit. That’s… a number.”

Shouto doesn’t bother looking. “Maxed out?” he asks, and Izuku’s resulting grimace answers him louder than words ever could. Shouto winces, removing the thermometer from his mouth; the plastic end is slightly warped from his heat, buckled where his tongue had rested on it. “Sorry, I didn’t—”

“Try this one.” Izuku tucks his pencil back behind his ear, reaching over and producing a metal kitchen thermometer seemingly out of fucking nowhere. It’s little more than a skewer of polished steel connected to a small device by a long, grey cord; it looks like it’s industrial strength. Izuku flips it over, squinting at the writing on the back of the indicator. “This thing can withstand an oven, so I’m assuming it can withstand you. Probably.”

“Probably?”

Izuku looks up with a smile. “Here’s hoping.”

Shouto takes the end of the thermometer and gingerly places it in his mouth, grimacing when his teeth scrape against polished, sour metal. Izuku keeps an eye on the numeric display as the digits rise rapidly, and Shouto does his level best not to break into a perfunctory sweat right on the spot.

The device beeps after a moment, and Izuku lets out a low whistle at the result. “Looks like you’re hanging out around 140° right now,” he mutters distractedly, scribbling down his findings in the margin of a nearby sheet of paper. He pauses between numbers, frowning, and looks up at Shouto. “Um. Is that low for you? I don’t know what you consider low anymore.”

“You think I’d know?” Shouto mumbles, eyeing the bowl of yogurt near Izuku’s elbow; his stomach rumbles at the sight, and his gaze quickly shifts to the fridge across the kitchen. With a soft exhale, he slips out of his seat and rounds the island with his goal in mind.

“I suppose it’s not exactly an ideal temperature,” he says over his shoulder as he approaches the fridge. “But I don’t know my average anymore though. It fluctuates.”
Izuku hums without looking up. “It’s better than I expected, at least.”

“Easy for you to say. You didn’t almost burn down the apartment.”

“Keyword being ‘almost,’” Izuku reminds him, glancing up over the rim of his glasses. His mouth curves, dimple flashing in the morning sunlight, and he stops writing for a moment to prop his elbows against the granite countertop. “C’mon, look on the bright side for a second.” He counts off his fingers. “You’re not boiling, nobody’s dead, and the apartment is pretty much intact, aside from your room. The neighbors didn’t even call the fire department last night. We’re fine.”

*Fine is relative,* he wants to say, but he tastes the bitterness of overused words on his tongue and chooses to keep them stapled to the back his throat in favor of comfortable silence. Shouto pops the fridge door open, relishing the tentative touch of cool air against his heated face for a moment before he begins sifting through the produce crisper in search of a fresh apple.

“When you put it that way, I suppose,” Shouto mutters without looking up, dragging his fingertips over waxy orange rinds and the soft skin of kiwi fruits. He glances over his shoulder. “And speaking of which, how are we going to deal with that?”

“Deal with what?”

“My bedroom.” Shouto’s hand closes around a tart green apple. Closing the crisper, he turns from the fridge and kicks the door closed behind him with his foot, making his way toward the knife block near the stove. “We’re going to have to get replacement furniture or something soon. I don’t want to sleep in your room forever.”

Izuku’s face twists in mock hurt. “Hey, my room’s not that awful.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

“Fair enough.” Izuku places the end of his pencil between his teeth, frowning faintly. “Now that you mention it though, I may have already figured something out. In theory, at least.”

Shouto lets out a soft sigh. “You know I hate it when you say that.”

“Say what?”

“*In theory.*” Shouto gives him a flat, unimpressed look. “Call me pessimistic, but that usually means the plan stands a good chance of blowing up in our faces. Historically speaking, anyway.”

Izuku opens his mouth to argue, but he stops at the last second and clamps his mouth shut. His expression turns thoughtful. “All right, historically speaking, sure,” he amends, rolling his eyes. “I’ll give you that much. But this time it probably won’t blow up in our faces.”

“Probably?”

“Definitely maybe.”

Izuku’s tenuous tone gives Shouto pause. Grabbing a small chopping knife and a cutting board, he raises an expectant eyebrow in Izuku’s direction as he sets the board and blade down on top of a few sheets of notebook paper littering the opposite side of the island. Izuku is biting the end of his pencil again, shoulders tensed and spine ramrod straight as he looks everywhere in the apartment except Shouto.

Sinking the blade of the knife into the apple, Shouto carves off a small piece; he pops it in his
mouth with a quiet crunch.

“I’m not going to like this plan,” Shouto says slowly, studying Izuku’s expression carefully. “Am I?”

Izuku sinks his teeth into his lower lip, giving him a tight, pained smile. “Probably not, no.”

“Izuku,” he warns.

The atmosphere tightens around them almost instantly, and Izuku throws his hands up in defense, dropping his pencil to the counter with a quiet clatter. “Listen, before you get pissed, let me explain—”

Shouto sets the cutting knife down and braces his hands against the edge of the island, sighing heavily. “Just tell me what you did.”

“—promise I thought this through before I made the call, but I didn’t know what else to do, so I made a choice and kind of went with it,” he blusters, gesturing wildly. A few papers are accidentally swept off the counter in the process, but Izuku hardly glances at them as he continues his senseless babbling. “And you were still asleep when I thought of it, but I didn’t want to wake you up to ask, so this honestly seemed like the best—”

Shouto runs a hand over his face. “Please tell me you didn’t call Momo.”


That is, until Izuku adds, “I called my mom.”

Shouto’s eyes snap wide, and his heart plunges into the pit of his stomach. “You what?”

“Please don’t be mad,” Izuku begs quietly, pressing himself as far back in his chair as he’ll go as if two extra inches of space between them will actually make a difference. He fiddles with the chain around his neck, nervously toying with his wedding band, and he winces. “Are you mad? You look mad.”

“I’m—” Shouto stammers, tearing his fingers through his loose hair. A thousand emotions funnel through him all at once, sluicing through his veins in a deluge he could drown in. Anger, fear, panic—they assault him in searing, short flashfires, and he doesn’t know what to do with any of them.

Shouto presses his hands against his eyes until he sees stars, sucking in a deep breath as he fights to put two words together into something halfway coherent. He opens his mouth, determined to say something—

Before he makes a single sound, Shouto hears a sharp knock at the door.

Shouto drops his hands from his face, heart stopping. Izuku’s head swivels. Across the apartment, a shadow shifts and sways at the bottom of the front door, seeping through the crack like liquid pitch intent on staining the floorboards of the entryway.

Shouto’s throat closes up almost instantly.

“Is that…?” he trails, voice strangled.
“My mother.” Izuku’s face is pale beneath his freckles, eyes blown wide. He turns back to Shouto and lifts his eyebrows with a forced smile. “Um. Bad timing?”

Shouto aims a glare at Izuku, baring his teeth, and he pushes his hair away from his face before begrudgingly starting for the door. Shouto hears the scrape of a chair being pushed out and clumsy footsteps coming up behind him as Izuku follows, falling in behind Shouto’s left shoulder. The knock comes again, this time a little more uncertain than before, but still strong enough to be jarring in the relative quiet of their apartment.

Shouto peers through the peephole, two fingers looped over the lock chain just in case. Sure enough, Inko stands on the landing in front of their door, hair clipped back beneath a wide-brimmed sunhat and two plastic bags of something looped over one arm. She’s glancing around the hallway with mild interest, face halfway set in a sunny smile already.

Shouto pulls away from the peephole and presses his forehead against the door.

“I hate you,” he murmurs without turning around, allowing his eyes to drift closed. “So, so much.”

Izuku sighs. “No, you don’t. If you hated me, you’d have moved out weeks ago.”

“I’m mandated by law to live here.”

“You’re really not.” Izuku’s amusement seeps between his syllables. “Oh, come on, Shouto. You’ve enjoyed living with me. Admit it.”

“That was then,” Shouto intones solemnly. “This is now.”

Izuku lets out a small, lighthearted half-laugh, and Shouto tries his hardest not to fall prey to its contagion on principle. His heart is still locked in a vice, thundering faster than his thoughts can keep up. Inko’s still outside, she knows, she knows, she knows—

“Listen, dude,” Izuku says, setting a hand on Shouto’s right shoulder. “If you leave my mother on our doorstep, I’m pretty sure I’m legally obligated to kick your ass. It’s in the rules.”

Shouto glances back at him skeptically. “The rules for what?”

“The rules for being a good son.”

“There are no rules for that.”

“Debatable. Now, move.” Izuku pinches the dip of Shouto’s waist sharply, and Shouto spasms away from the door with a curse hissed between teeth.

Shouto instinctively reaches up to tuck tangles of hair behind his ears, straightening his t-shirt and adjusting the sock on his right foot by a few millimeters so the brand emblem looks correct for once. He doesn’t know why he cares—he saw Inko earlier this week, and he’d looked significantly more disheveled back then than he does right now. By all accounts, it really should matter what he looks like; Inko’s never been the type to care about that sort of thing. She’s much too nice for that. And yet, Shouto feels every tangle in his bedhead, every frayed seam in his borrowed shirt, and each wrinkle pressed into his cheek by his pillowcase. (Is this normal? This doesn’t feel normal. This feels different.)

His stomach churns with inexplicable nausea, and the back of his neck begins to sweat as Izuku turns the knob and pulls the door wide.
“Hey, mom,” Izuku greets, holding the door open for her to slip inside. His smile is genuine and warm, and for a moment, Shouto forgets why he’s supposed to be mad about this in the first place. “You’re… um. Early. Really early.”

“You never gave me a time, dear,” she replies, rising up onto her tiptoes to press a perfunctory kiss against Izuku’s cheek. She’s her son’s mirror image in almost every way, down to the dimples on either side of their mouths and the specific curve of their eyelashes. Despite himself, Shouto feels his irritation with the situation chipping away the longer he looks at her, his reservations splintering like brittle glass under the pressure of Inko’s warm, familiar presence.

Izuku wordlessly offers to take the bags from his mother, and Inko finally slips inside the apartment with soft, small footsteps to hand the bags off to her son. Izuku gently shuts the door behind her before making his way into the kitchen with a content hum, setting the bags down near the base of the island. If he squints, Shouto can make out a few spray nozzles, rolls of trash bags, and other basic cleaning supplies hiding behind the thin plastic.

Shouto fiddles with the hem of Izuku’s too-large shirt as Inko carefully removes her shoes and hangs her sunhat on one of the hooks in the foyer with the utmost care. He has no idea what to say or how to greet her now that she knows he’s a ticking timebomb. Everything that comes to mind feels wrong.

Thankfully, he doesn’t have to worry about it for long. Inko turns around with a soft sigh, and upon seeing him, her expression softens into something warm.

“Oh, Shouto,” she murmurs, smiling as she approaches him. She reaches up and stands on her tiptoes to press a chaste kiss against his unscarred cheek. “I’m so happy you’re all right, sweetheart. We’ll get this mess fixed in no time. Don’t you worry about a thing.”

“Oh, Shouto,” she murmurs, smiling as she approaches him. She reaches up and stands on her tiptoes to press a chaste kiss against his unscarred cheek. “I’m so happy you’re all right, sweetheart. We’ll get this mess fixed in no time. Don’t you worry about a thing.”

“Um,” he stammers, biting into his cheek until he tastes the sour sharpness of blood. Inko pulls away, dropping back down to her feet with a soft smile, but Shouto makes sure he doesn’t meet her eyes. “I, uh— thank you,” he mutters, hating how every word feels like cardboard in his mouth. “For coming, I mean. It’s… nice. Thank you.”

“I’m happy to help however I can.” She pats his shoulder, squeezing firmly, and the dimples in her cheeks deepen infinitesimally, but her smile only lasts a moment, quickly shifting into an expression of vague annoyance as she reaches out to pat his ribs. “Has my son been feeding you well enough lately? You’re a bit thin, now that I’m looking at you.”

“I’m happy to help however I can.” She pats his shoulder, squeezing firmly, and the dimples in her cheeks deepen infinitesimally, but her smile only lasts a moment, quickly shifting into an expression of vague annoyance as she reaches out to pat his ribs. “Has my son been feeding you well enough lately? You’re a bit thin, now that I’m looking at you.”

“Mom,” Izuku protests from the kitchen. His cheeks are tinged pink, and he rakes a hand through his tangled curls with a sputtered laugh. “I don’t— I’m not, like, starving him. Jesus. He probably cooks more often than I do around here.”

“It was just a question, honey. No need to get defensive.” Inko waves him off and tugs lightly at the hem of Shouto’s t-shirt, straightening it and smoothing out its wrinkles. She aims another sweet smile up at him, eyes crinkling at the corners. “Well, no matter. I’ll go ahead and start on breakfast while you boys get ready to leave. Sound good?”

“Fine by me,” Izuku says. “Keys?”

“In one of the bags, sweetheart. Car’s all gassed up and ready to go, and everything you asked for is in the trunk.”

Hand darting forward, Izuku rifles around the plastic bags and pulls out a set of silver car keys that jingle noisily between his fingers. “Cool. Thanks, mom,” he says, and tucks them into the pockets
of his joggers.

Shouto blinks, frowning as he looks between the two of them. “Sorry, what’s happening?”

“Breakfast. It’s the most important meal of the day.” Inko nods sagely as she pushes her sleeves up, turning toward the kitchen. She makes for the fridge and pops the door wide, pulling out two cartons of eggs and a gallon of milk, and she sets them on the counter directly on top of Izuku’s notes. “You know, when Izuku was little, maybe seven or so—”

“Oh my god.” Izuku’s face pales. “Stop.”

“—he would bring home all sorts of things from the school book fair about heroes and their lifestyle regimens,” she continues, ignoring the red-faced squawking from her son as she diligently washes her hands. She shakes her head sadly. “He tried for months to get me to put him on one of those ridiculous diets. I think he thought kale and vitamin supplements were All Might’s secrets to being such a great hero.”

“You don’t say,” Shouto murmurs, biting his lower lip to hold back a smile. Izuku glares at him across the room and mouths I’ll kill you. Shouto ignores him.

“Oh, yes,” Inko continues unaware, shaking her head with a light laugh. “I ended up compromising and told him I’d start feeding him better breakfasts, but that was as far as I’d go for a little boy in elementary school. I don’t care what those tabloids say, juice cleanses aren’t meant for children as skinny as Izuku used to be.” She smiles, glancing over at her son fondly while he attempts to disintegrate on the spot. “Oh, how you cried about it. Threw a fit for weeks, I swear.”

“Stop, please.” Izuku’s expression is drawn as he stares at his mother, every gaunt shadow ten times more apparent than before. “Why are you doing this to me?”

Inko waves him off, drying her hands with a nearby towel. “Hush, sweetie, I’m telling Shouto a story.”

“You’re humiliating me.”

“I’m your mother. It’s my job.”

Izuku aims a miserable look at Shouto that screams help me, dear god, I’m dying, please help me. Shouto merely lifts an eyebrow and crosses his arms over his chest, leaning back against the wall of the foyer with a smirk.

“Cute story,” Shouto tells Inko lightly, keeping his gaze determinedly on Izuku over the top of her head. “Really… adorable.”

Izuku lobs a nearby Kleenex box at Shouto’s head, biting back a begrudging smile. “Asshole.”

“Language, young man,” Inko warns, pulling a spatula out of the utensil holder.

Izuku winces. “Shit, sorry.”

“Izuku.”

“Sorry!” He takes several perfunctory steps away from his mother—she’s brandishing the spatula, and Izuku only looks a little bit afraid of it. He rubs the back of his neck, glancing in Shouto’s direction, then back toward the hallway. “Hey, are you going to shower or what? Taking your sweet time here.”
Shouto shrugs. “I wasn’t aware we were in a hurry.”

“Well, I kind of want to beat morning traffic, if that’s cool with you.”

Inko cracks an egg into a bowl and says, without looking up, “Those silly protestors are blocking the north interstate, too. You’ll want to head east and go around, assuming they’re still there.”

Izuku points at his mother. “Yes. That. Definitely.”

Shouto shifts his weight with a faint frown. “Where are we going, exactly?”

“You’ll see,” Izuku slips the keys out of his pocket and tosses them up in the air, catching them with a jingle and a bright smile. “Just make sure you aren’t wearing any clothes you particularly care about.”
There’s something about a journey that always feels long, even when you know exactly where you’re going.

Shouto knows this road—its dips, its curves, every exit, every detour. He memorized these houses long ago, back when he had the memory to spare, yet something about this journey feels unfamiliar, in its own way. Maybe it’s the traffic, or maybe it’s the fact that Izuku’s the one driving him this time. (That, in itself, is odd enough. When was the last time they actually drove anywhere?)

Shouto sits in the passenger seat, back ramrod straight as they pass small inlets of pastel houses, freshly sprouted fields, and nameless single-street towns they find along the way. It’s not a long drive by any means, but it’s long enough to be significant. Izuku’s right hand grips the bottom of the steering with a certain amount of laziness; his left arm rests on the ledge by the window. He’s sprawled out in the driver’s seat, the picture of ease in a tight t-shirt and his least favorite pair of joggers, and the cracked window on his side of the car tousles his hair and sends shards of sunlight sweeping across his face every time the cloud cover breaks overhead. It’s a warm day—good for this sort of excursion, he thinks.

Shouto fiddles with the zipper of his jacket, jingling metal against metal. His foot taps a downbeat while an American pop song plays faintly through the speakers of the car. He doesn’t recognize the tune.

“If I didn’t know you better, I’d assume you think I’m driving you out to the middle of nowhere to kill you,” Izuku murmurs, glancing sidelong for a moment. His gaze returns to the road, and he signals to merge into the left lane. “I’m not, just to be clear.”

Shouto cracks a small smile. “I know,” he says. “And you wouldn’t take me to the quarry to do it, anyway. You’re sneakier than that.”

“That’s rich coming from the guy who claims I breathe loudly.”

“You do. That’s indisputable.” Izuku opens his mouth to argue, but Shouto holds up a finger and cuts him off. “But, for the record, you can be sneaky when you want to be. I’ve seen you do it before. Once.”

“Once,” Izuku repeats incredulously.

“Maybe twice.”

“Asshole.”

“Hey, your mother told you to watch your language.”

Izuku’s cheeks color slightly, and he has the good sense to look infinitesimally abashed. “Well—I mean, yeah, but she’s not here right now. So, I can say what I want.”

Shouto lifts an eyebrow. He hums lightly, turning back toward the window as they pass a small collection of houses near the edge of a clump of trees a few miles off the road. “I suppose I can
refrain from telling her you said it.”

“I’m hearing a ‘but’ somewhere in there,” Izuku drawls, shifting in his seat. He glances over then back at the road. “What do you want?”

“You have to make dinner for a week.”

“Done.” Izuku flips his signal to pass a car, merging over. “Too easy.”

“And you have to do dishes, too.”

Izuku’s face crumples in an instant. “What? No. That’s— no. That’s too much. I’m already doing laundry right now.”

Shouto shrugs, sinking down into his seat. “Guess I’m telling your mom, then.”

“Oh, come on.” Izuku glances over, gaze helpless. His expression turns pleading, but Shouto merely arches a challenging eyebrow, and Izuku deflates. “Fine,” he mutters. “But if any of our forks get bent on accident, you can’t yell at me. Okay? You have to promise.”

“When have I ever yelled at you?”

“Never, but I think you’re capable. It’ll happen. Someday.” Izuku huffs, shaking his head. He glances sidelong with a frown. “I almost regret bringing you out here now. Almost.”

Shouto spares a smile, tilting his head down so his hair slips down to hide his face. His hair is just barely past his shoulders now, his signature part long lost to anxious fingers—a habit he picked up from Izuku over the last few months, unfortunately. The strands intermingle now, red with white, and Shouto finds he minds it less with each passing day.

Silence envelops them once again as the kilometers disappear behind them, but the quiet isn’t uncomfortable by any means. The music plays softly, and for one single, solitary moment, it almost feels as if they’re two normal people on a road trip. Just Shouto and Izuku, not a sidekick and a ruined former pro-hero. Shouto allows himself to take solace in this fantasy for a brief moment.

The rest of the journey takes them almost no time at all. By the time the car exits the highway and pavement turns to rough gravel, the sun is halfway between horizons and bearing down on them with pleasant springtime warmth. Shouto recognizes chain-link fences and warning signs between dense tree lines that get sparser and sparser the farther they travel, but he doesn’t bother to read any of the signs.

They cruise past broken fences and rusted strings of torn barbed wire for a quarter kilometer before Izuku stops the car in an open clearing. It’s flat and wide, about the size of a football pitch, devoid of most vegetation, and covered in dry slag leftover from when the quarry was still in operation. They’re parked somewhat near the cliffside drop-off into the glassy lake that rests a hundred feet below them, but they’re just far enough away to be safe—provided they don’t act any more recklessly than usual, that is (which is asking a lot, now that Shouto thinks about it).

Izuku kills the engine, drops the keys into the cupholder in the center of the dash, and clambers out of the car without a word, heading for the trunk. He’s humming tunelessly under his breath, brows closely knit in concentration as he no doubt checks things off invisible lists in his head. Shouto watches him in the rearview until the trunk lid obscures his view.

Shouto doesn’t reach for his seatbelt. He doesn’t make any move to get out of the car at all.
In the distance, he can see their old stargazing spot on the other side of the lake—he spies that steep incline, the old tree, the stone that looks like Cementoss if you squint—and his skin ripples at the memory of the last time he was here. A little over a year ago, he thinks. Feels like forever. Feels like no time at all.

“Hey, you coming?” Izuku calls out, his voice muffled behind glass and steel as he hauls a heavy cooler out from the trunk with one hand, two fire extinguishers clutched under his other free arm. “We’re losing daylight, dude. Get the lead out.”

Swallowing his nostalgia, Shouto fumbles with his seatbelt buckle and releases the clasp, climbing out of the car on legs much shakier than he anticipated. Without thinking, he goes for the two silver briefcases in the backseat and yanks them free, kicking the door closed behind him.

“Anything else?”

“Just my bag,” Izuku says, setting the cooler down and leaning the fire extinguishers up next to it. He quickly swipes his backpack out of the trunk and closes it with a resounding thunk, immediately unzipping the bag and digging around inside. He pulls out two pencils, a notebook, and a video camera. He smiles. “Now we’re ready to do this thing.”

Shouto stares at the camera. “No.”

Izuku blinks. “No?”

“No,” he repeats, setting the briefcases down next to the cooler. He crosses his arms over his chest. “You’re not filming—this.” He gestures vaguely to the quarry and himself. “Me. You’re not filming me.”

Izuku gives him a funny look, flipping the on switch on the camera and holding the viewfinder up to his eye. The light next to the lens blinks bright red. “What are you talking about? Of course I’m filming you. We need records of our data.”

“We need records of exactly nothing,” Shouto says, voice strained. He holds out a hand. “Records means evidence, and evidence means I don’t get my license back. Give me the camera.”

Izuku shakes his head, stepping out of range. “Shouto, I need this stuff for review later. You can’t expect me to remember everything we’re going to do today, can you? I need my data to be accurate if we’re going to do this right.”

“I’m not a science experiment.” Approaching Izuku, Shouto lifts a hand to cover the lens. He blows a few strands of hair out of his eyes with a puff, giving Izuku a faintly pleading look. “Please. Turn the damn thing off already before I melt it.”

That catches him. Izuku frowns concernedly, lowering the camera a few scant inches with Shouto’s hand following closely behind, and for a moment, Shouto doesn’t think he’s going to do it. He can sense the itch of excitement skittering beneath Izuku’s skin like an electrical current, and that childlike wonder he used to have back in high school is just as bright as it’s ever been in the depths of his eyes. Shouto feels the telltale tug of hesitance behind his sternum like a bee sting, but he holds his ground.

Thankfully, two heartbeats later, Izuku’s thumb flicks upward and flips the flyout display closed. The red light dies, and the camera turns off.

“All right,” Izuku tells him, voice tinged with disappointment. His mouth quirks upward on one side. “We’ll do this your way. No filming. I promise.”
“No secret filming, either.”

Izuku throws his hands up in the air. “Oh, for the love of— did I say anything about secret filming? No. No, I didn’t. So, calm yourself, Mr. Paranoia.”

Shouto drops his hand back to his side, and he lets out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. “Just making sure,” he mutters, playing with the zipper of his jacket. He glances out into the center of the quarry clearing and rolls his shoulders, loosening himself up. “So, how are we doing this, then? Am I just setting myself on fire or what?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Izuku sets the camera down on the cooler and brushes his hands off on his sweatpants before bracing them against his hips. He squints out into the clearing, cocking his head to one side. “I figure we can plant you right in the middle—” He points, muscles in his forearm flexing dangerously, and Shouto tries not to notice. “—and I can chill back here while we run some basic drills.”

“What kind of drills?”

“Physical ones first, then some basic Quirk drills like they had us do in school. I want to see if you still operate roughly the same without your ice, and how you’re balancing your body temperature under exertion. We can check for dehydration, new recharge rates, endurance tests—you know, simple stuff like that.”

Shouto nods slowly and unzips his jacket, folding it neatly and placing it next to the two briefcases as he begins to stretch his arms and shoulders. “All right, seems easy enough.”

Izuku nods. “To start, at least. We’ll work up to some harder things later.”

“Sounds good.”

Shouto shivers involuntarily as the breeze bites through his black t-shirt like it’s not even there, and he feels his body temperature rise automatically to counter the spring chill. If Izuku notices, he doesn’t let on, but it brings a thought to the forefront of Shouto’s mind.

“Should I change into my uniform?” he asks, flexing his bad hand as he tests pointlessly for feeling in his damaged fingertips. Habit. “If I’m going to be setting myself on fire, I don’t want to ruin my clothes.”

Izuku crouches down and pops the cooler open, grabbing a bottle of ice water and tossing it to Shouto. He frowns, considering. “I wouldn’t, no,” he says slowly. “Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“Depending on your new temperature max, you might melt through your old suit.” He laughs humorlessly, turning back to the cooler to dig himself out his own water bottle. “Now that’s some evidence we don’t need, right there. Not sure how we’d explain ourselves out of that one.”

Shouto grimaces, thinking about the distinct scent of burned Kevlar and melted spandex. Not pleasant. “Fair point. Guess I’ll do this the old-fashioned way.”

Immediately, Shouto reaches for the back collar of his shirt and pulls the garment over his head in one fluid movement, depositing it next to his jacket in a crumpled pile. The breeze hits his skin all at once, and gooseflesh ripples out across his body. The blue-black striations that mar his right forearm are stark against his pale, undamaged skin, but looking at it isn’t quite as horrifying as it once was.
Izuku looks up from the cooler, mouth open to say something, but the words stop short on his lips as his eyes snap wide. He immediately looks away, cheeks tinging a faint shade of pink. “Shit, sorry.”

Shouto arches a brow. “For what?”

“For, um. Looking. I guess?” He shakes his head. “Sorry, I just didn’t expect that.”

“I don’t want to burn my shirt,” Shouto tells him. The breeze blows hair into his eyes, and he swipes it away. “Plus, I haven’t had decent sunlight in weeks. Let me live.”

Izuku blinks, mouth opening and closing like a fish as he pointedly stares everywhere except Shouto’s bare torso. The water bottle crunches slightly in his hand. “I— right. Sunlight. Okay. Yes.”

Shouto arches an eyebrow. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. Totally. Just, uh… yeah.” He closes the cooler and shakes his head slightly, pushing himself to his feet as he passes the water bottle back and forth between his hands in time with Shouto’s heartbeat. “Anyway,” he starts, “maybe we should start with some basic running and agility tests to see how heated you get normally, then we can move to Quirk tests in the afternoon once your temperature peaks. I want to see how quickly you dehydrate under these circumstances because I have a hypothesis that it’s going to be faster, but we’ll really have to test it carefully and watch your vitals while you—”

“Do you have a hair tie?”

Izuku stops in the middle of a word. He blinks. “I— What?”

“A hair tie.” Shouto brushes his hair out of his face again, glaring at the strands as they dance wildly in the breeze. “I forgot mine, and this is going to get annoying really fast if I don’t have one.”

Izuku’s face goes strangely flat for a moment. Then, he snaps his fingers.

“Hang on a second,” he says, setting his water bottle down and heading back to the car. He goes for the passenger’s seat door and wrenches it open, ducking down to rifle through the glove box and beneath the seat. He cranes his neck and shoves his entire arm beneath the seat to feel around blindly, tongue caught between his teeth as he searches.

Shouto rocks back and forth on his heels as he waits, exhaling steam between his teeth to fend off the slight chill in the air. A moment later, Izuku’s face lights up. With an unintelligible mumble, he pulls his arm back out from underneath the car seat. Clutched between his fingers is a black elastic hair tie that looks a little worse for wear, but still useable.

“Oh, I knew it,” Izuku says, kicking the car door closed behind him as he approaches Shouto. He hold it out for Shouto to take. “Thought it was a long shot, but whatever. Found a thousand bobby pins, too, in case you need those.”

Shouto takes the hair tie with a quiet word of thanks and immediately sets to tying his hair back in a knot, frowning slightly. “How did you know it was under there?”

Izuku shrugs nonchalantly, waving a hand. “Luce always had a bad habit of leaving her hair ties in random places. So does my mom. I learned that no place is out of the question when you’re looking for one of those things.”
Shouto freezes. “So, this hair tie belongs to…”

“Probably my mom.” He rakes his fingers through his hair, shirt riding up a little bit above the waistband of his joggers in the process. He points at the messy knot at the base of Shouto’s neck. “And that probably isn’t going to stay, you know.”

Shouto shrugs, bouncing on his toes as he warms his muscles up. “Doesn’t have to stay,” he says lightly. “I’ll just put it back up.”

“Or I could braid it for you.”

Shouto stops bouncing suddenly. He studies Izuku’s face. “You know how to braid,” he says flatly.

Izuku rubs the back of his neck. “I… yeah. Kind of.”

“Kind of?”

Izuku winces, shuffling his feet in the gravel. “Well, Lucy always used to French braid her hair before runs and stuff, y’know? But she got tired of doing it herself, so she taught me a few years back.” He gestures vaguely to Shouto’s hair which, sure enough, is already starting to fall out of its knot. “You’ve got enough that I could probably do something with it. If you wanted, that is. No pressure.”

Shouto considers it. It would certainly be nice to have his hair out of his face for good, but at the same time—

No.

“I think I’ll be fine,” he says quietly, knowing full well his hair will fall down in a matter of minutes. “Thank you though.”

Izuku almost looks relieved. He nods. “Right. Okay. Then let’s get started.”

Chapter End Notes
With Flame Incandescent

Chapter Summary

Izuku sets Shouto on fire. For science.

Chapter Notes

Long time no see. Happy quarantine, everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Being back at the quarry again heralds memories of that intoxicating, familiar breathlessness of infinity that used to come with stargazing and all the other stupid shit Izuku did when he was younger. It’s a raw sort of sensation, like the scraped palms he and Shouto would get when vaulting those chain-link fences or clambering up the steep hillside they once claimed as their own. Cold, but not unpleasant against the open wound. Achingly nostalgic. Theirs.

Admittedly, there’s something empty about the air out here now that Izuku’s older and more aware of these sorts of things. It’s absent of the typical city smog he’s long since grown used to tasting on the back of his tongue every morning, but he can’t exactly say he minds it, even if he prefers not to think about the last time he and Shouto were here together. The memory twists his stomach, and he winces. Focus.

The hood of his mother’s car is warm enough beneath his thighs where he sits, and he exhales softly as he frowns at the stopwatch on his phone. The callused pads of his fingers catch against the cracked screen while the numbers tick upward one by one. Pointedly, Izuku’s gaze shifts to Shouto’s form across the wide clearing. He’s on the tenth lap of his cooldown, cheeks flushed and teeth gritted as he turns into the home stretch, making a haggard beeline for Izuku and the car. His fists are clenched in white-knuckled determination, but his form is impeccable despite it all. He’s made decent time. Not great time, admittedly, but still. Decent.

Biting his lip, Izuku taps his phone screen and scribbles Shouto’s final time down in the notebook in his lap. It’s better than his original estimate.

“Oh not bad,” Izuku calls out distractedly, not looking up from his notes as Shouto’s footsteps crunch closer and closer across the gravel clearing. Izuku points blindly at the cooler by the front tire of the car. “Get some water before you die, dude. How you feelin’?”

Shouto stumbles to a stop in front of the car, bracing his hands on his knees as he doubles over to gasp for air. His hair is sweat-dampened and falling out of its knot in a mess of multicolored tangles (shocking, Izuku thinks dryly), and there’s a fine sheen sweat coating the muscles of his back and shoulders.

“Feel like I could start a forest fire,” Shouto wheezes, chest heaving. He leans back up to his full height with a sharp inhale, lacing his fingers behind his neck and exposing the long column of his pale throat. Jesus Christ. “Or… fuck, I don’t know. Dead. I feel a little dead.”
Izuku nods with a thoughtful hum, scribbling useless symbols and squiggles into the margins of his notebook just so his hands have something to do. “Well, at least you’re not as out of shape as I thought you’d be. That’s something.”

Shouto glares flatly. “Your confidence is inspiring.”

“You know it.” Izuku flashes a plastic smile, but it falls off his face quickly. He jabs his pencil toward the cooler again. “Now drink water, I’m serious. We’ve still got a few things to do before we leave.”

Shouto drops his head back and groans tiredly, trudging toward the cooler for another bottle and muttering curses under his breath the whole time. Stooping down toward the cooler, he reaches in and grabs a fresh bottle before twisting the cap off and draining it in ten seconds flat. A few rivulets of water slip past the corners of his mouth to trace his jawline and drip into the hollows over his collarbones, trailing down between his pectoral muscles and into the valleys between his abs. Izuku watches with wide eyes as Shouto wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and tosses the spent bottle onto the pile with the others, sucking air through his teeth. His breathing finally begins to level out.

Izuku’s grip on his pencil is crushing. He makes a conscious effort not to snap it in two. He shouldn’t be looking. He shouldn’t be noticing anything aside from Shouto’s body temperature (a ripe 180°, last they checked), his running times, and the way his damaged fingers don’t seem to fumble with things half as often as they used to. They’re here for science, dammit, not this. It’s ridiculous, it’s desperate, it’s—god, it’s like high school all over again, really, and that’s sort of the worst thing about it.

“I need to get laid,” Izuku mutters under his breath in English.

Shouto looks over, eyebrows raised. “What was that?”

“Nothing! I’m— uh, not. No. It’s nothing.” Izuku rubs a hand over his warm face and squeezes his eyes shut, shaking his head slightly to clear the thoughts from his mind. He lets out a long sigh. “Sorry. I’m just… hungry. I think. Been out here a while.”

Shouto frowns faintly but doesn’t press, thankfully. With a nod of quiet understanding, he leans a hip against the car and crosses his arms over his chest, squinting out across the clearing toward the cliffside and the lake below them. “Do you want to go home?”

Izuku shakes his head, flipping to another page in his notebook full of cramped scribbles and illegible shorthand. “Not yet,” he murmurs, poring over the bullet list near the margin. “Just a few things left to do. Next up is—”

“Please don’t make me run again.” Shouto’s voice is strained.

Izuku glances at him sidelong, smirking. “I mean, I could.”

Shouto’s expression flattens. “I will steal the car and leave you here. Swear to god.”

“I’d still get home before you.”

Shouto rolls his eyes and waves dismissively, scattering sparks in the air with the motion. “Fuck it, whatever,” he grumbles. “So, what’s next?”

“Quirk tests.” Snapping his notebook shut, Izuku pushes off the hood of the car and snatches up
the nearby fire extinguisher with a smile. “It’s time to actually start setting you on fire.”

Shouto lets out a low exhale and nods solemnly, brows knitted as his jaw works silently for several seconds as if considering something. It’s not the response Izuku expects from him—he was expecting something more along the lines of a vicious eye roll or a crisp “fine, I don’t care” paired with Shouto’s signature pained grimace. Of all the banal physical tests they’ve done for the last few hours, this is the only time he’s hesitated.

Lowering the fire extinguisher, Izuku’s expression creases with concern. “You good?”

Shouto nods, glancing away. “Yeah,” he says, flexing his hands at his sides. He winces, rubbing the palm of his right hand. “Yeah, sorry, I’m… fine.”

Izuku raises a skeptical eyebrow. “You don’t look fine.”

“I’m fine.” Shouto bites out, and Izuku’s eyebrows fly up into his hairline. A terse silence falls between them, but a moment later, Shouto rubs the back of his neck and glances out toward the clearing with a wince. “Where do you want me?”

Izuku hesitates. He considers pressing Shouto for more information, to see if he can drag the answer out of him kicking and screaming like he usually does. It’s not like it would be hard.

But maybe this isn’t the time for that sort of inquisition. Maybe they’re better off finishing the tests and going home for dinner.

Letting out a soft exhale, Izuku points toward the center of the shale-covered clearing. “Wherever. Somewhere out there, I guess.”

Shouto nods tersely and heads out, taking his spot and grinding his heels between the loose gravel at his feet. His jaw is set, fists clenched, and there’s a restless sort of energy rippling beneath his skin that comes off him in hazy waves of heat.

At this distance it’s hard to tell, but for a moment, Izuku swears he sees a faint tremble in Shouto’s right hand. Something cold twists in his chest.

“Anything specific you want me to do?” Shouto calls out, tucking a few loose strands of hair behind his ear as the breeze picks up. He bounces on his toes, and tendrils of smoke begin to emanate off his left shoulder. “Or do you just want me to light up normally and see what happens?”

Izuku pulls the pin on the fire extinguisher and tucks it in his pocket—just in case. “I’m not sure. What’s normal for you at this point?”

At this, Shouto hesitates. He bites his lower lip, and his hands clench at his sides. “I… don’t know,” he admits, almost too quiet to be heard.

Izuku forces a small, crooked smile and shrugs lightly. “Fuck around and find out then, I guess,” he says. He nods in Shouto’s direction. “Come on, hotman, flame up.”

Shouto’s face twists, the moment shattered, and he recoils. “I’m sorry, did you just call me hotman?”

Izuku drops his head back with an exasperated sigh. “Will you just get burning already? We have to be back by dinnertime.”

Shouto gives him a dirty look that says we will talk about this later. He mutters something under
his breath but squares his shoulders and allows his eyes to drift shut as he concentrates on activating his fire.

For a moment, nothing happens. Izuku shifts his weight, glancing from side to side as he waits for ignition, but as the seconds drag on, he starts to wonder if Shouto’s really even trying. He almost calls out to see if everything’s all right. It usually doesn’t take Shouto any time at all to activate his flames, but maybe things are different now. He wouldn’t know.

Then he sees it. It’s small flame at first, flickering like a candle where it’s attached to the curve of Shouto’s muscled shoulder, but soon the blaze begins to spread outward, sweeping over inch upon inch of pale skin to engulf him all the way from neck to fingertip. The flames are a pleasant orange color, and Izuku can feel their heat from here. Pretty normal.

Shouto is studying his own arm with a frown, spreading his fingers and stretching his arm this way and that to see if he missed any spots. Cautious optimism etches itself into the set of his mouth, but his eyes are narrowed—he doesn’t trust it.

“How’s it feel?” Izuku asks over the quiet crackles of his flames, taking a few steps closer and circling around toward Shouto’s left side. Izuku’s got the extinguisher tucked under his arm, braced against his hip as he tilts his head to look Shouto’s arm up and down. “Any major differences?”


Izuku blinks. “Cold?”

Shouto nods, still transfixed by his own flames. “Yeah, just a bit.” He makes a fist and sparks burst outward in a small cloud, floating on the breeze in Izuku’s direction before they dissipate. “I suppose I’m used to my blue flames, so orange feels… weird. Been a while.”

Izuku relaxes, nodding. “Any difficulty controlling it?”

“No,” Shouto answers firmly. “I can go hotter.”

Izuku taps his fingers against the body of the fire extinguisher, considering it. Something uneasy pricks at the back of his mind, quiet and insidious as it takes hold in the soft soil of his mind. Izuku knows Shouto can go hotter. That isn’t the problem here.

“Why don’t you take it easy for now,” Izuku suggests gently, rocking back and forth on his heels as he plays with the words inside his mouth. “Cause if things really have changed, we probably shouldn’t mess with this too much until we know what those changes are. We don’t know what your new balance is like.”

But Shouto shakes his head, gaze narrowing as he studies his hand. It’s almost as if he didn’t hear Izuku at all. “Hang on, I’m gonna keep going,” he says.

Izuku’s stomach twists. “Shou, wait—”

Orange bleeds into brilliant blue like a ripple almost instantly, the flames spreading further down Shouto’s chest toward his navel in a lush layer of vibrant heat. His left cheek flickers with flames smaller than the ones blazing on his shoulder, and his eyes light up with something that can only be described as joy. Shouto even lets out a small, breathy laugh that sends something skittering down the length of Izuku’s spine, but he doesn’t have the mental capacity to worry about any of that right now. All he can think about is how stunning Shouto looks bathed in those blue flames, despite the
fact that he’s seen it a thousand times before. There’s something different about seeing Shouto exist in his element again after all this time, refreshed and happy and free.

Izuku takes a few steps backward, feeling the heat penetrate the fabric of his t-shirt like it’s not even there; those flames are overwhelming enough to suck the oxygen dry from his lungs. Breathtaking.

“All right,” he wheezes, taking another step away from Shouto until he can breathe easily again. He coughs slightly and waves some smoke out of his face. “Uh, how’s that feel? Any different than before?”

Shouto shakes his head, not looking up as he spreads his fingers out across his flame-engulfed abdomen, completely entranced. The loose strands of hair around his face float weightlessly amongst the heat. “Feels… nice,” he manages, mouth curving into a faint smile that makes something in Izuku’s chest seize up. “Really nice.”

One side of Izuku’s mouth quirks upward. “Someone’s getting sentimental.”

Shouto glances over, gaze flat and unimpressed. “Shouldn’t you be taking notes right now?”

“Nah, this is just a test run. I’ll take notes later.” Izuku waves him off. “How’s your control feel? Good?”

Shouto’s fingers flex dangerously, and a brighter blaze engulfs his hand in a flash before it dies back down. His eyes are brilliant as he nods. “Feels fucking amazing.”

Izuku’s lips curve slightly. “Must be nice to stretch yourself after being inside for so long.”

“You have no idea,” Shouto exhales. Eyes narrowing in concentration, he extends his arm upward and sends a column of flames roaring into the sky, burning and swirling violently in a blinding blaze of solid blue-black heat. Izuku staggers backwards, grip tightening on the fire extinguisher, but Shouto doesn’t seem frightened. In fact, he’s thrilled.

“God, this feels so good,” Shouto marvels almost to himself, turning his hand over. He looks over at Izuku with bright eyes. “I’m not crazy, am I? This is really working?”

Izuku shrugs. “Seems to be, but I wouldn’t know. It’s not my power.”

“You’ve worked with me though. You know what my flames are like normally.”

That’s… true, Izuku supposes, biting his lip. To an extent, at least. He knows Shouto’s flames as well as any sidekick can know their hero’s powerset—he’s familiar with the feeling of searing heat cutting through the fabric of his costume in the middle of a shootout, or the trademark dryness left in the air after Shouto leaves a room. There’s something unforgettable about that sort of power once you’ve been exposed to it, especially when it’s wielded by someone with as much control and narrow-eyed focus as Shouto. Izuku’d be hard-pressed to forget the feeling of those world-famous flames any time soon.

“I suppose it feels the same as before,” he hedges carefully. Another though occurs to him. “How’s your right side handling the strain? Any imbalances?”

Shouto frowns, reaching up and dragging the deadened fingers of his right hand through the flames on his forearm almost experimentally. After a moment, his brow twitches and he pulls his hand back with a disappointed frown. He touches his thumb to his index finger, then middle, ring, pinkie, and back again one by one—a habit he’s picked up in recent weeks, Izuku knows. A
standard test for feeling that never seems to yield results.

“No. Doesn’t seem like it,” Shouto answers, though his tone is more subdued than before. He drops his right hand back to his side, fist tightening. His mouth twitches downward. “Does feel a bit like I’m leaning my weight on one foot more than the other now though. Figuratively speaking.”

Izuku logs this information away for later, pressing his fingers against his mouth in thought as his mind cycles endlessly on a loop. Shouto’s stance is relaxed, face smooth and serene as he bathes in the warmth of his fire, totally trusting in his own element like a bird kept from the sky for too long. There’s something unforgettable about this moment, even though Izuku knows memory is the furthest thing from air-tight—given time, he’ll forget shapes, the flavor of the air, half-colors and partial tones of shadow, and the particular angle of Shouto’s wavering smile. Izuku’s halfway tempted to take it all at face value right then and there, to tuck it away on a shelf in his mind and move on from this to the next big thing in front of them both.

But he can’t do that. He can’t.

Izuku tastes smoke on the back of his tongue, and he drops his gaze to his feet as his brows furrow. Admittedly, there’s very little he wouldn’t do to keep that peaceful expression on Shouto’s face for the next millennia or two, but something tickles at the back of his mind, reminding him that they’re here for a reason. It’s back at their apartment spelled out in piles of ash and curls of melted, half-peeled paint, and no matter how much he wants to, he can’t ignore that.

None of this explains last night, he thinks, glancing back up through his lashes to watch Shouto shoot off a few more small, experimental plumes of fire up into the air. Someone with that much control shouldn’t have burned their bedroom to a crisp without a good fucking reason. We’re missing something.

Glancing back at the car, Izuku spies his notebook. He should probably write some of this down before he forgets it. Then they can start their temperature tests.

Izuku sets the fire extinguisher down and waves a hand to get Shouto’s attention as he begins trekking across the clearing to get his notebook. “Go ahead and power down,” he calls out. “I need to take some notes real quick. Five-minute break?”

Shouto nods, rolling his shoulders. “Sounds good.”

“Rehydrate while you’re at it.”

“Sure thing.”

Turning to walk away, Izuku’s steps crunch noisily against the sharp shale beneath his sneakers, and he stuffs his hands in his pockets as he runs basic calculations in his mind to lay a groundwork. His flash point might be different, we need to figure out how hot he needs to be to ignite. What’s his fuel source now? What was it before? Can’t believe I never bothered to ask back when we were—

The scent of smoke draws his attention once again, dragging him from his thoughts. Izuku looks over with a frown. Shouto is still in the center of the clearing, painted blue with the tongues of fast-moving flames. Nothing has changed.

Izuku stops walking. “Uh. Is everything okay?”

Shouto nods tersely. “Everything’s fine.”
“Are you sure?” Izuku shifts from foot to foot. “’Cause you don’t look—”

“I know,” Shouto says, tone clipped. He’s frowning, glaring down at his left hand as if it’s offended him, and his jaw is set. “I’m trying to put it out,” he mutters.

“You can’t turn it off?”

“Yes, I can.” Shouto’s hand is shaking, and he reaches up to grip his left wrist as if to strangle and drain the energy from his fingers and pull the flames from his skin like loose threads. He grits his teeth. “It’s just… taking a minute.”

Izuku’s skin prickles like there’s a piece of hair too close to his face, and in that moment, he considers the options laid out before him. He eyes the fire extinguisher where he left it across the clearing, probably a good twenty feet away; it’s a smear of red against dull grey, bright enough to leave an afterimage on the backs of his eyelids. The quarry lake sits about a hundred feet below the cliffside, cool and placid and impossibly deep, almost as if the sky tipped over and emptied itself into the earth. *Worst case scenario.*

Izuku doesn’t move. Instead, he waits. Maybe Shouto’s just out of practice.

*One Mississippi,* he hears in the back of his mind. The voice is not his own, tinged with a blunt American accent. *Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi.*

*Four.*

Across the clearing, Shouto shudders and his face twists in pain. It all happens rather quickly after that.

Starting at the tips of his pale fingers, Shouto’s blue flames sputter and pop like firecrackers, bleeding out their brilliant color—paler, *paler*—until they burn white-hot against his skin in an uncontrollable blaze. The flames are steady in the breeze, unflinching like a welder’s torch. Izuku watches the white stain spread across his torso and up his arm in horror, fear, fascination, *fuck,* he isn’t sure—he can’t move, can’t even breathe. There’s no more oxygen in his lungs as the white flames overtake Shouto’s left arm, shoulder, and chest.

Shouto staggers backwards with a hiss and falls heavily to one knee as he holds his arm out away from his body, eyes squeezed shut against the light. His hair is blown back from his face and the waistband of his joggers is starting to char and smolder. He’s *shaking.* He’s shaking and stumbling and there’s too much heat, too bright, too hot, too much, too *much.* Izuku thinks Shouto’s saying something. *What is he saying?*

Izuku comes back into his own body all at once and lurches forward to do… something. What, he isn’t sure, but *something.* Before his thoughts can catch up with him however, Izuku finds himself colliding with a wall of solid heat that dries his eyes out and sucks the oxygen from his body like a leech, forcing him to stumble backwards or be roasted alive. He throws an arm over his eyes to shield himself from the blinding blaze; the hairs on his forearm begin to smolder.

“*Shouto,*” he yells over the roar of the fire, choking on dry air and staggering toward where he left the extinguisher. The earth bends beneath his feet, the air feels like crumpled paper and peeling sunburns, and the extinguisher is still so *fucking* far away. “Shouto, you’ve got to turn it off!”

“I’m trying!” Shouto shouts back, but there’s pain in his voice. He’s stretched thin, ready to snap, smolder, and burn to ash. He pitches forward on his knees with a ragged exhale, catching and holding himself up with his damaged arm while the wildfire continues to rage across his skin. His
elbow shudders under his weight.

Izuku sprints across the clearing and slides to a clumsy stop near the extinguisher, grasping the curved body of the metal canister before he drops it with a sharp, unbidden swear. His palm is red and raw from the brief contact, already starting to blister in certain spots. Only now does he notice the peeling label, safety tag, and flaccid hose—the plastic parts of the extinguisher are melting. Jesus Christ.

*Plan B,* Izuku thinks to himself, looking around wildly as his lungs fight for oxygen amongst the smoke and unbearable heat. He eyes the cliffside, but the drop is too far to simply shove Shouto down there—with the water being that far, he’ll die on impact. Izuku would have to break the fall for him somehow, but even then, that requires getting close enough to grab him and haul him over there, and getting close means—

A thought occurs to him.

Izuku turns back toward him, gritting his teeth and taking an unbearable step forward through the waves of heat emanating from Shouto’s body. He’s crumpled up on the ground in the center of a ring of red-hot stones that glow like embers, and Izuku’s shoes stick to the ground like warm taffy in some places, but he pretends not to notice. Bigger problems, *always* bigger. He can see a disturbing lacework of veins glowing in various shades of orange and red beneath the skin of Shouto’s neck and jaw as he gets closer, and that in and of itself is concerning. He looks ready to pass out or immolate on the spot, whichever comes first.

Izuku stops fifteen feet away from Shouto’s crumpled form; he’s gasping for air and trembling like a leaf—he’s not close enough to burn alive, but close enough to matter, and that’s all he really needs. Shouto is kneeling on the ground, shoulders hunched and breathing haggardly as his fingers curl amongst the red-hot stones surrounding him.

Gritting his teeth, Izuku outstretches his right arm and steadies it with his left, fingers wrapping tightly around his wrist to keep himself from faltering.

“Please, please work,” he prays to absolutely no one as he curves his middle finger against his thumb and braces himself. This will either solve the problem or make things much, much worse.

With a flash of green sparks, Izuku flicks his finger. All at once, the air shifts direction, sweeping across the clearing in a gale-force wind worthy of the strongest storm. The red-hot gravel dulls in color for a moment as the air cools and smoke dissipates, and trees in the distance bend in submission as Shouto is forced to roll limply onto his back with a shallow wheeze. His flames aren’t out yet, but they’re blue in places now, interspersed with orange. Izuku’s chest seizes with hope.

He grits his teeth and flicks his finger again, then once more for good measure. Winds surge, taking with them the scent of smoke in the air and the dry lack of oxygen, and inch by inch, Shouto’s flames begin to go out. His head is tipped back against the rocks in the center of the clearing; his chest heaves, gasping for air he can’t seem to get enough of, and he’s covered in soot streaked with sweat. His eyes are closed. His fingers twitch at his sides.

Hand still poised and ready to fire off another gale force wind (just in case), Izuku takes a few tentative steps forward now that he’s able to stand the temperature. Shouto doesn’t move from where he’s laid out on the ground, nor does he look up at Izuku’s approach. His eyes remain closed as his breathing evens out, chest rising and falling steadily.

Well, shit. Is he unconscious? Biting his lip, Izuku nudges Shouto in the ribs with the toe of his
sneaker, then jumps back and braces his finger against his thumb once again, ready to go. Shouto’s face contorts slightly at the touch, but he doesn’t say anything or make a move to get up. Frowning, Izuku shuffles close again and nudges him a little harder this time.

At first, nothing happens. Panic seizes Izuku, cold and clawing. Then—

“Ow,” Shouto says flatly.

Shouto cracks one eye open, squinting upward into the sunlight to look at Izuku. He looks tired, split apart and hollowed out, but Izuku’s never been more relieved to see him in such a state in his entire damned life.

Izuku drops his arm back to his side with a sharp exhale, raking his fingers through his hair with a breathless laugh. “Jesus Christ, dude,” he says, shaking his head. “You— what the hell was that back there?”

“Dunno,” Shouto croaks, then coughs slightly. “Wasn’t very fun, whatever it was.”

His cheeks are streaked with soot, eyes ringed with shades of violet exhaustion. With a rattling sigh, he drops his head back against the ground, then points blindly toward the car.

“Water,” he groans. “Please.”

Izuku nods frantically. He nearly stumbles over his own feet as he jogs toward the cooler and snatches an armload of water bottles, bringing them over and dumping them on the ground in a pile at Shouto’s side. Shouto grabs a bottle with a wince and uncaps it with clumsy fingers, dumping the contents all over his face and chest. Steam sizzles at the contact, and he releases a slow, smooth breath as his eyes roll back into his head.

“Fuck me,” Shouto says softly after the steam has dissipated. His skin gleams wetly in the sunlight. “That… sucked.”

Understatement of the century, but sure, that’s one word for it. Izuku lowers himself to the ground and crosses his legs, bracing his elbows against his knees as he thinks about what to say next. He parses through his words with care, ignoring the dozens of questions that war for dominance in the back of his mind.

He settles on something simple to start. “Are you okay?” he asks.

Shouto gazes up at the sky. “I don’t know. Hard to tell right now.” He grabs a fresh water bottle and presses it against his forehead, and Izuku watches raptly as condensation drips past Shouto’s temple and disappears into his hairline. “I’m… tired,” he says quietly after a moment. “And thirsty. Feels like I’m about to fall out of my own skin or something.”

Izuku blinks. “Now that’s a mental image.”

Shouto shrugs, pressing the bottle to the side of his neck. “S’what it feels like,” he mutters. “Don’t know how else to describe it.”

“Have you ever gone that hot before?”

Shouto’s brow knits as he thinks about it. He shakes his head. “Not like that, no. Something similar happened at the hospital after my accident, but it was only for a second. Didn’t think much of it.”

“The hospital?” Izuku repeats, eyebrows flying up. “Shouto, that was weeks ago.”
“It was barely for a second. I figured it’d balance out and go away after a while.” Gritting his teeth, Shouto hauls himself into a seated position. He twists off the cap of his water bottle and takes a desperate gulp, then one more. He drains the bottle in a matter of seconds, immediately reaching for another one from the pile. “But I’ve never done that before,” he says lowly, shaking his head. “Whatever it was.”

Izuku thinks about it, then shrugs. “Well, whatever it was, it was really fucking awesome.” Shouto gives him a look, but Izuku holds up a placating hand. “I mean, it was definitely scary. Obviously. But still, it was pretty cool to watch. Kind of like seeing a star go supernova, or a volcano explode. Something like that.”

Shouto arches an eyebrow. “Poetic.”

Izuku shoves Shouto’s shoulder with an amused huff. “I’m serious, that’s what it looked like! I’ve never seen you do anything like that before. It was…” Terrifying, stunning, incredible, absolutely petrifying. A million words come to mind but all of them reek of inadequacy and half-truths. Izuku wants to stuff them back down his throat as quickly as they appear. He bites his tongue and tastes blood. How do you describe the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?

“No.” Shouto’s expression is stony, and Izuku clacks his own teeth together. Shouto shakes his head. “At that temperature, even if I managed to get it under control… I think it would only serve to hurt people.”

In the distance, the sun sets over the horizon; the sky above them is painted in rich swaths of rose gold and amber. Shouto’s skin gleams beneath the sun’s fading scrutiny, and despite the fact he’s about as drained and wrung out as an old sponge, there’s a distinct sort of energy running beneath his skin that Izuku can’t quite identify. Like a flat image come to life, Shouto looks more like himself than he has since that building fell on him back in March. It’s written in the curve of his spine, the rigid muscles of his forearms, and the sharp cut of his jaw against the horizon—he’s breathing on his own again, colored in at the corners and fucking alive, and Izuku almost dares to feel a shred of hope for them both in that moment.
How do you describe the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?

Izuku has a feeling he’d describe it sort of like that.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Time passes. Someone starts to fall in love again.

(Also, happy birthday to this fic. It's officially two years old. Champagne and strippers for everyone! Hooray!)

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So You Run on Gasoline

Chapter Summary

“I can’t fly, Izuku.”

Izuku’s face sours and he huffs. “Well, not with that attitude.”

Chapter Notes

yes, this update is coming two days after the last one. no, you are not seeing things. we love a good quarantine update schedule, hm? yesyes indeed

chapter title is taken from Halsey's song "Gasoline" bc that's what i listened to when i wrote part of it and honestly ive had a bit of wine at this point so we out here vibin. also my editor is a little tipsy too. we'll fix typos in the morning lmao

cheers, bitches. i love you all to bits.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s a predictable pattern they fall into after that day at the quarry, and one Shouto doesn’t altogether mind. His days no longer bleed together within the claustrophobic confines of the apartment; rather, each day is doled out in manageable portions and kept to a strict schedule that helps him breathe a little easier in the mornings. The changes aren’t noticeable to anyone outside the little bubble they’ve created for each other, but he supposes that’s all right. In fact, he quite prefers it.

Their days always begin the same way now: an alarm blares from Izuku’s phone (an annoyingly catchy song by Hall & Oates that sticks in Shouto’s head for hours after the fact) and an irritated groan from one of them, sometimes both. The song always wakes Shouto from his futon on the floor of Izuku’s room, but it only wakes Izuku about half of the time, he’s discovered. Izuku sleeps like the dead these days, splayed out across his mattress with disastrous hair and a drool stain on his pillow, and nothing outside of an air horn or the sweet wrath of God ever seems to wake him up before he’s good and ready. Shouto doesn’t have an air horn, however, so he usually settles for reaching over blindly and grabbing Izuku’s sheets. He yanks them off rudely and doesn’t feel even the slightest bit bad about it.

“Wake up,” Shouto grumbles, flipping over and covering his head with his pillow to block out the sunlight streaming through the window. Izuku stirs but doesn’t make any moves to get up, reaching clumsily for sheets that aren’t there any longer. Shouto glares up at him from the floor, peeking out from under his pillow. He pokes Izuku’s forearm where it hangs over the side of the bed. “Wake up. I hate that fucking song.”

“Mm. Great song,” Izuku mumbles sleepily before rolling over, burying his face in his own pillow.
The song continues to loop for the fifth time, phone vibrating wildly on Izuku’s nightstand. Shouto feels the vibrations in his teeth.

With a huff, he sits up and reaches for the device, yanking it off the charger with a little more force than necessary. He hits the snooze button, then tosses it haphazardly onto Izuku’s bed. It lands in the center of his broad shoulders, sliding down the valley of his spine to settle in the dip of his lower back.

“Ow,” Izuku says, his voice muffled through the pillow.

Shouto flops back down, unsympathetic. “Get up. You’re going to be late for patrol.”

It works to rouse him about three times out of five, but Shouto supposes he’s faced worse odds before, so he takes what he can get. One way or another, Izuku always manages to slide out of bed and lumber over toward his closet, grabbing his compression suit and uniform before shouldering through the door on his way to the bathroom down the hall. The shower hisses, and Shouto sinks back into the softness of his futon, relishing the warmth of his blankets and the relative quiet of Izuku’s bedroom. It’s not the worst way to start the day, admittedly. Just different.

They eat their breakfast together every morning at the kitchen island after Izuku’s shower, arguing lightly over crosswords and stupid advice columns before Izuku leaves at 9 AM sharp to go to work. Shouto is always hollower after he leaves—a little less there, a little more antsy—and despite the seemingly endless amount of time allotted to him for self-reflection these days, he can’t quite put his finger on why.

Maybe he’s too comfortable in this arrangement. Maybe spending all this time together trapped in this safehouse while anti-hero protests rage in the city has rotted his brain a bit, or perhaps he’s just not getting enough sun. He needs a goddamn hobby other than crocheting and reading shitty YA novels on his Kindle, and he needs to move. That day at the quarry left an itch beneath his skin, one he can’t satisfy while he’s stuck within city limits and hiding from a villain that may or may not exist at all, and confined in the apartment by himself, he’s all the more aware of it. But there’s only so much he can do.

To make up for this deficit, Shouto spends his time watering his plants, listening to news reports, and shoving furniture aside so he can make enough space to exercise in the living room while Izuku’s gone for the day. He defaults back to his old regimens in addition to the physical therapy sessions he still attends for his right arm, and he does his best to while away the hours by any means necessary. He cleans the apartment, making sure to keep his old bedroom door shut at all times, and he spends his afternoons baking sourdough bread in between chapters of his latest book—a novel about some girl with supernatural powers and a boy with way too much personality for the both of them. On top of it all, he watches his temperature carefully, sticking a thermometer beneath his tongue every hour to record the results for Izuku in the notebooks that now live on the coffee table in the living room in a haphazard pile.

Selfishly, Shouto looks forward to Izuku’s days off the most. On those days, they drive down to the quarry equipped with three fire extinguishers—one for of obvious reasons, another for just in case, and a third for Izuku’s peace of mind, even if it is a little overkill in Shouto’s opinion. They also bring along enough ice water to drown in and stacks of notebooks with charred edges and bent spiral bindings filled from cover to cover with equations and other thermodynamic gibberish. The agency’s been so concerned with the protests downtown that they’re barely lifted a finger to check on Shouto and Izuku in their safehouse since late April; they take what free time they can get with greedy, clawing hands and don’t feel the least bit bad about any of it, even though they probably should. What Momo doesn’t know won’t kill her. Right?
Despite the gnawing of guilt in his stomach, Shouto relishes the hours they spend at that quarry. He always feels more alive beneath the unbearable press of the sun overhead, breathing a little easier as flames dance along his skin in controlled patches of orange and blue. He’s had some flare-ups of white fire of course, but Izuku has always been there to put him out just as quickly with a gale-force wind, a fire extinguisher, or even in one panicked case, the quarry lake.

“Sorry! I panicked,” Izuku had said after the fact, crouching down near the edge of the water and offering Shouto an outstretched hand in place of an olive branch. He’d been smiling down at him apologetically at the time, but Shouto could see the amusement glittering in his eyes—subtle, but clearly there. That fucker.

So, Shouto clasped Izuku’s hand, and with a sharp yank, he pulled Izuku into the water with him with a splash, ignoring his squawk of protest and flailing limbs. It was worth it to see those curls plastered to his freckled face, expression split apart with shock and bewilderment and maybe just a little bit of fun. Intoxicating.

Shouto trains hard, despite it all. He bleeds and sweats and breaks a little more every time they visit the quarry, and he focuses on little else outside of the ticking timer in the back of his mind. It gets louder with each passing day, and the seconds seem to move quicker as April blurs into May, summer creeping around the corner to show its face in flashes of warm sunlight and unbearably thick humidity.

His licensure reevaluation is in a month and a half, about halfway through July. It’s not enough time, but they’ll have to make it work. They have no other choice. He practices tirelessly with his flames, they spar together occasionally, and he runs countless kilometers every day—and sure, Shouto hates running just as much as he did back in high school and every day of his career after that, but without his ice at his disposal, he needs to start compensating. He’s realistic if nothing else.

“Your primary method of transportation is fucked,” Izuku tells him bluntly one afternoon in early May. Shouto’s laid back against the hood of the car, skin streaked with ash and sweat from their experiments, and Izuku sits next to him with his legs crossed and a notebook settled against his thigh. His glasses slip down his nose as he frowns at his notes. “If you want even half of your maneuverability back, we’ve got to get you trained up for some endurance running. Or something.”

Shouto’s legs burn, but not because of his Quirk. He drops his head back against the hot metal car hood with a thunk. “Fine,” he mutters. “Am I allowed to complain about it?”

“Well, duh. Figured that went without saying.” Izuku’s face alights with curiosity, and he pokes Shouto’s ribs with the end of his pencil. “Unless you want to test—”

“I can’t fly, Izuku.”

Izuku’s face sours and he huffs. “Well, not with that attitude,” he mutters. Shouto shoves him off the car.

Still, Izuku drills him relentlessly, fully aware of the time limit set before them. He takes pages upon pages of notes on Shouto’s performance every training session, and during breaks, cooldown periods, and sometimes even dinner and breakfast at the apartment, he goes over these results with Shouto. He records running times, Shouto’s internal temperature under stress, certain things that seem to trigger his white fire flare-ups—that, in particular, seems to correlate directly to the length of time Shouto spends burning and his emotional state at the time of ignition, but the details are fuzzy. Sometimes he burns a little brighter after a sneeze. Other times, his veins begin to glow beneath his skin when a cold chill comes through, or when they run out of milk for the fifth time.
that week because Izuku has some weird obsession with calcium.

Too many outliers. Too much inconclusive data. The pattern simply isn’t there.

Shouto can see how much it frustrates Izuku to not know the triggers of his white fire—he’s always been a master of deductive reasoning and figuring out the impossible. This shouldn’t be any different. Hell, if anything, it should be easier with all the data they’re recording.

They’re in the living room one night, take-out boxes tucked in their laps as Jeopardy plays quietly in the background. Izuku sits at the coffee table with his ankles crossed, notebooks spread out in front of him as he twirls a pencil hypnotically between his fingers, muttering words under his breath. Shouto reclines on the sofa, taking up the whole space while he picks through his soba with chopsticks, not really paying attention. His eyes dart back and forth between Trebek and Izuku every few minutes, but Izuku’s too lost in his notes to notice the Daily Double flashing across the screen.

“What is Cloud Gate,” Shouto murmurs idly to no one, poking at his noodles. He eyes Izuku—that crease between his brows has been there for at least the last half hour, maybe more. He clears his throat. “Your food’s going to get cold, you know.”

Izuku looks up distractedly, pencil ceasing its movements between his index and middle finger. That brow crease deepens even more, if that’s possible. “Hm?”

“I said your food’s going to get cold.” Shouto jabs his chopsticks at the barely touched box of takeout in Izuku’s lap. He glances back at the television. “And you just missed the Daily Double. You would’ve gotten it, too.”

Izuku blinks, eyes bleary. “Oh,” he says numbly. He glances at the screen, light playing across his features in artificial stains of blue and white; the shadows beneath his eyes are especially deep tonight. “I’m— right, sorry. Wasn’t paying attention.”

Shouto shrugs, digging through his noodles a bit. “Nothing to apologize for,” he says, sinking back into the couch cushions. “You should eat, though.”

In his peripherals, Shouto watches as Izuku takes off his glasses with a soft sigh, folding them up and setting them neatly on the coffee table next to his notebooks. His hair’s a disheveled mess tonight, windblown and tangled from patrol that morning, but he’s only got minor scrapes and bruises leftover, so that’s something to be thankful for. Shouto’s also pretty sure he’s worn that vintage All Might shirt around the apartment for the better part of three days at this point, but he hasn’t exactly been counting.

Shouto catches himself studying the cut of Izuku’s profile in the darkness, mapping the sharp angle of his cheekbones and the spot he missed under his jaw when shaving that morning. He’s exhausted, yes, but he vibrates with pent-up energy Shouto can feel from clear across the room in the hollows of his chest. In the relative dimness of the room, the silver scar at the corner of Izuku’s mouth seems to glow on its own; it catches the light from every flashy commercial break that flickers across the screen, staining that part of his mouth iridescent.

Shouto frowns down at his food, brows furrowing. He wonders if it’s possible to develop food poisoning within the span of twenty minutes. His stomach feels weird.

“I’m sorry,” Izuku says a moment later, rubbing his face as exhaustion seeps from every pore. He shakes his head, gesturing toward his notebooks. “I know I’ve been super distracted, but I just… I don’t get it. It’s like my brain’s too scattered and there’s too much damned data in front of my face
for me to organize my thoughts.”

Shouto bites the inside of his cheek, twirling his noodles around the ends of his chopsticks. “You feel like you’re going in circles,” he surmises.

Izuku points at him, eyes sharp. “Yes,” he says firmly. “That. A million times that. It’s like my mind’s about to melt out of my fucking ears or something.”

Huffing, Izuku begins to mutter under his breath and grabs his own chopsticks, finally digging into his dinner as a contestant onscreen buzzes in and gets the next question wrong, much to the audience’s dismay. The person’s loss of money is significant. *Bummer.*

Shouto parses through his options carefully, taking a bite of his food. “All right,” he says simply after a moment. “So, talk it out then.”

Izuku looks up, mouth full. “Wha’?”

Shouto’s expression flattens. “Oh, real charming.”

Izuku’s cheeks color and he swallows, smiling sheepishly. “Sorry,” he says, albeit clearly this time. He coughs slightly. “Uh, so what did you mean?”

“I meant talk it out with me. Your ideas and stuff, you know? You always do better when you think out loud, and I’m part of this, too.” Shouto gestures vaguely at himself with his chopsticks. “It’s not like I can’t contribute to the conversation. It’s my problem to deal with, not yours, technically speaking.”

Izuku studies him thoughtfully for a moment, tapping his chopsticks against the edge of his takeout box as he considers it. He worries at his lower lip, teeth flashing in the darkness, but Shouto pretends not to see it or that damned silver scar. He must have food poisoning, honestly. The left side of his face feels way too fucking warm all of a sudden. *Fever?*

After a moment, Izuku inhales deeply and lets it out through his teeth in a low sigh, and he nods in stiff assent. Picking up his dinner with one hand, Izuku pushes himself to his feet and crosses the space without a word. His socked footfalls are heavy against the carpet, and he’s squinting a bit without his glasses the way he always does in the mornings before he puts his contacts in, but he makes his way to the end of the couch near Shouto’s feet without tripping over anything. Shouto shifts in place, prepared to scoot his feet back to make room for Izuku on the sofa.

Suddenly, he feels the cool touch of callused fingers curving beneath the Achilles tendon of his left ankle.

Shouto’s brain floods with white noise like a tidal wave, and he’s fairly certain he stops breathing. Knuckles blanch beneath skin, and his chopsticks creak under the rigid pressure of him holding them deathly still above his food. All he can do is stare straight ahead in stunned silence as Izuku slips a hand beneath both of Shouto’s ankles, lifting his feet slightly to slide in and take his regular spot on the couch. With aching gentleness, Izuku sets Shouto’s feet in his lap once he’s situated.

“Izuku says lightly, shifting slightly in his seat. He kicks his feet up on the coffee table and crosses his ankles, and Shouto feels the cabled muscles of Izuku’s thighs shift through the thin material of his sweatpants with every movement. “So,” he starts, taking a small bite of his dinner, “I was thinking about yesterday when we did that test—you know, the one with the rubber bands and the sticks? Anyway, it sort of…”

Izuku’s voice fades into gibberish, replaced with a high-pitched pressure that rings somewhere
behind Shouto’s eyes and reverberates in his teeth. Every bone in his body has been replaced with wrought iron. His stomach lurches and roils as Izuku gestures vaguely with his chopsticks in the air, talking about... something as Alex Trebek does who-gives-a-shit on the television across the room. Shouto’s skin pricks like a million needles scraping across his skin all at once, and his lungs collapse inside his chest. Probably. He isn’t sure, to be quite honest, but it’s not like he has the wherewithal to fucking check.

Izuku is warm beneath Shouto’s feet—god, he’s so warm, all lean muscle and pliant skin and a million other adjectives Shouto would love to use if only his brain would start working again. Unfortunately, Izuku is nothing if not fidgety, and every time he shifts his weight or gestures animatedly in the middle of his rambling, he jostles Shouto and reminds him of every single square inch of contact they’re sharing at the moment.

He’s nauseated—no, dammit, he’s numb. He feels too much all at once, splashed in a thousand different colors with a fizzle like seltzer on the back of his tongue.

Shit. Shit. What’s Izuku saying? Shouto blinks hard and tries to swallow past the thorns in his throat, but he’s only getting bits and pieces between his own thunderous heartbeats. He’s saying something about thermonuclear physics and... laws, Shouto thinks. Laws of motion? No, dammit, it’s thermodynamics again. He mentions flash points and atoms and—

The wooden chopsticks in his left hand begin to char.

Shouto stares at them in horror, his breaths coming in short gasps caught behind his teeth, but he swallows each of them down until his chest feels like it’s about to explode. Izuku is still talking, eyes caught somewhere far away as he theorizes and babbles about anything and everything, but Shouto is about to melt down like a goddamn nuclear reactor if he doesn’t get up and leave this sofa right fucking now.

Shouto jams his chopsticks into what remains of his soba and slips his feet out of Izuku’s lap and onto the floor where they belong. He staggers to a standing position, knees shaky as his fingertips begin to smolder, but he shoves his left hand in the pocket of his pajamas to hide the evidence. He clenches his fist so tightly he fears splitting the skin over his knuckles.

Izuku stops talking abruptly, brows knitting. In the background. Alex Trebek reads off a question about some national park in America with a geyser, but Shouto barely hears it. “Uh,” Izuku starts, glancing toward the TV and back again. “You good, dude?”

“Yes,” Shouto bites out. He nods stiffly, offering Izuku a tense smile that doesn’t feel remotely real, but it’s all he can manage right now. “I’m fine. Just need some water.”

Izuku doesn’t look convinced. “Are you sure? ‘Cause you look, uh... flushed. Or something. I don’t know.”

“Yes, I’m okay. Need water, that’s all,” he says tightly, rounding the edge of the couch and making a beeline for the kitchen. His chest is searing as he dumps his leftovers in the trash with shaky fingers. Sure enough, thin tendrils of smoke are beginning to seep through the fabric of his t-shirt. He swallows his panic, still feeling Izuku’s gaze on him from the living room.

Over his shoulder, he asks with false interest, “Um, sorry, what were you saying?”

Izuku has an arm draped over the back of the couch, neck craned back to look at Shouto upside down. His concerned frown almost looks like a smile from this angle. “I said you look flushed.”
“No, before that.” Shouto grits his teeth and rubs at his left pectoral muscle to smother the smoke leeching from his skin. “Something about thermodynamics, I think?”

He sighs. “Shou, that’s literally all I talked about.”

Shouto’s left cheek burns a little hotter at the nickname, unbidden. Slipping his left hand out of his pocket, he notices that his nail beds are beginning to glow red-hot in the dimness of the apartment. His control is slipping, slipping, nearly gone. He needs a plan.

“Oh,” he stammers, eyeing the bathroom door down the hall. He fumbles for a lie and comes up empty. “I—”

Izuku cuts him off with a sigh, shaking his head as he turns back to the television. “You didn’t listen to a thing I said, did you?”

No, he didn’t, but he’ll burn himself to ashes before he ever, ever admits that.

“I was supposed to call my mother tonight,” Shouto states flatly from the kitchen, tasting the lie in every syllable. He stuffs his left hand back in the pocket of his pajama pants and turns on his heel, heading for the hallway. “Sorry. Just remembered. Don’t wait up for me.”

Izuku glances over, brows creasing with an insipid kind of hurt that spears Shouto through the chest. “Oh,” he says quietly, biting his lower lip. His face twists, but he nods tightly and turns back to the television. His shoulders are a little more slumped than they were a minute ago. “All right, then. Tell her I said hi.”

“I will.” Shouto’s skin is flaying from the inside out, blood thinning and melting down within his veins as his temperature flares with shame. He glances over his shoulder to make sure Izuku isn’t watching him—he’s not, thank god; rather, Izuku’s tired gaze is directed at the takeout box in his lap, chopsticks picking idly at nothing in particular. Taking the opportunity, Shouto slips into the bathroom and closes the door quietly behind him. He flips the lock.

Swearing through his teeth, Shouto strips off his shirt and cranks the sink faucet as cold as it will go with fumbling fingers. He cups the icy water in his hands and splashes his face, neck, shoulder, and chest, his fingers hissing and steaming under the frigid deluge, but his body temperature still rages beneath his skin despite it all. The temperature differential sears his nerve endings like molten steel; he clenches his jaw and subsists through it.

The mirror shows him what he’d hoped he wouldn’t see: white fire sputters in small patches on his shoulder, skin glowing orange around the affected areas before the heat sinks back into his skin again. Shuddering, he douses them with water as quickly as they appear. It just doesn’t make any sense.

It’s all about your new thermogenic process, he hears in his head, but the voice is not his own—it’s Izuku’s. He sounds thoughtful and frustrated, but not annoyed, and Shouto realizes this must’ve been what he was talking about earlier. We know your flash point is lower now, and that makes you more susceptible to combustion in general, but that still doesn’t explain why it’s happening without your permission, or at this intensity. We need to test a variety of triggers for you next time we head out to the quarry, I think. I just have no idea what to test specifically, you know? It could be anything at all.

Shouto soaks a washcloth in cold water and presses it against his face as Izuku’s voice trails off, and he lets out a long, slow breath of relief as his skin temperature finally settles to a low sizzle. Knees weak, he presses his back against the bathroom door and slides down to the floor. He
heavily drops his head back against the wood with a defeated exhale.

“Fuck,” he whispers, covering his face with his hands as he squeezes his eyes shut. “Fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

fellas is it gay to spontaneously combust when your hot roommate puts your feet in his lap? bc methinks it's hella gay.

up next: Therapy. Also, Shouto pays a visit to someone he hasn't seen in a long, long time.

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Time Past, Time Present

Chapter Notes

This chapter is 10,000 words long. I am exhausted. Tbh this author's note has no relevance to what actually happens in the chapter itself; I just wanted you all to know my pain.

Also, a brief head's up: I've embedded a specific song link in the first word of a paragraph toward the end of this fic. Should you feel so inclined as to listen to the music I was listening to when I finished this chapter, feel free to click on it when the time comes.

See you at the bottom, friends. I hope you enjoy this labor of love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Morning, nine AM.

The city is lit in ashen shades of dewy grey, skyscrapers and construction cranes carved flat and lifeless against the backdrop of an overcast sky. Izuku spies mountains in the far distance, barely more than deep purple smudges on the horizon; the streets far below him snake with the pulsing lifeblood of honking cars and jaywalking pedestrians. If the smog of the city disappeared for even a moment, he thinks he'd be able to smell the sea.

Izuku traces the harsh outline of the cityscape with the tip of his finger, touch smearing across the window in slow, purposeful strokes. The glass is cold beneath his touch and would be easy to shatter, given the chance—it's thin and barely there, but it's tempered, nonetheless. It'd hardly take any strength at all to break it into a thousand pieces. The barest press of a hand, maybe, or even just a breath. Doctor Kubo’s office is warm despite the early summertime chill outside, and the city’s rippling energy is little more than a muted hum outside the thin glass windows—a fact for which Izuku is grateful. The walls of her office are painted in soft shades of blue, and her aquarium bubbles in the background as colorful fish swim in lazy circles around one another. There’s the faint scent of lavender in the air—a scent Izuku’s never particularly cared for, but one everyone else in the world seems to love. He thinks it’s supposed to be relaxing.

Izuku tips his forehead against the window, peering down. Twenty stories below, a crowd of people surges on the sidewalks of the nearest intersection, spilling into the streets with signs lifted and flags waving wildly in the breeze. At this distance, Izuku can’t hear them, but he has a feeling he knows what they’re chanting at all the passing cars and taxis. He passed them on his way into the building not twenty minutes ago, his head ducked and hood pulled low over his eyes to avoid recognition.

Kubo hasn’t said anything since she sat down in her chair five minutes ago, tablet perched on her knee as she studies him from across the room. Her dark hair is pinned back today in a tight bun, and she’s missing her glasses for once; it only serves to make her look younger. Her fingers are perfectly manicured as usual, curled around a thin stylus held mere millimeters from the surface of her tablet.

Izuku fiddles with the zipper on his jacket as the clock on the wall ticks softly. “When did they
“Start showing up?” he asks.

Kubo purses her lips, thinking about it. “A few days ago. I suppose it was only a matter of time before they thought to come here.”

Izuku watches the crowd as it spills across the street in an amorphous mass, flooding the front steps of the building. This place is one of only two well-known pro-hero rehabilitation centers in the city, so he supposes she’s right—this should’ve happened a lot sooner, all things considered.

“The agency knows about this?” Izuku asks. Kubo nods, and he frowns. “Huh. I’m surprised they haven’t sent anyone to deal with them yet.”

She tilts her head to one side in silent question. “Do you think they should?”

Izuku shoves his hands in the pockets of his zip hoodie, shrugging. “I mean, yeah. Those protestors are disturbing the peace. That’s got to count for something in the eyes of the law.”

“Nonviolent protest isn’t illegal, Midoriya.”

Izuku huffs, crossing the room and sinking onto the sofa against the far wall. It’s an uncomfortable place to sit, he’s learned, but it’s at least a little better than the chair across from Kubo—that thing’s cushions are stuffed with actual fucking iron, he swears.

“I know, I know,” he mutters, waving her off as he shifts a little deeper into the corner of the couch. “I’m just saying.”

“What are you saying, exactly?”

Izuku’s words catch on the edges of his teeth. His shoulders drop infinitesimally. “I…” he trails. Frowns. “I don’t know.”

Kubo smiles at him. It’s the type of smile that says I know you or at least I’ve read your file enough to think I know you. It’s never been particularly comforting.

“The protests are making you nervous,” she concludes. “Aren’t they?”

“Yes, god.” Izuku runs a hand over his face and huffs a shallow laugh through his fingers. “It’s like they’re the only thing on the news these days. I can’t go anywhere in the damned city without running into them at least once.”

Kubo scribbles something down on her tablet and crosses one knee over the other, her movements delicate and precise. “You’ve been around these sorts of uprisings before though. I remember you saying something about that a while back in one of our sessions.”

Izuku drops his head against the back of the sofa and shrugs. “Apples to oranges, Doc. All protests are different. If they weren’t, we’d be able to contain them a lot better.”

She doesn’t agree or disagree with him, but he can practically hear her weighing both options in her mind as she considers her next words carefully. “All right. Let’s focus on that for a moment. When was the last time you saw these sorts of anti-hero movements?”

Izuku chews his cheek as he thinks about it, flipping the invisible pages of a calendar with burned edges and days blotted out by red ink. He remembers the shimmering top of the Chrysler Building, the cramped apartment blocks of the Upper West Side, and the lush parks in Gramercy—the memories are paper-thin now, almost entirely translucent and half-faded as he sifts through them.
one by one.

(He remembers scalding Molotov cocktails and screaming throngs of angry people, broken windows and trashed streets. Blood-stained asphalt, the burn of smog in his lungs, streetlamps that never seemed to burn bright enough. We want war, they’d shouted, and Izuku’s agency had all but granted their wish.)

“The first time I saw them up close, it was a few years back,” he decides. “I was stationed in New York when they began. Vindicator was just getting started with her stuff over in Jersey.”

Kubo hums, jotting something down. “Were you Number One at the time?”

“Yeah.” Izuku’s face twists at the memory, and he shakes his head. “Think it was still pretty new—maybe a few months into it?”

“I see.” Kubo hums. “And had you gotten married yet?”

His left shoulder aches dully. “No,” he tells her, glancing down at his hands in his lap. “We were dating, but I hadn’t proposed yet.”

“You were thinking about it though?”

“I thought about it the first day I met her,” he answers truthfully.

Across the room, an angelfish swims toward the surface of the aquarium to nibble at a floating piece of algae. Its scales gleam gold in the artificial light of the tank, and its fins are pale and transparent, barely even there. Between the hum of the filter and the ticking of the clock, the room pulses beneath Izuku’s skin as Kubo regards him, tapping a manicured fingernail against the arm of her chair.

“These New York protests,” she starts, her voice soothing and soft. “What can you tell me about them?”

Exhaling slowly through his nose, Izuku grimaces and absentmindedly slips a hand beneath the collar of his t-shirt to press his palm against the twisted scar tissue of his left shoulder. He kneads the juncture of his neck and shoulder to massage the tightness from his muscles as he considers his words, but none of them match up with one another, like puzzle pieces all cut from a different die. Crazy, he wants to tell her, remembering boldly painted signs and broken windows of government buildings. Smoke sears his lungs. They were all fucking crazy. Lawless, infinite, excruciating. Take your pick.

“They were… messy,” he tells her after a moment, turning each syllable over in his mouth. He thinks back to those late nights at the agency with Mia, trying to find a pattern in the uprisings or intercepting communications between the villains who planned them. “Vin was the figurehead of it all from the start, but things were harmless enough at first. My agency didn’t even properly sanction an investigation until the first bombing. We did our own work up until then.”

Kubo nods, urging him on. “Good. Keep going, Midoriya.”

His mouth tastes sour as memories resurface one by one, painting his focus in bold strokes of scarlet and black smoke. “There were a few more protests in Midtown after that,” he says quietly. “A couple people got hurt, but the rest of the protests were still pretty peaceful, so we kept an eye on them and called it good. They kept the city on its toes. We had no idea how to contain the protestors until we figured out Vindicator was the one manipulating them. They all just kept
happening until—"

“Until what?” she asks firmly, but her voice is far from unkind. “What finally stopped those protests in the end?”

Izuku’s shoulder seizes sharply, and his gaze snaps toward her. Nausea clings to him like hot wax.

“You already know the answer to that,” he says, voice scraped raw. He remembers the sticky sensation of hot blood between his fingers and a promise he never kept. “The entire fucking world knows.”

“Maybe so,” she admits, leaning forward in her chair. “But I still think you need to consider something.”

“Consider what?”

“The fact that maybe the protests downstairs aren’t that different from the ones you witnessed in New York all those years ago,” she tells him, unfazed. Her lashes are long and curved as she blinks slowly, tilting her head to one side in silent challenge. “Maybe these protests are exactly the same as the protests that crop up every few years, but now you’re the one that’s different. You’re experiencing these events through a different lens. A broader one. And it frightens you.”

Izuku opens his mouth to argue, but the sound dies in the depths of his throat before he can put his voice to it. She’s watching him, studying his face with mild interest. He wants to call her insane, to shake her by her shoulders until she understands. These protests aren’t peaceful. They’re a lit fucking fuse, burning faster with every day toward an end goal no one at the agency can figure out—there’s no pattern, no root cause, no organization behind it all as far as they can tell, and none of it makes any fucking sense.

A chilling, nasally voice with a thick accent slithers into his skull like heavy poison, giving him pause.

Judge, jury, executioner.

Izuku shakes his head to clear his thoughts, grounding himself. “That’s— no. Sorry, but you’re wrong this time. I mean, they torched the hero memorial uptown two weeks ago. How can we ignore that?”

“Tell me, Midoriya, is it fair to condemn an entire group of peaceful protestors for the actions of an individual?”

“They bombed my apartment,” he argues hotly. “My apartment.”

Kubo holds up a finger. “Ah, but there was no evidence connecting the protests to that night. You told me so yourself. It was all circumstantial.” She smiles. “And you’re avoiding my question.”

“I’m not suggesting we ignore it, but every group has its extremists,” she answers. She sets her stylus down and laces her fingers together in her lap. “Tell me, Midoriya, is it fair to condemn an entire group of peaceful protestors for the actions of an individual?”

“They bombed my apartment,” he argues hotly. “My apartment.”

Kubo holds up a finger. “Ah, but there was no evidence connecting the protests to that night. You told me so yourself. It was all circumstantial.” She smiles. “And you’re avoiding my question.”

Izuku rakes a hand through his hair and pushes off the couch with a hissed swear, pacing the length of Kubo’s office as irritation fizzles beneath his skin. “No,” he finally snaps, throwing his hands up in the air. “No, all right? I don’t think that’s fair.”

“Then why would you suggest it in the first place?” Kubo calmly sinks back into her chair, draping her long, thin fingers over the armrests as she looks up at him with mild curiosity. “It seems odd that your first reaction to the protests would be to call in crowd control, or even a hero to deal with it all. Don’t you agree?”
Izuku gives her a tired look. He’s torn elastic, stretched out and left in a haphazard pile on the floor, and there’s nothing left in him that will stretch further. He rubs a hand over his face as exhaustion sets in, sinking into his bones.

“Why are you asking me all this stuff?” he finally exhales. “This feels more like an interrogation than a therapy session.”

“I’m asking because I’m worried,” she tells him, leaning forward and bracing her elbows on her knees. She smiles tightly at him; it doesn’t quite reach the creases of concern around her eyes, but her expression seems genuine, in her own way. She counts off on her slender fingers as she lists, “I’m worried that you’re too anxious about these protests to approach them appropriately, given your past experiences with them. I’m worried you think this is all going to end the same way it did the first time. And I’m really worried that you’ve resigned yourself to that fate without realizing it because you’re scared, Midoriya, and rightly so.”

Izuku pulls at his lower lip with his teeth, shaking his head. He wants to tell her she’s wrong, that he’s not scared at all—he doesn’t fear petty political uprisings, nor does he fear death. Never has, never will. With a job like his, he’s never had a choice in the matter. Any active hero would say the same, given the chance.

But maybe he’s scared of something else. Something newer and more tender, like a fresh wound that hasn’t quite healed yet.

*Judge. Jury.*

*Executioner.*

Izuku swallows the glass in his throat and staggers back a half step, catching himself on the corner of Kubo’s desk. It creaks under his weight, and he curls his fingers over the edge to keep steady as his knees threaten to buckle. He holds the desk tightly enough for the wood to barely begin splintering.

“I’m…” he trails, mouth dry. He swallows again and squeezes his eyes shut. “Fuck, Kubo.”

It’s a surface-level admittance of nothing particularly significant, but Kubo sees it for what it really is. She smiles at him in quiet understanding, and she thankfully does not press.

“Fuck, indeed,” she agrees instead, the curse fitting oddly in her mouth. She gestures toward the sofa. “Have a seat, please. You look like you’re about to fall over.”

Izuku lumbers across the room and collapses against the couch, legs spread and arms hanging limply at the room as he tips his head back against the wall. He stares numbly at a watercolor painting of a butterfly that’s framed above him as his thoughts swirl—the painting’s nothing special, really. It’s almost sort of ugly with its washed-out colors and soft focus. Izuku even hates the frame, all black and heavy and not at all befitting of a delicate painting of a fucking butterfly.

Kubo doesn’t push him to say anything. Instead, she waits, rolling her stylus between her fingers as she watches him. Izuku doesn’t know how long he sits there, sifting through words by the dozen as he struggles to come up with something to say, but it feels like infinity. It feels like five seconds.

“I don’t know what to do,” Izuku says softly once his stomach settles and his thoughts make a little more sense. He doesn’t look at her. “I’m not supposed to be this scared of something I’ve faced before in the field. That should make me more prepared to deal with it, right? I shouldn’t be scared at all.”
“I’m inclined to disagree, actually.” Kubo plucks at the hem of her pencil skirt, lips pursed. “Your circumstances have changed drastically since you were employed in New York. While your grief may not define you, it does play a part in who you are now and what your response will be to any given situation. I’m afraid it always will. You have new stakes to worry about, new fears. It’s normal to be frightened.”

“Then why does everyone keep expecting me to jump back into things again?” Izuku leans up and drops his face into his hands, elbows braced against his knees. “It’s like they expect me to roll up one day with a big, stupid smile and save the damned country like nothing’s wrong. Like nothing’s... different. But that’s not me anymore.”

Kubo worries at her lower lip—painted a pale shade of pink today, he notices. Different from her usual red. Her brow pinches faintly. “It’s unfair for people to put that sort of expectation on you after all you’ve been through, yes,” she agrees, each word measured and weighed. Kubo deliberates over her next thought, pressing her fingers against her mouth. “If I were in your shoes, I think the pressure would be quite hard to deal with, especially on a scale like yours. I don’t blame you for being hesitant to embrace your old public image.”

“Yeah, exactly. It sucks.”

“Is that why you’ve postponed your professional reinstatement three times?”

At this, Izuku peers through his fingers. His gaze is flat and unimpressed, and a sudden weight descends in the pit of his stomach. “Who told you that?”

“I’m under contract from your agency, Midoriya. They tell me everything.”

He pauses, mouth twisting. “Okay, fair,” he mutters, dropping his hands. He slumps back against the sofa and shrugs. “So, what’s your point? I’m not obligated to go pro again. Sidekick work suits me fine. I don’t see the issue here.”

“Maybe so,” she concedes. “But regardless of your employment position, I think we just figured out why you’ve been turning your agency down.”

Izuku’s head lolls to one side, glancing at her with a stale expression. “Yeah, fine. Okay. You caught me.” He holds up his hands and waves them in mock surrender. “Congratulations, you’re a genius.”

“Don’t be glib with me, hero,” she tells him, but her smile is small and crooked, kind of like the pinkie finger on her left hand—an old sports injury that never healed right. Volleyball, he thinks. She kicks out one foot and nudges his knee gently with the toe of her stiletto. “Come on, why don’t you explain it to me in your own words so I can get a better idea of how you’re feeling about it? I feel like I’ve been doing an awful lot of talking this session.”

“Hey, I’m not complaining,” he says, but she arches an expectant eyebrow at him, and he sighs. Turning, he pitches back on the sofa and lays out, one leg hooked over the armrest and the other dangling off the side to brush the floor with his fingers. He stares at the ceiling and counts the acoustic tiles, then multiplies them and finds the square root—or tries, at least. It doesn’t quite come out to a clean number.

“It’s not that I don’t want to go professional again,” he tells her first, picking at a hangnail on his thumb. “Sidekick work suits me right now, I guess. I don’t mind taking orders from certain heroes. Takes the pressure off so I can focus on doing a good job rather than how to do it or what the best plan of attack is, and that’s big for me right now.”
“Understandable.” She hums. “That way if you fail, it’s not automatically your fault.”

Izuku looks over at her. “Okay, ouch.”

“I’m not wrong though, am I?”

Izuku crosses his arms and glares up at the ceiling, tasting something bitter in the back of his throat. “Well, no,” he mutters. “But still. Ouch.”

Kubo laughs, and even Izuku finds himself smiling, though his chest does sting a bit right behind his sternum. Across the room, Kubo shifts in her chair, toeing off her high heels and neatly tucking her ankles beneath her body as she tries to get resituated. She sets the tablet aside, tucking the stylus into her hair.

“You said you don’t mind taking orders from ‘certain heroes,’” she quotes, leaning against an arm of her chair. Lacing her fingers together, she tilts her head to one side. “Care to elaborate on that?”

“Shouto,” Izuku says instantly, unrepentant. He winces. “I mean, there are a few people at the agency I don’t mind working with, but Shouto’s the one I’m most comfortable following. No contest.”

“And why is that?”

Izuku scoffs. “Are you kidding?”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?” Kubo lifts her shoulders, leaning back in her chair. She picks idly at a polished fingernail. “You say very little about him outside of a professional capacity, and he’s never been one of my patients before. I’m afraid I don’t know very much about him aside from what I used to see in the news.”

Izuku’s mouth curves, and he huffs. “Yeah, you and the rest of the world, I guess. He’s a private person.”

“Indeed,” she murmurs. “You seem to know him well though. I take it you two have been friends for a long time?”

“Coming up on fifteen years, I think. We met in high school,” he says, but the number nearly knocks the wind from his lungs the moment it’s past his lips. Has it really been that long? “But we fell out of touch for a while, so. Uh. It wasn’t, like, a continuous thing. We were kind of on and off for a bit there.”

“Why is that?”

The answer comes easily to him, but he keeps his mouth clamped shut around the words. He remembers the soft grass in Central Park, the chill of his cavernous apartment, and the echo of I’m not sacrificing you bouncing off the windows like the crack of a gunshot. He remembers it all with agonizing clarity. The only thing he doesn’t quite remember is the way Shouto’s mouth felt against his—that part’s fuzzy, indistinct. A just punishment, all things considered.

Izuku sucks air through his teeth. There’s a sudden stitch in his side, or maybe a dagger, he isn’t sure. Blood in his mouth, heart splitting down the center. It hurts.

“We had a falling out,” he manages, voice stiff. Plastic. Fake. “Distance got hard. You know how it is.”
Kubo picks up on the lie, and Izuku seriously considers jumping out the window just so he doesn’t have to talk about this. He’s never talked about it with anyone, save Shouto on that night when they were trapped in the tunnels beneath Geneva with barely half a plan between them and enough tension in the air to suffocate them both. He hates thinking about this because thinking leads to complication, and complication is something he really doesn’t need with Shouto right now. They’ve struck a tenuous balance these last few months; he’d be remiss to disrupt it now.

*Please, don’t prod,* he begs absolutely no one. *Pleasepleaseplease—*

Kubo frowns, eyes shuttering into steely professionalism as she notes Izuku’s tense posture and white-knuckled fists. “A falling out,” she repeats. “What kind of falling out are we talking about here? A fight? A break-up?”

“Can we go back to discussing my license?” he moans pitifully, grabbing a nearby throw pillow and covering his face with it. He wonders if he’d be able to smother himself right here and now. “Please,” he adds, as if it will help.

Kubo purses her painted lips. “If you’d like,” she replies gently, but before Izuku can shoot back with a relieved *yes, god, please, talk to me about holding the moral high ground or the fact that I’m never going pro again, I’ll take anything over this*, Kubo pulls the stylus from her hair and begins to twirl it between her fingers—a habit she falls into when she’s thinking hard about something. “Before we do that, would you at least be willing to tell me why you won’t talk about this?”

“No,” he mutters through the pillow.

“Why not? It seems relevant, considering you’re currently living with him.”

“It’s not fucking relevant,” he bites out, tossing the pillow to the side, but even saying *that* hurts. He gestures vaguely up at the ceiling, letting out a sharp breath. “Listen, it happened a long time ago. Things are different now. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Your tone suggests otherwise.”

“My tone has nothing to do with it.” Izuku sits up, crossing his arms over his chest, and he glares at her. “It’s old news, Kubo. Done, finished. We’re different people now, and I’m fine with that. Things are good between us.”

She hums lowly. “Does Shouto feel the same way?”

“About what, living together?”

“About your falling out,” she corrects.

Her question catches him off-guard, and he blinks at her. “How am I supposed to know?”

“He is your roommate,” she points out. Her stylus comes to a stop between her index and middle finger, frozen in the midst of an elaborate spin. “And he’s also your most trusted friend, if I’m understanding you correctly.”

He eyes her. “I don’t see your point here.”

She shrugs. “Most people would’ve ‘put it all out on the table,’ figuratively speaking, before moving in together, even if your cohabitation was agency-mandated. Based on the way you’re talking I don’t think either of you did that.”
He swallows thickly, sinking back into the cushions of the sofa. He knows she’s right, and he’d be lying if he said he hadn’t thought about mentioning it to Shouto before. How could he not? They’ve been tied to each other since day one, sharing matching scars from a wound that never fully healed, all twisted and angry red in a place they couldn’t reach.

“Is it really so terrible for us to not talk about it?” he asks softly, staring at the floor between his feet. He rubs the back of his neck. “Cowardly, sure. I get that. But I don’t think it’s wrong.”

At this, Kubo’s brows tick upward. She places the end of her stylus between her teeth, studying him closely. “You feel it would upset the balance of things,” she concludes, and Izuku nods.

“I did ask him about it. Once,” he tells her, staring off into the middle distance as he remembers low ceilings, long tunnels, and the frigid feeling of cold concrete pressed against his cheek. “It was a while ago, back before we partnered up again. Things were still weird between us. I asked him if he regretted what happened, and he told me no.”

Kubo begins to twirl her stylus again. “Not the outcome you were expecting, I’m guessing?”

“It was exactly the outcome I expected.” He grimaces. “It just wasn’t the one I wanted.”

“I see.” Kubo rolls her stylus, eyes fixed on the movement. “Have you considered asking Shouto again now that things are better between you two?”

Izuku pinches the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes to fend off a sudden migraine. “I suppose I’ve thought about it once or twice, sure.”

“What stopped you from going through with it?”

He gives her a look. “Trust me, we don’t have that kind of time.”

One side of her mouth curves upward, and she chuckles. “All right, fair enough. Still, I think getting some closure over this issue would settle a lot of your anxiety.”

“I don’t have anxiety about Shouto. Other things, sure. But not him.” That, at least, he can answer firmly. He shakes his head. “If anything, Shouto’s the one thing in my life I’m not worried about right now.”

“There’s the main thing holding you back from getting that closure? If you had to boil it down.”

Izuku plays with the hem of his t-shirt as he ponders her question, frowning down at his lap. The clock ticks, and he can hear the protestors down below as they roar for justice, fairness, and a restructured law system. The aquarium filter burbles quietly above it all, keeping the time with his heartbeat.

“He… runs,” Izuku finally says. The words sink heavily in his chest, cold and dark like oil seeping between his ribs in rivulets of thick, caustic poison—a familiar sort of death. “That’s how this friendship has always worked. He runs, and I hold my ground until there’s nothing left to stand on.”

Kubo’s eyelashes flutter, and she frowns. “I’m… not quite sure I understand what you’re saying. You think Shouto would leave if you asked him for closure?”

He shakes his head. “No, he wouldn’t leave. He’ll stay in that apartment until the day the agency orders him out of there. That’s not the problem.”
“Explain it to me, then.”

“He runs,” Izuku says again, bracing his elbows on his knees and leaning forward to drop his forehead into his hands. He laughs, though the sound is flat and humorless. “Shouto’s always been smarter than me in that way. He knows when to cut his losses and bolt, when to regroup and fight another day. He’s clever in the moment. Knows how to dodge a question but still answer truthfully.”

Kubo’s eyes narrow, mouth parted as she tries to piece his words together. “And you… don’t?”

“Not exactly.” Izuku rakes his hands through his hair, ignoring the pinprick tangles he encounters along the way. “My brain likes to get stuck on certain thoughts like a… a broken record or something. I don’t know. Once I’ve got something in my head, I have to stand my ground until the bitter end because I can’t think of anything else. I get too focused.”

“In a professional capacity, a lot of people would consider that an admirable trait. Brave, even.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, well, in a personal capacity, it really fucking sucks. So.”

Kubo taps her stylus against her thigh, pressing her lips into a thin line. Her eyes dart toward the clock on the wall, and Izuku notices that they only have about five minutes left in their session. He tries not to look too relieved. Carefully, Kubo slips her feet out from under her with a soft shift of fabric, settling back into her stilettos with practiced ease, and she reaches for her tablet to scribble some notes down. Her stylus flows neatly across the screen in perfect block print.

“I think I understand what you’re trying to say,” she tells him without looking up from her tablet. Izuku can’t see what she’s writing; he doesn’t have the emotional strength to really care right now. “But I’m afraid I’m going to have to disagree with you this time.”

“Shocking,” he deadpans. “Disagree with what?”

Kubo finishes writing her notes and tucks the stylus back into her hair, locking the screen of her tablet with a flourish. She drapes her arms along the armrests of her chair, shoulders held perfectly straight.

“You said it yourself,” she tells him, smiling. “You and Shouto are different people now. I don’t think you’re giving yourself enough credit for how you’d handle the situation under these circumstances. And although I can’t be sure of this since I don’t know him personally, I would wager a guess that the same can be said for your friend.”

Izuku exhales. He rubs at his eyes. “Maybe,” he relents, but he doesn’t really believe it. “I still don’t know if it’s worth the risk of trying.”

Kubo’s smile broadens, eyes crinkling at the edges. “You’re a hero, Midoriya,” she tells him warmly. “Risk and reward are both parts of the game.”

Shouto’s in the middle of chopping an onion when he hears the sound of Izuku’s keys jingling on the other side of the front door. He looks up through his lashes at the sound, knife caught in midair, and his gaze darts toward the clock above the stove. It reads 5:47.
He’s late.

The doorknob begins to turn before Shouto can begin to wonder where Izuku’s been the last several hours—not that it’s his business, really. He just can’t help but be a little concerned. Izuku rarely comes home late from his appointments, and if he does, he’s always sure to send Shouto a quick text about it, citing paperwork at the agency or a quick trip to his mother’s place for the afternoon. Shouto eyes his phone on the end of the counter; one end is jammed into an empty glass to amplify the soft music emanating from the device’s speakers—lo-fi, nothing intense. He has no notifications to speak of, save two missed phone calls from Natsuo, a text from Momo, and an email from his mother because she never quite figured out the whole texting thing. There’s nothing from Izuku.

Shouto frowns and brings his knife downward, slicing the onion cleanly in half just as Izuku shoulders through the doorway without ceremony. Shouto glances sidelong: Izuku looks confused, and he’s muttering something under his breath as he kicks off his sneakers and tosses his jacket on the hook by the door. Clad in jeans and one of his old t-shirts that says “bread” for some inexplicable reason, he doesn’t look any different than when he left the apartment that morning. No bruises, no scrapes.

Wasn’t in a fight, he thinks, peeling the skin off the halves of the onion. Didn’t take on extra hours. Where was he?

“Hey,” Shouto greets distractedly, tossing the onion skin off to one side of his cutting board. Izuku doesn’t seem to hear him. “Izuku,” he tries again, this time a little louder.

He looks up, his gaze clouded with… something. Shouto isn’t sure what. Izuku hums, lifting a single scarred brow in question. “Sorry, what?”

“I said hey,” Shouto reiterates. He looks Izuku up and down, mouth thinning. “You were gone for a while today.”

Izuku opens his mouth to answer, but before he does, he catches himself, then frowns and glances down at the floor. The muscle in his jaw flutters beneath freckled skin, pulsing a tattoo Shouto can feel from here.

Izuku squares his shoulders. He smiles; it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Yeah, sorry. Stopped by my mom’s for a bit. Trains were extra slow because of—”

“The protests,” he finishes, nodding. Shouto points his chopping knife at the television in the living room where the news is cycling, though the sound is muted. Sure enough, live footage plays across the screen, showcasing the protests in all their glory as hundreds of people block the highways with their signs lifted high. “They’re holding up the north interstate right now. Didn’t know about the trains though.”

“Nothing is sacred, I guess.” Izuku rakes a hand through his hair and stretches languidly, shirt stretching over his chest and ready to split apart right down the center. Shouto drops his gaze back to the onion in front of him, gripping the knife a little tighter than before as his skin begins to warm. Jesus Christ, stop it.

Izuku lets out a sharp exhale and rolls his bad shoulder with a wince, padding into the kitchen on socked feet. Shouto resumes his prep for dinner, dicing the onions neatly with planned, precise movements, and Izuku slips behind him to get to the fridge. It’s a familiar dance they’ve done countless times before, thanks in part to the painfully narrow space between the kitchen counters and the island, but Shouto has to bite his tongue when he feels the press of splayed fingers against
his lower back.

He tries to breathe normally. The rational side of him knows it’s nothing more than a silent *hey, I’m here, please don’t move while I try to get past you* sort of gesture—completely meaningless. Utterly platonic. The less rational side of Shouto’s brain, however, chooses instead to fixate on the sheer breadth of Izuku’s hands and what he could do with them, given the chance.

“Sorry,” Izuku murmurs as he slips past Shouto toward the fridge, probably in search of a water bottle or a stupid fucking protein bar, one of the two. The pressure of Izuku’s hand disappears an instant later, and Shouto’s skin ripples with gooseflesh beneath his shirt at the sudden loss of warmth. He tries not to melt on the spot.

“It’s… fine,” Shouto mutters, but his tongue feels too large for his mouth. He swallows dryly, shaking his head to clear his thoughts—dirty, awful, *ridiculous* thoughts that don’t belong in this apartment, of all places. Shame claws at him from the inside out.

Izuku, surely enough, grabs a water bottle from the fridge and kicks the door closed behind him with a hum. He leans a hip against the edge of the island counter, looking down at Shouto’s spread of prepped vegetables in front of him. “Dinner?”

“Dinner,” Shouto agrees.

“Gonna tell me what we’re having?”

Shouto gives him a look. “Doesn’t matter what we’re having. You’ll eat it anyway.”

“True,” he says, shrugging. “Still, I’m curious.”

“Well, you can be curious for another half hour.” Shouto points the knife at the center of Izuku’s chest. “Stop hovering. I mean it this time.”

Izuku holds up his hands in mock surrender, and a smile *almost* splits his face, but right before his teeth flash in that blinding way that always seems to make Shouto’s heart beat a little faster, his smile… falters. Instead, his expression twists, and his eyes cloud with that strange *something* again. Whatever it is.

Izuku rubs the back of his neck, glancing toward the living room. He forces a smile. “Sorry,” he says. “I’ll, uh. Stop hovering. Promise.”

Shouto lowers his knife back to the cutting board. His brow furrows as Izuku pushes off the counter and heads for the living room without another word, hopping over the back of the sofa to fall into the cushions with a shallow sigh. From here, Shouto can see Izuku’s socked feet hanging over the armrest, bouncing idly in midair as he begins to scroll through his phone. He doesn’t speak again.

Something’s… *wrong*. It hangs heavily in the air of the apartment, draping over their shoulders and dragging them down with every second of frozen, yawning silence. Shouto runs a finger over the dull side of his kitchen knife, worrying his lip between his teeth. He stares at the half-chopped onions in front of him, the intact bell peppers off to the side.

*Ask,* he hears in the back of his mind. *Ask, ask.*

“How was therapy today?” Shouto finally ventures, hating the way each word scrapes against the flat of his tongue. He sinks his blade into the onions once again, resuming his work with only partial focus.
Across the room, Izuku’s foot stops bobbing as soon as the words are past Shouto’s lips. He doesn’t move to sit up or respond—for all intents and purposes, he’s frozen on that sofa, unyielding. The news plays silently in the background, showcasing clips from the fire at the public hero memorial earlier this month, and Shouto gathers his heartbeats in the pit of his stomach as he waits.

Across the room, Izuku lets out a long, slow breath. “Therapy was…” he trails, searching for the proper words. His voice is reed-thin, quiet, and not at all familiar. “Interesting,” is what he finally settles on. A perfect non-answer.

Shouto nods slowly, scraping the onion off his cutting board and into a small bowl. He reaches for the bell pepper at his elbow. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Izuku sets his phone on the coffee table and slings an arm over his forehead as he stares up at the ceiling with a frown. “Kubo just asked me some difficult questions today, I guess.”

“Define difficult.”

“Oh, you know. Moral stuff, my professional license, other things like that.” He pauses, hesitating, and then adds, “She also asked about you.”

Shouto stiffens, paring knife inserted precariously at the base of the pepper’s stem. His thumb rubs across the taut, waxy skin of the vegetable as he turns Izuku’s words over and over in his head.

“Me,” he repeats. “What about me, exactly?”


“Very specific,” Shouto deadpans.

Izuku grabs a small pillow and hurls in Shouto’s general direction, but it falls short of the island. “Shut up, you know what I mean.” He gestures vaguely. “I don’t know, she asked about us living together, what you’re like as a person—that kind of thing. Apparently, I don’t talk about you much, so she wanted some… context.”

Context. It’s not a word he likes. Shouto chews on his cheek, carefully curving the blade of the paring knife around the bell pepper’s stem to yank out its core. He sets it aside with the discarded onion skin; a few pale white seeds stick to his fingertips.

“What sort of context did you give her?” he asks carefully.

Izuku doesn’t say anything for several moments, and Shouto holds his breath. The news flickers endlessly on the television, flashing blue-white-orange-red against the walls as the sun dips below the horizon outside their windows to bathe them both in liquid amber. Something about the silence is incriminating in and of itself, but Shouto doesn’t want to be the one to name it.

Context. Flashes of color swirl at the forefront of Shouto’s mind as he recalls the cool air of Central Park and the press of frigid masonry against his back as they ran through the streets of the Upper East Side and Midtown, the two of them tied together at the fingertips with the taste of each other in their mouths. Wandering hands, whispered promises they never bothered to keep.

Izuku says context. Shouto hears truth.

Across the room, Izuku sits up on the sofa with a sigh and rubs a hand across his face. “I didn’t give her specifics, if that’s what you’re asking,” he assures Shouto. He cards his fingers through
his hair with a grimace. “I wouldn’t— I’d never do that. You’ve got to believe me.”

“I do believe you,” Shouto says, halving the bell pepper. He slices it lengthwise, knife zipping across the board in long, steady strokes, but he doesn’t look up for even a second. “She knows, though? About us.”

“She knows something happened, yeah.” Izuku winces, mouth twisting. “I didn’t tell her what went down specifically. Or when.”

“Why?”

At this, Izuku recoils incredulously. “Because it’s our business?” he answers, brow scrunching as he studies Shouto from the living room. “What, you really think I’d tell her something like that without your permission? Come on.”

“She’s your therapist, Izuku.”

“Oh, and you’re my friend. I don’t see your point.”

“My point is that she’s trying to help you with this stuff. That’s the purpose of having a therapist, isn’t it? If your progress involves telling her what happened between us, then I’m fine with it.” There’s a strange tug behind his heart as he says it, pinched and poignant like a bee sting or a burn. He ignores it, swallowing hard. “Look, what happened back then was… complicated. I know that. We both do. But it happened a long time ago, so I don’t see why it matters anymore.”

“I think it matters.”

Izuku’s question echoes in the back of his mind, thoughts and feelings all jumbling beyond repair as the ringing in his ears reaches a fever pitch. Callused fingers playing at the hem of his shirt, the bite of a cold balcony railing against his lower back, three missed calls, he wishes he’d never found that stupid cell phone. Truth slips through his fingers the more he stagnates, evading his touch as he fights for a decent hold on words he doesn’t quite understand. His heart thunders. He feels sick.

Shouto’s ministrations with the chopping knife become clumsy and crooked, and before he realizes it, he barely misses slicing the tip of his right index finger clean off in his haste. The knife blade instead lightly grazes his skin, glancing off his nail to catch the side of his finger at a shallow angle. It’s not deep, but it is long and not exactly pretty. Shouto stares numbly as a small bead of blackened blood wells up against his damaged skin; the edges of the cut are already beginning to blanch dead-white against frostbitten purple, and the sight nauseates him.

It doesn’t feel like anything at all.

It only takes Izuku a moment to notice that Shouto’s stopped preparing dinner—or, more specifically, why. Eyes widen. Skin pales. Somewhere behind the dull ringing in Shouto’s ears, he hears Izuku swear and scramble off the couch, darting across the room with half-sputtered questions spilling from his lips. He cuts a clean path around the kitchen island and reaches over to disentangle Shouto’s fingers from the handle of the knife, setting it aside with frantic hands. He’s babbling. He’s always babbling.

“Oh my god, what the hell, oh my god,” he’s saying as he grasps Shouto’s wrist and tugs him gently toward the sink. Flipping the faucet on full blast and freezing, he sticks Shouto’s hand beneath the spray, and Shouto watches in morbid fascination as the water turns a familiar shade of pink.
“Oh my fucking god,” Izuku blusters again because apparently that’s the only thing he can come up with right now. He releases Shouto’s wrist and fumbles with one of the nearby cabinets, wrenching the door open to grab a smaller, secondary first aid kit they’ve kept up there ever since Izuku started going back on night shift patrols.

“Does it hurt? Are you okay?” He continues to ramble, setting the kit down on the counter and prying it open. He sifts through supplies with clumsy fingers, plucking out whatever he might need and a few things he definitely doesn’t. “How bad is it? Do you—I mean, uh. Stitches? Or bandages? Both? I’m getting both.”

“It’s not that bad,” Shouto intones, curling his fingers beneath the cold water. The deluge flowers scarlet for a moment but slowly fades to pink as the wound begins to clot. “It doesn’t even hurt, honestly.”

“Doesn’t even—?” he starts incredulously, but his gaze drops to Shouto’s hand and it dawns on him all at once. His mouth presses into a thin line, eyes flooding with thinly veiled sorrow as he surveys Shouto’s blue-black skin. “Ah. Well, pros and cons, I suppose.”

It’s not a false platitude or an apology, and Shouto revels in it. He huffs in amusement. “That’s one way of putting it.”

As Shouto holds his hand beneath the faucet, Izuku picks out a small adhesive bandage and some antiseptic from the first aid kit. He hops up to sit on the counter next to the sink, swinging his legs in open air as he waits for Shouto’s wound to clot completely; his heels bump the lower cabinets in time with the smooth lo-fi still playing from Shouto’s phone on the island. When the spray runs clear, Shouto turns the faucet off and dries his hand on a towel. He murmurs his thanks when Izuku holds out the bandage and antiseptic for him to take.

Shouto tears the bandage open with his teeth, fumbling to pry it out of its sterile casing. As he cleans his cut and wraps it, Izuku remains oddly quiet, his gaze directed at the floor. His brow is pinched, mouth twitching at the corner.

“Do you remember the Geneva op?” Izuku asks quietly after a time, fingers laced together between his spread knees. The scars on his knuckles gleam pale gold in the waning sunlight of early evening; he’s been biting his nails again.

Shouto hesitates for a moment, thinking back to cramped tunnels and deafening explosions, ricocheting bullets and twisted metal catwalks stretching as far as the eye could see. There’s still scarring on his left eardrum leftover from that stupid fucking science machine; he’s never quite forgiven it. With a soft sigh, he closes the cap to the antiseptic bottle and sets it aside.

“Bits and pieces,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest. He rests back against the island until the edge of the counter digs into his lower back, and he leans into the sensation. “Pretty sure I came out of that mission with a concussion, so some things are fuzzy. Why?”

Izuku bites his lower lip, ankles swinging lazily in open air. His lashes flutter, his jaw clenches, and the scar tissue over his knuckles begins to strain.

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“You told me once,” he begins, voice low, “that you didn’t regret what happened to us back in New York. That if you had the chance, you’d do things exactly the same way all over again.”

“I remember,” he says slowly.

“Well, do you still stand by it?” Izuku looks up at him, meeting his gaze with steely determination,
and Shouto’s stomach twists into knots.

Shouto rubs a hand over his face and exhales through his fingers. “That was a long time ago, Izuku.”

“I know.” He hops down from the counter and comes to stand directly in front of Shouto, brows furrowed. “I know, and I’m asking anyway.”

Shouto closes his eyes and tilts his head back. “It’s in the past,” he murmurs. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“It matters to me.”

“Maybe it shouldn’t,” Shouto tells him, stepping close enough that he can make out every single freckle on Izuku’s cheeks, all the way down to the tiny ones that like to hide in the smile lines around his eyes. “You can’t change what happened back then and neither can I. We were kids, Izuku. There’s no use dwelling on this any more than we already have.”

Shouto moves to sidestep, but before he can get anywhere, Izuku’s hand darts forward to encircle his wrist, holding him in place. Izuku’s heavy, roughened fingers rest comfortably over the delicate lacework of veins in Shouto’s wrist, and his blood heats dangerously as Izuku gently runs the pad of his thumb over the eggshell hills and valleys of taut tendons trapped beneath his skin. *Danger, danger.*

“Please,” Izuku murmurs, searching his gaze for something Shouto can’t identify. His lips twitch upward in a sad, sallow smile that reaches his eyes, despite it all. “Please, Shouto, don’t run this time. I won’t let you.”

Heartbeat in his throat, skin pulsing. Everything in the world has narrowed down to the steady rasp of Izuku’s thumb against the skin of Shouto’s inner wrist. Time moves backwards without him.

He’s in New York, shivering on a balcony in a shirt that’s too expensive with familiar fingers tremulously tracing the sharp angles of his hipbones. He’s in Geneva, trapped beneath the earth in a cramped tunnel with flickering blue emergency lights and the hum of something dangerous nipping at his heels. He’s in their apartment—a little older, a little more damaged, but breathing just the same.

*Don’t run,* Izuku asks of him. He hears the request in triplicate, and each voice sounds a little different, but the words do not change.

*(Don’t run.)*

“Why is this so important to you all of a sudden?” Shouto whispers, not tearing his eyes from Izuku’s. He tries to swallow; it feels like broken glass against his teeth. “You never—I didn’t—” He squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head. “God, it’s been years. So many years.”

“I know,” Izuku says, and his eyes are shadowed with a bitter regret. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Why now?” Shouto demands. He tugs against Izuku’s grip, but he holds tight and doesn’t let go. “Why is this only coming up now that we’re—”

“Because I’ve spent a long time thinking that what happened between us wasn’t supposed to matter to me,” he blurts. He’s warm, and his grip is comforting in its indomitable strength; it anchors Shouto to the spot. “I didn’t think you cared about what happened that night, so I told myself I needed to feel the same way about it. I chose to move on because you did the exact same fucking
thing, and that was fine. I was fine with it.”

Shouto stares, outraged. “You think I didn’t care?”

“You left.” Izuku’s grip tightens and he blinks hard, lashes fluttering—his eyes are glassy in the fading sunlight streaming through the windows. “I didn’t hear from you for— for years, Shouto. What was I supposed to think?”


“Then why didn’t you say that in Geneva?”

“Because you were married.” His voice breaks on the word, and he hates himself for it. He swallows, tipping his chin back as his eyes burn, and he lets out a hollow laugh that barely sounds like a laugh at all. “I didn’t know you anymore, Izuku. We weren’t… us. Too much time had passed. We had a job to do. It wasn’t the right time.”

“Tell me now, then,” he begs, eyes pleading.

“Why?” he snaps. Shouto’s hands begin to tremble, body temperature fluctuating dangerously. “In this entire conversation, you haven’t given me a single reason why you suddenly need to know the answer to this goddamn question.”

“I don’t know,” he bursts out, expression crumpling as soon as the words are past his lips. He tightens his fist and sucks in a shuddering breath, clenching his jaw as he tries to rein in his heartbeat. “I don’t fucking know, all right? It makes no sense. I know it makes no sense. I can’t explain it. I’ve just been thinking about this a lot today and… and I don’t know. Okay?”

“That’s not a reason.”

“Well, it’s all I’ve got!” He tears a hand through his hair and lets out a ragged exhale. “I want closure. I want… god, I don’t know, but I need this to happen or else I’m not going to be able to think about anything else for the rest of forever. Please, Shouto. Please.”

Time slows, stops, and Shouto holds his breath to carry the moment. Izuku’s flayed open, laid utterly bare before him. If Shouto reached out, he has a feeling he’d be able to find Izuku’s still-beating heart trapped behind his ribcage, fingers slipping through tangled viscera to take hold of something that’s never truly been his. He’s exposed like a raw nerve, and it’s too much, too much, I can’t do this.

I’m not supposed to be here.

With clenched teeth, Shouto breaks Izuku’s grip on his wrist and tries to step away, but Izuku intercepts him, caging him against the kitchen island before he can get far. Izuku’s strong hands curl around the edge of the counter on either side of Shouto’s hips; his focus is singular, piercing. Infinite.

“Please,” Izuku whispers one last time. He smells like fabric softener with the familiar undercurrent of ozone that’s followed him around every day Shouto’s ever known him; up close, the combination is heady and intoxicating, and his knees begin to shake. “I’ll never ask you for anything ever again, I just… I need to know.”

Shouto’s unraveling, loose threads pooling at his feet with every breath he takes. He’s all heart, thundering, pulsing, a complete and utter mess, and oh, god, this can’t be happening right now. He stares in numb horror as a single tear slips down Izuku’s cheek, meeting the corner of his mouth.
near that scar—that stupid, perfect, silver scar that splits the side of his upper lip in the most fascinating way. Words caught in his throat, he watches Izuku scrub his tear away with the back of his hand, his focus unwavering.

And maybe that’s what does Shouto in. Maybe it’s the tear, or that stupid fucking scar, or the fact that there isn’t enough air in this apartment for the both of them anymore and Shouto might very well be dying right now, or maybe dreaming. Because he’s suffocating, inhaling a substance he’s never tasted before and expelling something that feels an awful lot like helium. And maybe he’s okay with that.

He’s right where he’s supposed to be.

“I stand by what I said to you in Geneva,” Shouto breathes, but the words are too large for his mouth, pressing against his cheeks until he chokes. Almost at once, Izuku’s expression begins to shatter, but Shouto stops him with a hand. “Stop. Listen to me.”

Izuku clenches his jaw and nods stiffly, brows pitching high on his forehead. He’s shaking. They’re both shaking. This doesn’t feel real.

“I do regret what happened that night,” he continues slowly. “I used to wonder what would’ve happened if I’d just ignored those messages on your phone, or if we’d left that club even twenty minutes earlier. It drove me crazy. I hated leaving New York like that, Izuku. It was hard. One of the hardest things I’ve ever done, probably.”

“You didn’t call,” Izuku murmurs.

“Neither did you,” Shouto points out. “Play by your own rules.”

Izuku closes his eyes and nods, letting out a slow breath. “I didn’t think you’d want to hear from me,” he admits. “I was… scared.”

*I was terrified*, Shouto wants to say, but he swallows it down. “We both had our reasons,” he says instead, and the words are bitter on his tongue. He weighs his next words carefully.

*Don’t fuck this up. Please.*

“But regardless of what happened between us back then,” he begins, chest fluttering, “I think that no matter the outcome of that night in your apartment, we still would’ve ended up here. Maybe not exactly like this, but... we’d be together. Somehow.” He smiles shakily. “Izuku, my answer may not have changed much between now and Geneva, but my reasons definitely did. I think that’s the part that matters.”

Silence settles, filling the space between them as time continues its slow, inexorable drip. Izuku takes in Shouto’s words with an indecipherable expression etched into his features, but his breathing begins to steadily even out as he processes. *Understands.* The sun has since set in the open window behind them both, pitching their apartment into soft shades of violet offset by warm lamplight, and the breeze is cool against their heated skin. They can breathe again, if only barely. Shouto will take what he can get.

*Eyeing* the clock on the stove, Shouto bites his lower lip. Izuku hasn’t moved yet or even looked up at him, and his hands are still braced against the edge of the counter on either side of Shouto’s hips, all but pinning him in place. Izuku’s stiller than a statue, carved from ivory against the shadows, and for several seconds, it almost seems like he’ll never move again.

Shouto doesn’t expect the kiss. It just sort of happens.
Izuku’s mouth is a warm, gentle pressure against his own, all sweet silence and softness from the start, and Shouto inhales sharply at the contact as his thoughts promptly plunge into nothingness. Izuku’s hands release the counter to come up and cup Shouto’s face as he leans in for a better angle, callused thumbs resting beneath the slopes of his cheekbones as if they’ve always belonged there. It’s nothing more than a soft press of lips, a chaste lingering in a space too small for any two people to possibly fill, but Shouto’s dizzied regardless, spinning, spiraling, **falling**.

Barely a whisper, the kiss claws its way deep within his chest and settles someplace hidden behind his heart, out of sight. **Safe.**

Maybe it lasts a millisecond. Maybe it lasts a millennium. He isn’t sure. Izuku is the one who finally pulls away, their breaths mingling in the scant space between their parted mouths as reality sets like a stain at the corners of their vision. Shouto stares at Izuku, wide-eyed. His mind is empty. His stomach churns. But there’s something warm behind his breastbone now, glowing like an ember and smoldering a little brighter than it did before.

He wonders what it will take to keep it burning.

Chapter End Notes

up next: i *really* need to stop doing these "up next" things. nothing ever goes according to plan in this house lbr. some stuff will probably happen next chapter and the boys will deal with shit. happy trails, fuckers.

Love you all. I've missed you dearly, and I'm happy to finally be back to a regular update schedule. ♥ Hallelujah.

Also, here's some amazing art of that passionate, spontaneous kiss! Go give the artist some love. :D

**Tumblr | Twitter | CuriousCat | Roots Fan-Picked Playlist**

Works inspired by this: **fic** ["The Roots That Clutch" by laquearia](https://archiveofourown.org/works/7842222) by [zarusoba_shoto](https://archiveofourown.org/users/zarusoba_shoto) (Bobfucker), *From Purpose to Passion* by [Miss_TeaDDK](https://archiveofourown.org/users/Miss_TeaDDK)

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